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Karl Barth

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# Chapter 11

## Karl Barth

*Hanna Reichel*

### Introduction

Born into a notable Basel family of pastors and theologians in 1886, Karl Barth began his own theological studies in Bern, where his father Johann Friedrich (Fritz) taught New Testament but was quickly drawn to the more liberal schools of Berlin and Marburg. Immersing himself in Schleiermacher and Kant, and impressed by Adolf von Harnack and Wilhelm Hermann, Barth emerged from his studies as a self-proclaimed disciple of the “modern school,” which saw the Christian faith as subject to critical investigation, tied up with religious experience, and dedicated to the moral transformation of society.

First signs of disenchantment with that tradition – as well as of Barth’s polemical disposition – surface during his time as an editorial assistant for the *Christliche Welt*, the leading journal of Liberal Protestantism in Germany. In his first article, “Moderne Theologie und Reichsgottesarbeit” (1909) Barth critiqued “modern theology” for its comparatively lesser use for pastoral ministry and practical work, producing a heated exchange with his father as well as with leading Practical theologians. Barth served in the German Reformed church in Geneva for two years and married Nelly Hoffmann, with whom he would have five children, before taking a call to Safenwil, Aargau in 1911. Pastoring this congregation of factory workers and agrarian labourers, Barth participated in their struggle, joined the Social Democratic Party, and was soon nicknamed “the red pastor of Safenwil.”

Barth dates the “twilight of the idols” that finalized his break with liberal theology to Germany’s invasion of Belgium in 1914. Appalled by the enthusiasm of his once revered teachers for German warmongering, Barth diagnosed their inability to resist nationalism and militarism as a theological failure, the close identification of the Christian God with cultural and ethical achievements. Together with his fellow pastor-theologian and friend Eduard Thurneysen, Barth turned to the Bible in search for a different theological foundation.

The resultant commentary on Paul’s letter to the Romans (1919) represented a startling departure from historical-critical scholarship: Rather than speaking *about* Paul’s theology, Barth located himself *with* Paul in the same dilemma beyond historical distance, suffering an in-breaking of God “vertically from above” that could leave no epistemic, ethical, or pastoral standing point. The second edition, revised in light of the debates that quickly ensued, distanced itself even further from Liberal Protestantism and asserted the “wholly Other” God in both judgment and affirmation of humanity.

Famous overnight, the rural Swiss pastor was appointed to an “honorary” position for Reformed dogmatics in Göttingen in 1921. Tasked to teach courses on Reformed confessions and figures without the academic credentials normally required for such a position, Barth built his repertoire as the lone Reformed theologian in a staunchly Lutheran faculty, and as a foreigner

funded from abroad in an increasingly nationalistic climate, with economic catastrophe leading to further political turmoil. In these years, momentum built around Barth, Thurneysen, Friedrich Gogarten, Rudolf Bultmann, and Emil Brunner as a group who spoke of “crisis” and advocated a new “Word of God theology.” Their emphasis on the radical difference between God and the world became known as “dialectical theology” and found its voice in the periodical *Zwischen den Zeiten*, edited by Georg Merz from 1922 until its dissolution in 1933 when, during the Nazi rise to power, previously existing tensions could no longer be bridged.

In 1925, Barth moved to a professorship in Münster that brought him into close contact with Roman Catholicism. In discussions with his Jesuit colleague Erich Przywara over nature and grace, the role of analogy, and the “scientific” nature of theology, Barth cemented his fundamental disagreement with Roman Catholicism while also being inspired by its interdisciplinary engagement with philosophy of religion, psychology, and sociology. Charlotte “Lollo” von Kirschbaum, a trained Red Cross nurse whom Barth had met in 1924 over shared theological interests, moved into the Barth household in 1929. Officially serving as his secretary and assistant, von Kirschbaum became Barth’s partner in life as well as theological work, resulting in an uneasy “triangular” relationship with Nelly.

Called to the University of Bonn in 1930, Barth programmatically restarted the project of a comprehensive systematic theology, which he had twice before begun under different titles. An outspoken critic of National Socialism, Barth became strongly involved in the “Confessing Church” movement, culminating in his role in drafting the *Barmen Declaration* in 1934. Confessing Jesus Christ as “the one Word of God whom we have to hear, and whom we have to trust and obey in life and in death,” it denounced the Nazi claim to power over church polity, proclamation, and doctrine as heretical. After refusing an unreserved oath of loyalty to Hitler in 1935, Barth was dismissed from his position and soon prohibited from publishing and speaking in Germany. Basel University offered Barth the post that he would hold until his retirement in 1962.

From Basel, Barth continued to be a public voice with as much pastoral concern as political fervor and often controversial stances. Volunteering for armed service himself, Barth encouraged international military action against Germany. After the war, however, he was one of the first and most ardent advocates of reconciliation with Germany and across Europe. Barth refused to condemn communism in the East outright, while critiquing Western anticommunism as well as NATO rearmament. Barth delivered the opening address for the World Council of Churches’ first assembly in Amsterdam in 1948 and was an invited observer to the Second Vatican Council. Barth continued lecturing, writing, and publishing until his death in Basel in 1968. Nelly continued visiting Charlotte von Kirschbaum in the hospital until she died and subsequently buried her in the Barth family tomb.

## Survey

Any survey of Barth’s work has to reckon with three distinct challenges. Its sheer volume is the most obvious of them. His (unfinished!) *Church Dogmatics* alone extends over more than nine thousand pages, and the *Gesamtausgabe* with his other writings already contains more than fifty volumes at about half of its projected completion. Second, the diversity of sites and genres of Barth’s work, as well as differences in their accessibility in print and translation, has led to one-sided appraisals. Finally, Barth had a remarkable willingness and capacity to “begin again” and rethink previous positions, as well as to publicly announce changes of heart.

The *Church Dogmatics* has been compared to a cathedral due to its monumental architecture, comprehensiveness and systematicity, erudition, and rigor. Read in isolation, this

*magnum opus* might give rise to the impression of Barth as a modern scholastic. Yet Barth's theology took place in attentive dialogue with his time, as is evident in the vast number of his public addresses and talks, articles, and essays. Barth was a major public intellectual and a frequent speaker in diverse ecclesial and academic publics. He preached regularly in the State Prison of Basel and maintained vigorous conversations through letters with theologians, church leaders, and ecumenical figures like Emil Brunner, Rudolf Bultmann, Willem Visser 't Hooft, Martin Niemoeller, and Josef Hromádka. Barth understood his work to be “fundamentally a theology for pastors,”<sup>1</sup> in service of the church, necessitated both by the human impossibility of proclamation and by the sheer overflowing joy of the gospel.

Barth's fervor and originality grew out of an acute need to speak, as he would say, “with the Bible in one and the newspaper in the other hand.” The image captures well his unapologetic rootedness in the scriptures and the attentive contextual witness to which he put the theological tradition. Although both these “texts” were irreducible to him, their relationship also had a very particular shape: Analyzing the context through a distinctly theological lens, he insisted that the text to be proclaimed to this context is time and again the one Word of God in different inflections – formally the scriptures, materially the one Word of God to which they testify: the person of Jesus Christ. Both Barth's contextuality and his aversion to a “system” thus emerged out of a profound theological commitment: The grounding of all theology in the event of divine self-revelation implied a discontinuity and actualism in epistemological terms, a necessity to “every day, in fact every hour ... begin anew with the beginning.”<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, this disposition manifests in some pronounced shifts in emphases and articulations. Yet, the theological “text” with which Barth insisted on beginning time and again – the one Word of God, Jesus Christ – was the anchor of continuity and consistency in Barth's lifelong wrestling, discernment, and dialogical engagement, allowing him to hold complexity without sacrificing decisiveness and versatility.

The development of Barth's thought has been subject to much debate, spurred not only by its temporal distension and changes in language, interlocutors, and theological framing, but also by Barth's own frequent comments on various supposed turns for dramatic effect, which commentators have tended to follow. Special attention has been devoted to dating and characterizing Barth's turn from liberal theology, his move from a dialectical mode of critique to a more positively dogmatic mode, and the material change in his understanding of God through the reconceptualization of the doctrine of election. Although the remarkable consistency in central tenets of Barth's thought has meanwhile been increasingly emphasized, a rough periodization like the following might be useful:<sup>3</sup>

- Until 1915: liberal-theological phase
- 1915/16–19: turn away from liberal theology and to the Bible
- 1920–23: dialectical theology phase
- 1924–mid-1930s: first dogmatic phase, marked by increasing engagement of the Reformed tradition and Roman Catholicism and by first attempts to conceptualize a theological system

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *Final Testimonies*, ed. Eberhard Busch, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 23.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, trans. Grover Foley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 165.

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Michael Beintker, “Resümee: Periodisierung des Barth'schen Denkens,” in *Barth Handbuch*, ed. Michael Beintker (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 232–7. The article also gives a helpful overview over different periodizations of Barth's thought.

- 1930s–68: second dogmatic phase, including new beginnings of a “church” dogmatics, the discovery and reformulation of the doctrine of election, the humanity of Christ, the notion of history, and the political ramifications of the gospel

Some shifts may be attributed less to dramatic conversions than to simple changes in context and audience: finding himself in Calvin’s and Beza’s historic pulpit, Barth devoted himself to their major works; called into a congregation of workers, Barth spoke the language of socialism. Tasked with teaching Reformed Theology in Göttingen, he delved more deeply into the Reformers; in Catholic Münster, he studied Aquinas and Anselm. During the turmoil of war, Barth preached judgment and divine sovereignty, in its aftermath, reconciliation and humanity.

At the same time, shifts in Barth’s theological articulations represent discernment of the Word of God in affirmation and judgment of their respective times: Barth’s famous theological rediscovery of the alterity of God in his Romans commentary responded to political and cultural disillusionments in World War I and to challenges encountered in congregational ministry. His insistence on the sovereignty of God and the Lordship of Christ was developed in close contrast to the claims to sovereignty and absolute power in Nazi Germany. In the face of the Nazi takeover of the German church, Barth’s famous imperative to “do theology as if nothing had happened”<sup>4</sup> was no quietism but an act of defiance and resistance. In the zero hour after the war, Barth’s rediscovery of the humanity of God grounded the humanity of the human being beyond its earthly phenomenology and inevitable disappointments.

Some continuity can be found in two theological “fronts” that map out the space against which Barth developed his theological project: Neo-Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. These categories do not necessarily define or map onto existing ecclesial or doctrinal bodies; rather, they became Barth’s labels for specific theological fallacies that he identified as underlying a range of intellectual, ecclesial, and political developments regardless of their denominational affiliation or genealogy.

Barth used the terms “Neo-Protestantism,” “liberalism,” “modern theology,” and “Cultural Protestantism” to refer broadly to an anthropocentric foundation of theology rather than to distinct historical schools. Often identifying this theological “error” with Friedrich Schleiermacher, with whom he had a love–hate relationship, Barth denounced the suspension of theological truth for experience and the centering of human freedom instead of the freedom of God. Such an inversion of the epistemological right relationship of God and human being into the self-consciousness of “religion” instead of the objectivity of revelation lead, according to Barth, to the all-too-easy identification of the divine with human achievements, rationalities, movements, and political systems that he could diagnose in the militarist enthusiasm of his liberal teachers just as much as in overly optimistic forms of religious socialism or in religious pietism.

Barth also militated strenuously against the “natural theology” of Roman Catholicism, which he once pointedly called the “invention of the anti-Christ.”<sup>5</sup> Although he could identify the church with the spiritual body of Christ, Barth did so through a conception of Christian existence as witness that resulted in a thoroughly low ecclesiology, utterly uninvested in clerical status, religious institutions, or their difference over and against the surrounding world. But Barth’s primary contention against Roman Catholicism was not the Vatican’s clerical or sacramental theology, but rather a “natural theology” over which he famously fell out with his Reformed (!)

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<sup>4</sup> Karl Barth, *Theological Existence To-Day!: (A Plea for Theological Freedom)* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012), 9.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 14 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1934–76), I/1, xiii.

colleague Emil Brunner. Barth considered natural theology's epistemological as well as ethical failure to adequately distinguish between the supernatural-divine and the natural-creaturely as conducive to the theological conflation of contemporary movements and politics with divine revelation that he saw behind German nationalism and the theological validation of the Nazi movement by the German Christians.

Against both Neo-Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, defined thusly as theological issues, Barth insisted on the alterity of God, the epistemological and ontological gap between God and world – a gap that cannot be bridged from the human side – and on the necessarily dispossessive nature of theological inquiry. Most of all, he insisted that the truth of God and the truth of the human being can both be found only in Jesus Christ as God's self-revelation, rather than inferred by human means, whether rational or mystic, philosophical or experiential. This emphasis on revelation in Christ also animates Barth's theological and ideology critiques.

The role of theology is thus ever only a secondary endeavor of tracing that divine movement, of a witness to the Word of God, the humanity of God, the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Barth was fond of comparing theology to the overlong index finger of John the Baptist in Matthias Gruenewald's famous Isenheim Altarpiece, pointing to the crucified Christ. Understanding his theology as such an indexical gesture lent it both its utmost seriousness *and* its self-relativization; its insistence on its *Sache and* its radically dispossessive and self-critical character; its starting point with the divine "yes," and its translations into ideological-critical "no's," its demand for a firm stance *and* its ability to reverse positions as necessary.

Understanding all theology to be self-relativizing witness, pointing away from itself to the Word of God, and out of that commitment critically interrogating the proclamation of the church in service to the execution of its testimonial vocation, Barth saw himself as a lifelong student of theology, time and again asked to return to the site of the event of God's self-revelation. The result is a theology that is unapologetically theological, rooted in the scriptures, developed in rigorous conversation with Reformed doctrine as well as classical, medieval, and modern theology, and committed to a Christian witness and practice in the church. Its articulation in classical terminology should not distract from the fact that Barth's theology is one of the most original and creative, even constructive theological enterprises of recent centuries.

## Content

Shifts in language and inflection as well as Barth's reservations against systematicity as a theological form should not distract from central commitments that function almost like axioms. In the mathematical language that especially the early Barth was fond of employing, axioms are propositions whose truth cannot be demonstrated but upon whose assumption complex and sophisticated systems of thinking can be built. Much of Barth's thought, across the wide range of doctrinal loci and diverse contextual engagements, can be described by inflecting, combining, and drawing out the following foundational commitments:

1. God is God.
2. The world is world.
3. God is in the world in God's one word, Jesus Christ.

"God is God" spells out classical notions of divine identity, simplicity, and transcendence while invoking the biblical language of God's self-revelation. In the Romans commentary, this axiom

marks God's alterity as "wholly Other" in counterdistinction to the world: "If I have a system, it is limited to the recognition of what Kierkegaard called the 'infinite qualitative distinction' between time and eternity ... 'God is in heaven, thou art on earth.'"<sup>6</sup> However, this wholly Other God is always already God for the world, God revealing Godself to the world, bridging the unbridgeable chasm, as Barth develops extensively in his mature theology: Election, creation, and covenant are expressions of God's faithfulness to be who God is. "The world is world" qualifies the other side of this first axiom: the world in difference to this God. Not God, but not godless, either, the world is loved by God, held by God, and addressed by God who waits for its response and makes space and time for it. "God is in the world in God's one word, Jesus Christ," is spelled out in the doctrines of revelation, incarnation, and redemption. The identification of the Word of God with the person of Jesus Christ both elevates and relativizes the scriptures in Old and New Testaments and the proclamation of the church into testimonies to this one Word of God, which can become the Word of God for us always in only indirect identity with the Word of God in Jesus Christ. Authentic knowledge of God is possible only through divine self-revelation and can never be attained by human means. At the same time, God *has* conclusively revealed Godself in God's Word, as definitive of who God is. There is no *deus absconditus*. The Christ-event, or the person of Jesus Christ, is definitive both for who God is – and for true humanity. The task of the Christian is to listen to this Word, time and again, and to witness to it.

Whereas the first two axioms are formally tautological, the third combines them paradoxically, or maybe dialectically, and dynamizes them. All three axioms boil down to this third – which however turns out to be not an axiom at all, but a name, pointing to a person. Shortly before his death, Barth himself summed up his theological approach:

The last word which I have to say as a theologian and also as a politician is not a term like "grace," but a name, "Jesus Christ." He is grace, and he is the last, beyond the world and the church and even theology . . . What I have been concerned to do in my long life has been increasingly to emphasize this name and to say: There is no salvation in any other name than this. For grace, too, is there. There, too, is the impulse to work, to struggle, and also the impulse towards fellowship, towards human solidarity. Everything that I have tested in my life, in weakness and in foolishness, is there. But it is there.<sup>7</sup>

Barth's *Church Dogmatics* too, spells out these three foundational commitments, this divine name. Each of its five volumes presents a Christocentric reformulation of a major doctrinal locus in the history of salvation and develops a theological ethics in corresponding witness to it. This approach leads to highly original reinterpretations within inherited material through recombinations and new internal connections, effecting a dynamization of the systematic structure.

Volume I, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, holds theological "prolegomena" – usually introductory remarks on epistemology and method. In Barth's case, they contain a full-blown doctrine of the Trinity, grammatically structured around the event of revelation as "God – reveals – Godself." This unusual opening expresses Barth's inner-theological foundation of theology: Not principles of rationality or a formalized methodology, but the event of the living God's self-revelation *is* the presupposition and condition of theology, cutting off all human attempts to reach, understand, master, or possess God by human means – attempts that Barth famously disqualifies as "religion." Grounding the possibility of theology only in divine self-revelation, the volume also defines theology as the church's critical self-reflection of its own proclamation of God's word, necessitating treatments of the incarnation, the Holy Spirit, and scripture.

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<sup>6</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 10.

<sup>7</sup> Barth, *Final Testimonies*, 29–30.

Volume II, *The Doctrine of God*, identifies God as “the one who loves in freedom.” The classical attributes of God are reinterpreted through the dialectical mutual determination of love and freedom: who God is in Godself is thus God *for us*. In what is often considered his most groundbreaking and original theological contribution, Barth incorporates the Calvinist notion of predestination into the doctrine of God as volume II.2, *The Election of God* describes God’s self-determination to be both “the electing God” and “the elected human being” in Jesus Christ. Participating in this election and in obedience to God’s command, Christians become witnesses to divine election in the world.

Volume III articulates *The Doctrine of Creation* not as a cosmological speculation but as the “external foundation” of the covenant of God with God’s people in history, which thus provides the “internal foundation” or inner reason for creation. Constituted toward this covenant, humanity is always already co-humanity, articulated in concrete being-for-others ranging from the parent–child relationship and the spousal encounter to universal humanity. Realized in inseparable unity of body and soul, and circumscribed by temporality, human freedom before God becomes fulfilled in Sabbath, in fellowship, in the affirmation of life, and in acknowledgement of one’s own temporal finitude.

The complex architecture of Volume IV, *The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation*, integrates a classical two-natures Christology with the threefold office into a dialectical movement with several sublayers. The three dogmatic subvolumes unfold this movement as shown in the following table:

	CD IV.1	CD IV.2	CD IV.3
Movement	The Lord as Servant	The Servant as Lord	The True Witness
Being	True God	True Human Being	Unity of the Person
Office	Priest	King	Prophet
Status	Status exinanitionis	Status exaltationis	Light
Hamartiology	Hybris -> fall	Sloth -> misery	Falsehood -> condemnation
Soteriology	Justification	Sanctification	Vocation
The Work of the Holy Spirit in Community (ecclesiology)	Gathering	Upbuilding	Sending
The Work of the Holy Spirit in the Individual	Faith	Love	Hope

The fourth, ethical subvolume was to spell out the Christian’s “free and active answer” to God’s reconciling grace. A partial publication, disavowing a sacramental understanding and the practice of children’s baptism, caused a last public scandal around Barth. Published posthumously from lectures, a part on the Lord’s prayer framed the Christian zeal for righteousness as active waiting for God’s revolt against the “lordless powers” of this world. A part on the Lord’s supper, as well as volume V, *The Doctrine of Redemption*, remained unformulated at the time of Barth’s death.

If Barth’s theology can be read as a radicalization of the Reformers’ insights into the sovereign grace of God and the critique of human self-justification in its religious, epistemological, and political inflections against the background of the intellectual and political developments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it does so by spelling out the name Jesus Christ as both

God's self-determination and the human being's truest definition. Barth's emphasis is thus only partially captured as a commitment to transcendence (as it is sometimes characterized); it is rather a witness to the living God who determines Godself to be God for the human being and who determines the human being to be for God, in Jesus Christ. Its axiomatic simplicity makes for great consistency and recognizability, while allowing for extreme versatility and generativity. This approach enabled Barth to be both "orthodox and modern,"<sup>8</sup> drawing on central commitments of the theological tradition yet applying them to often surprisingly new effects.

### Debate

Barth was a passionate theologian, and he continues to provoke passionate responses. Celebrated by some as a modern church father, a defender of the faith against modernity's onslaughts, reviled by others as a top-down, theocratic thinker firmly opposed to all theological validation of the human being, Barth leaves few unmoved. At the same time, even his fundamental assessments remain debated: Was he a modern scholastic or a postmodern thinker? A staunch defender of tradition or a radical innovator? An antiliberal or a theologian of freedom? A political, apolitical, or antipolitical theologian? Constantly self-relativizing or vexingly self-immunizing? A prophetic witness in an idolatrous world or a self-aggrandizing antagonist?

If Barth's theology has stirred much debate, this starts with his own "life in conflict."<sup>9</sup> Well known for his distaste for apologetics, Barth did not shy away from polemics. As much as he believed in the primacy of the divine "yes," Barth surely executed its resultant "no" fervently. From his first publications in the *Christliche Welt* indicting liberal theology, through his *Tambach lecture's* deliberate disappointment of his religious socialist audience's hopes, to publicly enacted fallings-out with fellow dialectical theologians, many of Barth's decisive publications constituted contrarian interventions against the assumptions of his immediate context. Although these fights can be read as an ongoing, relentless self-critique of Barth's own tendencies and inclinations, he also picked them with glee and leveraged them rhetorically for dramatic effect at much cost for his opponents. It should thus neither surprise that Barth's epigones have often emulated such public hostilities, nor that Barth's critiques have produced strong counterreactions and aversions.

Of the debates started by Barth but extending after his death, many revolved around theological method as challenged by his theology of revelation: questions surrounding biblical exegesis, scriptural hermeneutics, and historical criticism on the one hand, and questions concerning natural theology and the *analogia entis* on the other. The theological academy in Germany divided itself for several decades over an almost confessional "Barth or Bultmann" question as their historical debate was carried on by their students. Bultmann students like Ernst Fuchs and Gerhard Ebeling saw Barth as neo-orthodox, ahistorical, and lacking hermeneutical sensibility. Influenced by both Barth and Bultmann, Eberhard Jüngel reconciled their systems by reconstructing Barth's Trinitarian theology in functional equivalence to Bultmann's program of demythologization, thus construing both as versions of a critical, hermeneutical theology.<sup>10</sup> Beyond Bultmann, Bonhoeffer's early unease with Barth's "positivism of revelation" was rearticulated in Wolfhart Pannenberg's epistemological critique of Barth, and Paul Althaus's early

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Bruce L. McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Thus the apt title of Christiane Tietz's biography.

<sup>10</sup> Eberhard Jüngel, *Gottes Sein ist im Werden: Verantwortliche Rede vom Sein Gottes bei Karl Barth* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1965).

contentions against Barth's supposed "Christomonism" has repeatedly resurfaced in debates about religious pluralism.<sup>11</sup>

After his death, the interpretation of Barth's thought itself became subject to controversy. In postwar Germany, Marquardt's thesis that "Karl Barth was a socialist"<sup>12</sup> – not only in his early ministry but into the apparently apolitical *Church Dogmatics* – divided right-wing and left-wing Barthians over whether to read him primarily as a dogmatic theologian or as a public theologian of leftist politics. The so-called "Berlin school" of Barth interpretation, among them Helmut Gollwitzer (whom Barth had championed as his successor in Basel) and his students Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt and Ulrich Dannemann, advocated for a political and antibourgeois reading of Barth. The so-called "Munich school," spearheaded by Trutz Rendtorff and further developed by Falk Wagner and Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, not only depoliticized Barth but also followed Ernst Troeltsch in reading dialectical theology as an intraliberal reaction that reintroduced liberal theology's defining notion of freedom on the side of the divine rather than the human subject, effectively immunizing itself against the crisis of historicism through a doctrine of revelation.<sup>13</sup> Subsequently, Barth could be reappropriated for a transcendentalized subjectivist theology that would find its fulfillment in a theory of Christianity, with modern society as a space of actualization for Christian freedom. Alternatively, Barth's starting point with the absolute was equated with the totalitarian erasure ("*Gleichschaltung*") of difference. If the Berlin School might be charged with overly heroizing Barth, the Munich School thus declared Barth's explicit doctrinal substance as well as his consistent antitotalitarian advocacy to be a complete and utter self-misunderstanding. Such an openly anti-Barthian interpretation of Barth has consequently been denounced as "a sin against good taste."<sup>14</sup>

For all their stark disagreement, both German schools of interpretation understood Barth as a critical and engaged *modern* theologian. Barth's initial reception in anglophone theology, however, often perceived his pushback against liberalism as a simple pre- or antimodern repristination of Reformed, classical, or biblicist dogmatics, and often sidelined Barth's theology subsequently as a supposedly reactionary, "neo-orthodox" position. Although this perception has been significantly challenged, Barth's theology is still most often embraced in anglophone theology by those for whom premodern theological commitments find their critically refined expression in the dialectically sophisticated, postmetaphysical, yet unwavering realism of Barth's systematics.

Apart from the overall classification of Barth's theology and the periodization of his work, the specifics of his dogmatic position have of course also been subject to debate. In the early 2000s, Princeton Theological Seminary witnessed a particularly heated debate over the internal relationship between Barth's doctrines of election and Trinity. Headed by Bruce McCormack, one faction found Barth's doctrine of election to imply that even the doctrine of God cannot be conceived "remote Christo": God's self-determination in Jesus Christ is what effectively constitutes God as triune; whereas the other, headed by George Hunsinger, responded that such an

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<sup>11</sup> Systematized by Alan Race in, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983); Cf. the critique of Sven Ensminger, *Karl Barth's Theology as a Resource for a Christian Theology of Religions* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, *Theologie und Sozialismus: Das Beispiel Karl Barths* (München: Kaiser, 1972).

<sup>13</sup> Falk Wagner and Trutz Rendtorff, *Die Realisierung der Freiheit: Beiträge zur Kritik der Theologie Karl Barths* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Mohn, 1975). For a detailed account of different inner-liberal interpretations of Barth in German-speaking theology, cf. Stefan Holtmann, *Karl Barth als Theologe der Neuzeit: Studien zur kritischen Deutung seiner Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> Eberhard Jüngel, *Barth-Studien* (Zürich: Benziger, 1982), 13.

ordering would endanger Barth's ontological divide between creator and creature and, contradicting Barth's fundamental convictions, make God dependent on the human being.<sup>15</sup>

While secure of his influence, Barth himself often joked about self-declared "Barthians," insisting that he was not one of them. Maybe it is the tragedy of Barth's theology that it became so authoritative, as this has often reversed the critical character of his interventions and positions. In postwar Germany, Barthian theology claimed moral superiority as almost the lone theological system untainted by National Socialist cooptation. Although Barth's theological dialectics had been effective against reigning ideologies, and arguably exerted its greatest strengths in the struggle against Christian nationalism and other "possessive" theologies, it could become itself oppressive when articulated from positions of dominance, not just in dogmatics but also in practical theology and church polity. This critique – in variations shared by liberal and feminist theologians – has perhaps been most forcefully articulated by James Cone: "To be sure, as Barth pointed out, God's word is alien to humanity and thus comes to it as a 'bolt from the blue' – but which humanity? For oppressors, dehumanizers, the analysis is correct. However, when we speak of God's revelation to the oppressed, the analysis is incorrect."<sup>16</sup>

Much depends on whose side of the story a theology tells, which movement it effects. In his pushback against human idolatry, Barth's moves "top down": from God to the world, from text to context, from dogma to ethics, from revelation to witness. His rejection of subjective or contextual reflection, experience, or culture as theological *starting points* can at times obscure the engaged mode of his own theology. As Barth himself maintained, dialectics are not a superior way of doing theology; they inevitably turn into self-contradictions when fixed methodologically, frozen as the image of the "bird in flight." Barth's theology has thus often been perceived as rather unpastoral (despite his self-understanding as a theology for pastors) and even inhumane (against his insistence on the humanity of God); as crushing liberation and emancipation in their bud (despite his Christologically universalized "royal" human being); as unbearably negative (despite his joyful grounding in the divine "Yes") but also as overly triumphalist (despite all theoretic humility); as antipluralistic (despite all self-critique and self-relativization); and even totalitarian (despite his manifest commitments against fascism and nationalism).

More interesting than debates over Barth's "correct" interpretation or attempts at his vindication are the ones that wrestle constructively with his impulses in their own attempt to point to Christ. When theologians from Southeast Asia sought clarification for their interpretation and contextual application of Barth's theology, he responded:

Enough pointing toward an understanding of "my" theology! ... Now it is *your* turn. Now it is *your* task to do Christian theology in your new, different and particular situation with head and heart, with mouth and hands. How this ought to happen? In no way can I prescribe this for you. It is truly your own task to respond adequately ... You truly do not have to become "European," "Western" people, let alone "Barthians," in order to be good Christians and good theologians.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. especially Bruce L. McCormack, "Grace and Being," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 92–110; George Hunsinger, "Election and the Trinity: Twenty-Five Theses on the Theology of Karl Barth," *Modern Theology* 24, no. 2 (2008): 179–98; Michael Dempsey, ed., *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*. 50th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2020), 30.

<sup>17</sup> Karl Barth, "An Christen in Suedostasien," in *Offene Briefe 1945–1968*, ed. Diether Koch (Zürich: TVZ, 1984), 555, my translation.

## Influence, Achievement, and Agenda

Karl Barth's unapologetically theological refoundation of theology after the critical turns of modernity and its prophetic witness in the political turbulences of the time have been pivotal for Western Protestantism in the twentieth century. His influence has extended not only far beyond his own imagination or the stewardship of his theological legacy but also beyond his agenda or endorsement. In fact, the generativity of Barth's thought beyond "Barthianism," often in contradiction or critique, might be one of its most remarkable traits.

Already upon its debut in the 1920s, Barth's theology resonated widely with a feeling of crisis, and his polemical dialectical interventions against liberal Protestantism echoed across a broad theological, ecclesial, and political spectrum. The first dissertation on Barth's theology appeared as early as 1925,<sup>18</sup> and from the 1930s, he attracted international publicity and students. In postwar Germany, Barth's theology quickly became the dominant theological system taught at universities and seminaries, with subsequent generations working out their own profile in relation to and distinction from Barth's theology. Barth has been hugely influential throughout Europe into the present day, especially in the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, France, and Hungary.<sup>19</sup>

Barth has been celebrated as a pioneer of the ecumenical movement, a "*pastor pastorum oecumenicus*" for the impulses his theology provided for it.<sup>20</sup> Barth's Trinitarian formulation of mission inspired Karl Hartenstein's conception of a *missio dei*, which became the new paradigm of missiology for the World Council of Churches. Barth's theology has sparked widespread renewed interest in Trinitarian theology after the nineteenth and early twentieth century's relative silence on the matter. While the English-speaking academic reception of Barth has mostly focused on Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, the wider international and ecclesial reception has drawn much more on Barth's "occasional" writings as translated and circulated by his students into diverse contexts and languages, as well as on the ecumenical significance of the *Barmen Declaration*. Barth's involvement with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the ecumenical movement, as well as his public visibility of the "church struggle" years and after, has been influential for confessing theologians' and churches' in many parts of the world. Next to Bonhoeffer's theology, Barth's was an important resource in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa in the 1980s and 1990s. Ongoing influence – often through his international students – is felt in Japan, Korea, Indonesia, and China.

In the English-speaking academy, the reception was mixed. Barth attracted particular attention in ethics and moral theology (Nigel Biggar, Stanley Hauerwas, John Howard Yoder, Oliver O'Donovan). In Great Britain, his theology was often dismissed on the competing charges of "neo-orthodoxy" or overly liberal interpretation of scripture. In the United States, he was occasionally harnessed as an antidote to cultural emphases on self-actualization or leveraged for a Christian "counterculture." The "postliberal" Yale School drew on Barth's "generous orthodoxy" in their shared concern with the ecclesial function of theology for a particular community and their grammar of articulation (Hans Frei, George Lindbeck). The title "Barth scholar" became descriptive of those who devoted themselves to interpreting Barth's theology and/or applying it in particular extensions (John Webster, Thomas F. Torrance, Bruce McCormack, George Hunsinger).

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<sup>18</sup> Gottfried Holtz, "Die ethischen Konsequenzen des Gottesgedankens in der Theologie Karl Barths," PhD diss., Universität Rostock, 1925.

<sup>19</sup> For Barth's reception in different European contexts cf. Martin Leiner and Michael Trowitzsch, eds., *Karl Barths Theologie als europäisches Ereignis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> Thus Visser 't Hooft's appreciation in Karl Barth, *Gedenkfeier im Basler Münster* (Zürich: EVZ, 1969), 52.

At times, Barth's theology has been engaged more enthusiastically in Roman Catholic theology than by its Protestant counterparts, starting with the responses to the Romans commentary and Barth's conversations with Erich Przywara, through his reception by Hans Küng and Hans Urs von Balthasar, to more recent Thomist engagements. While relatively little engagement has ensued between Barth and Orthodox theology, he has found widespread interest in evangelical and postevangelical circles. Increasingly, Barth's theology has also been put into conversation with different areas of critical thought, like philosophy of religion, philosophy of language, postmodern interpretation, Jewish thought, gender studies, liberation theologies, postcolonial theologies, and political theologies.

Already during Barth's lifetime, a new generation of systematic theologians developed independent proposals while building on Barth – often rebuked by Barth himself, as in the case of Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg. Robert Jenson's narrative Trinitarian theology and Colin Gunton's reckoning with modernity's incoherencies were similarly Barth inspired, yet original proposals. Notable thinkers who carried Barthian impulses in different directions range as widely as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dorothee Sölle, José Míguez Bonino, Jacques Ellul, and John Updike.

If there are indications that scholarly interest in Barth as a historical figure or authoritative system is waning, there are also signs that interest in him as a constructive interlocutor might be only just beginning. Barth's rigorous engagement with the tradition combined with a willingness to fundamentally rethink and rearticulate its commitments, and the combination of axiomatic simplicity and constructive versatility offer an appealing toolset for constructive development. The centrality of Christ and the authority of scripture has made Barth's theology compelling to faithful Christians, while the dispossessive and dialectical structure of his thought turns him into a "gateway" from uncritically pre- to hypercritically postmodern articulations of faith. The ecclesial character of Barth's theology and the virtual identification of dogmatics with ethics has resonated with those interested in Christian discipleship, while its "confessing" nature builds bridges to political theology, public witness, and ethics of refusal and resistance. Barth's insistence on the Lordship of Christ has funded resolutely prodemocratic politics and his refusal of theological apologetics lends itself well to an existence in (post)pluralistic societies. Barth's hypercritical theological epistemology and his refusal to essentialize humanity open theology up for fruitful dialogue with different critical theories – decolonial, womanist, queer, crip – even where his material insights fall short of theirs. Barth's eschatology might even present perspectives for Christian hope in a time when politics, theory, and ecology find themselves disentranced by futuristic conceptions.

## Recommended Reading

### *Primary*

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