



MAKERS
of the MODERN
THEOLOGICAL
MIND

KARL
BARTH

David L. Mueller

Edited by Bob E. Patterson

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 HENDRICKSON
PUBLISHERS

Makers of the Modern Theological Mind
Karl Barth

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To
Marilyn
and
Charles and Mary Thompson

The following abbreviations are used to refer to some of Barth's writings:

C.D. *Church Dogmatics*

K.D. *Kirchliche Dogmatik*

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Publisher's Preface (2016)

The *Makers of the Modern Theological Mind* series was first published in the early 1970s and comprises eighteen volumes, each looking at the life and work of a highly influential modern theologian. Today's reader may wonder why we are reprinting these books after so many years, especially since much has been written in the intervening decades on most of these theologians. The answer is that Hendrickson Publishers remains committed to serving the church in theological education, and we believe the original series editor's purpose still holds true: "*These books will give a new generation the opportunity to be exposed to significant minds.*"

While readers may notice that some word choices and writing styles are dated, we chose to leave the original text intact in order to preserve the historical integrity of the books. Additionally, although the series represents a specific perspective in modern Western thought, these theologians nevertheless serve as forerunners to the many outstanding theological voices we hear in today's much broader perspective. It is for their sake and the sake of new generations that we are reprinting this series, thereby ensuring continued accessibility to these formative and important modern theologians.

Another unique feature of this series is that many of the authors studied with the particular theologian about whom they wrote. And because some of these books were written almost half a century ago—published during the political and social turmoil of the latter decades of the twentieth century—they also serve as historical accounts of how these theologians impacted the authors at the time that they themselves were writing.

We are confident that readers will continue to find these books interesting and useful, which is why we are releasing them with a new look and in paperback and also as e-books. As these theologians continue to influence the global church, this series remains a helpful overview of their historical context and their life's work.

PATRICIA ANDERS, EDITORIAL DIRECTOR
HENDRICKSON PUBLISHERS

Editor's Preface (1972)

Who are the thinkers that have shaped Christian theology in our time? This series tries to answer that question by providing a reliable guide to the ideas of the men who have significantly charted the theological seas of our century. In the current revival of theology, these books will give a new generation the opportunity to be exposed to significant minds. They are not meant, however, to be a substitute for a careful study of the original works of these makers of the modern theological mind.

This series is not for the lazy. Each major theologian is examined carefully and critically—his life, his theological method, his most germinal ideas, his weaknesses as a thinker, his place in the theological spectrum, and his chief contribution to the climate of theology today. The books are written with the assumption that laymen will read them and enter into the theological dialogue that is so necessary to the church as a whole. At the same time they are carefully enough designed to give assurance to a Ph.D. student in theology preparing for his preliminary exams.

Each author in the series is a professional scholar and theologian in his own right. All are specialists on, and in some cases have studied with, the theologians about whom they write. Welcome to the series.

BOB E. PATTERSON, EDITOR
BAYLOR UNIVERSITY

Author's Preface

During the period from 1932 to 1967 Barth published thirteen volumes of his *Church Dogmatics* totaling over 9000 pages in German! Obviously, it is quite presumptuous to write a “brief introduction” to the thought of a theologian who may be called a modern “Church Father.” Nevertheless, the attempt has been made. Whether the most important things which ought to go into such an introduction have been said and whether the analysis is reliable are for others to judge.

It is not possible to survey the entire *Church Dogmatics* in one small volume. Therefore, after an analysis of Barth's early development, major attention is accorded the doctrine of revelation, which bears upon everything else Barth writes. The third chapter is an analysis of some aspects of Barth's christocentric theology. The conclusion is an assessment of both some of the strengths and weaknesses of Barth's theology.

Throughout, it is my intention to interpret Barth fairly. Numerous quotations are used in order to provide the reader with something of the flavor of Barth's method and style. In most instances, I have used the official English translation of the *Church Dogmatics*. Though I have profited from reading some of Barth's critics, limitations of space precluded much dialogue with them. A Protestant, Thomas F. Torrance, and a Roman Catholic, Hans Urs von Balthasar, have been the most helpful interpreters of Barth with respect to his theological method and the transitions in his pilgrimage. My hope is that this work will whet the reader's appetite to the extent that he will read Barth on his own.

My father, William A. Mueller, was the first to introduce me to Barth's thought. In the early thirties, he wrote a doctoral dissertation dealing with the dialectical theology of the early Barth; some twenty-five years later (1958), I completed a doctoral dissertation at Duke University dealing with Barth's theological method. During the year 1959-60, I took a leave of absence from Baylor University in order to pursue post-graduate studies at the University of Basel in Switzerland. I am indebted to the J. Newton Ravzor Foundation for providing a grant which helped make that venture possible. The courtesies which Professor Barth extended me and the frequent contacts with him which seminars and colloquia made possible during that year will not be forgotten.

This book is dedicated to three people who shared in the joys of that year in Basel. Mr. and Mrs. Charles E. Thompson, my wife's parents, visited us in Basel and shared in the excitement which marked participation in one of the English colloquia chaired by the grand "old man" of Basel, Karl Barth. My wife Marilyn enriched the time we spent together in Basel and our common pilgrimage in the intervening years.

A special word of thanks is due friends who assisted me in this project. Mr. Warren McWilliams typed and corrected a rough draft of this manuscript. Miss Jean Aiken, office services supervisor, and her staff typed the final draft. Dr. Ronald F. Deering, associate librarian, read the manuscript and gave me helpful counsel.

DAVID L. MUELLER

1 Karl Barth: His Life and Thought (1886–1968)

HIS LIFE AND INFLUENCE

The life and work of Karl Barth were as rich and full as his multi-volumed *Church Dogmatics*, the most comprehensive interpretation of the Christian faith in modern theology. With his death in his birthplace, Basel, Switzerland, at the age of eighty-two, the Christian church lost one of its most learned, colorful, and devoted teachers.

Barth is generally regarded as a modern “church father” who belongs in the list of the most illustrious theologians in the history of Christianity. Future generations will not hesitate to speak of him with Augustine and Aquinas, Luther and Calvin, and with Schleiermacher and Ritschl. Indeed, it is fair to say that even as Schleiermacher dominated the theology of the nineteenth century and is the father of liberal theology, so Barth dominated much of the theology of the twentieth century and is the father of neoreformation theology. What is more, his stature has been acclaimed both by Roman Catholic and Protestant interpreters. Yet perhaps the clearest testimony to Barth’s monumental achievement in changing the direction of Protestant theology in this century as he moved “against the stream” of established patterns of thought is the fact that even his severest critics must establish their theological positions with respect to his.

THE EARLY YEARS, 1886–1909

What kind of theologian and man was Karl Barth? Although a brief biographical sketch cannot supply us with simple answers

to questions about his greatness and influence, a review of some significant events in his life and pilgrimage may help to see him in historical perspective.

Karl Barth was born in Basel, Switzerland, on May 10, 1886, the first son of Fritz Barth, a minister of the Swiss Reformed Church and a teacher in the Evangelical School of Preachers in Basel. Both of Barth's grandfathers were also ministers. His father was a native of Basel. Some have traced certain of Barth's traits to the characteristics of the people of the German-speaking region of Switzerland and of his ancestry. He was marked by an unusual intellect, a great capacity for work, seriousness of purpose, a democratic spirit, an appreciation for the arts—especially music—and finally, by a wry and engaging sense of humor. Basel, where Barth died on December 10, 1968, was his home until the age of three and again from 1935 until his death. To live in Basel, says one writer, "means life in an ancient but now very modern, middle-sized, industrial, and university city, located on the Rhine where France, Germany, and Switzerland meet, as clean and sedate and beflowered and proud as a city can be."¹

It is noteworthy that Barth's roots lie deeply imbedded in the Reformed or Calvinistic wing of the Swiss Reformation. When he was three years old, his father accepted a call to become a lecturer and subsequently a professor of Church History and New Testament Exegesis at the University of Bern. The academic and religious nurture of the Barth home must have exerted considerable influence. Peter, one of Karl's brothers, became the coeditor of a critical edition of Calvin's works. Another brother, Heinrich, became a reputable philosopher and served with his brother Karl on the faculty of the University of Basel until his retirement in 1960. It was in Bern, the capital of Switzerland, that Barth grew up and received his early religious training and formal education. Parental guidance, his father's conservative theological position, and the influence of the Christian community account both for the fact that his "faith was nourished in positive evangelical theology" and for his appreciation of "sacred scholarship in the service of the Gospel."²

Late in life Barth recalled that his appetite for theology was first whetted through instruction related to his confirmation at the age of sixteen. It seemed to him a challenge not only to be able to know and affirm the Confessions of the church, but also to be able “to understand them from within.” The pursuit of this goal made Barth resolve to become a theologian at the time of his confirmation.³

During his early schooling, Barth was interested in history and drama, whereas mathematics and the sciences held little attraction for him. This is why Arnold Come speaks of a bent in the young Barth which helps explain his subsequent “emphasis upon the Word of God as action, as event. He never became interested in pure research abstracted from life, even in the fields of exegesis and theology.”⁴

Following the European custom which prevails to the present, Barth pursued his theological training in several universities. At eighteen years of age, he began his studies at the University of Bern. There he was most influenced by the thought of his father. In addition, he studied systematic theology under Herman Lüdemann, a rather influential theologian in the liberal tradition. The most significant event in Barth’s intellectual pilgrimage at Bern occurred during the fourth semester, when he encountered both Kant’s philosophy and Schleiermacher’s theology. This intellectual liberation made Barth anxious to pursue his theological training with Wilhelm Herrmann of Marburg, the leading neo-Kantian theologian of the day. However, his father’s desire that he study with a more conservative theologian led them to compromise on the University of Berlin where Barth spent the fall semester of 1906. This move was important not only because it marked the beginning of Barth’s exposure to the reigning school of theological liberalism, but also because it afforded him close contact with one of its last and most influential exponents in the twentieth century, namely, Adolf von Harnack, the renowned church historian.

Barth devoted himself so completely to his seminar work with Harnack on “The Acts of the Apostles” that he gave only passing attention to the lectures of Karl Holl, Julius Kaftan, and Hermann

Gunkel. Indeed, Barth later confessed that he was so absorbed in his studies that he failed to take advantage of Berlin's cultural riches. Nor did he become Harnack's disciple! The young theologian of twenty, though impressed with Harnack's erudition, found the latter's version of the gospel set forth in his famous Heidelberg lectures of 1899–1900 entitled *The Essence of Christianity* to be a form of cultural Christianity. He was drawn ever more strongly to Marburg and Herrmann through reading the latter's *Ethics*. In the year 1925, Barth said: "The day twenty years ago in Berlin when I first read his *Ethik* . . . I remember as if it were today."⁵ But in deference to his father's wishes, he returned to study at Bern in the summer of 1907. In the fall of 1907, he enrolled at Tübingen to study for a semester with Adolph Schlatter, a rather well-known conservative Swiss New Testament theologian. Barth was not greatly impressed with Schlatter, and he seems to have spent more time working in systematic theology with Theodor Häring.

Barth's desire to study with Herrmann at Marburg was realized in the fall of 1908. He spent three semesters listening to Herrmann, whom he later referred to as "*the* theological teacher of my student years."⁶ Although Barth also said on the same occasion that he became a somewhat "surprising disciple of Herrmann" in saying things "quite differently" from his mentor, he concluded: ". . . I could never inwardly agree that I had really turned away from my teacher."⁷ In the light of Barth's subsequent theological development, one may interpret the latter remark to refer to Barth's continuing appreciation for the christological focus of his "unforgettable teacher."

While at Marburg, Barth also pursued his interest in Kant through study with the leading neo-Kantian philosophers of the day, Hermann Cohen and Paul Natorp. In addition, he continued his biblical studies with the eminent New Testament theologians Johannes Weiss, Wilhelm Heitmüller, and Adolf Jülicher. It was soon to become apparent, however, that Barth was not satisfied with a purely historical-critical understanding of the biblical text which did not come to grips with its subject matter. This was the charge he

later made against some of the liberal biblical scholars who dominated the discipline of biblical studies during his student days.

Barth concluded his formal theological education at Marburg at the age of twenty-three. After completing the theological examinations set by the Church of Bern in 1909, he was ordained. However, he never pursued doctoral studies in theology. After having made his mark theologically, numerous institutions gladly accorded him their highest honorary degrees.

TRANSITION TO DIALECTICAL THEOLOGY, 1909–1922

Upon the completion of his examinations and ordination, Barth did not feel quite ready to assume pastoral duties. This was due, in part, to Herrmann's repeated emphasis that all true preaching must grow out of the experience of the proclaimer. Since Barth did not feel that he possessed such deep religious experience, he chose instead to return to Marburg in order to serve as an assistant to Martin Rade, the editor of *Christliche Welt*, an influential liberal periodical which concentrated upon the church's responsibility in the world. Barth's growing ethical sensitivity concerning the mission of the church in society was deepened by this brief apprenticeship.

Later in 1909, Barth returned to his homeland in order to begin his pastoral ministry as an apprentice pastor of the German-speaking Reformed Church of Geneva, Switzerland, where he remained until 1911. The frame of mind in which Barth assumed his pastoral duties is evident in an article published in 1909. The thesis Barth sets forth is that the theological graduates of the more liberal faculties of Marburg and Heidelberg are more reluctant to enter into practical forms of church work (pastoral, missionary, etc.) than are the graduates of the more orthodox and pietistic theological faculties. Barth attributed this impasse to the two central emphases of liberal theology. The first is its "religious individualism." It

seemed to Barth that liberalism's rejection of all norms of revelation and authority external to the individual believer led to a concentration upon the subjective and personal experience of the individual Christian. The second characteristic of liberalism Barth designated was its emphasis upon "historical relativism." Because liberalism accepted the tenet of the prevailing historiography that there were no absolutes in history and therefore none in the realm of revelation or religion, it became necessary to treat the biblical witness to revelation in the same manner as all other similar phenomena in the history of religion. Barth summed up the outcome of this approach as follows: "Religion knows only individual values; history knows only general truths."⁸

When Barth wrote these words, he was a troubled devotee of the theological liberalism in which he had been trained. Later he depicted his stance in this period as follows:

To the prevailing tendency of about 1910 among the younger followers of Albrecht Ritschl I attached myself with passable conviction. Yet it was not without a certain alienation in view of the issue of this school in the philosophy of Ernst Troeltsch, in which I found myself disappointed in regard to what interested me in theology, although for the time being I did not see a better way before me.⁹

In 1911 Barth became the pastor of the Reformed Church of Safenwil in north central Switzerland. He served as pastor of this village church until 1921, and the theological revolution associated with his name came to birth in this small industrial village surrounded by the scenic Swiss landscape. Whoever would understand the genesis of Barth's theology must envisage him as a pastor faced with what he once described as "the need and promise of Christian preaching." The first years in Safenwil were not marked by any sharp break with his quasi-liberal theology. The most significant events of these years were his marriage to Nelly Hoffman (1913) and the renewal of his friendship with a former fellow student from Marburg, Eduard Thurneysen, now a neighboring pastor in Leutwil. These kindred spirits met frequently and carried on

a lively correspondence about common concerns when personal visits were not possible.¹⁰

In an address to a group of ministers in 1922, Barth provides us with an important statement concerning the context in which his theological reorientation took place:

For twelve years I was a minister, as all of you are. I *had* my theology. It was not really mine, to be sure, but that of my unforgotten teacher, Wilhelm Hermann [sic.], grafted upon the principles which I had learned, less consciously than unconsciously, in my native home—the principles of those Reformed Churches which today I represent and am honored to represent in an official capacity. Once in the ministry, I found myself growing away from those theological habits of thought and being forced back at every point more and more upon the specific *minister's* problem, the *sermon*. I sought to find my way between the problem of human life on the one hand and the content of the Bible on the other. As a minister I wanted to speak to the *people* in the infinite contradiction of their life, but to speak the no less infinite message of the *Bible*, which was as much of a riddle as life.¹¹

Through the influence of Thurneysen, Barth was introduced to the eschatological theology of Johann Christoph Blumhardt (1805–1880). This Lutheran pietist pastor had founded a retreat center in the German village of Bad Boll after having experienced the healing of a deranged girl through the power of his prayers in her behalf. He interpreted this event as a sign of the inbreak of the kingdom of God and of the victory of Christ over the forces of evil and darkness. His son Christoph assumed the leadership of this movement and stressed the manner in which commitment to the kingdom of God necessitated concern for men in all facets of their individual and social needs. Christoph Blumhardt provided a powerful impetus to the development of the Swiss religious-socialist movement by his contacts with Ragaz and Kutter, its two leaders. They criticized the prevailing conservatism of Swiss Protestantism which restricted salvation to the individual soul, and called instead for a recognition of the social dimension of the kingdom of God and of its movement in history.

Both Thurneysen and Barth became Christian socialists. Barth sided with the workers of Safenwil and of his congregation in their struggle for a just wage. Later Thurneysen wrote: "Socialism . . . was the movement that was to us the most impressive parable, if not the substance, of the Kingdom of God, which we preached on Sundays."¹² In 1915, Barth joined the Social-Democratic Party—a thing quite unheard of for a minister in that day. In a letter to Thurneysen dated February 5, 1915, he states that this decision was prompted because "it was no longer possible for me personally to remain suspended in the clouds above the present evil world but rather it had to be demonstrated here and now that faith in the Greatest does not exclude but rather includes within it work and suffering in the realm of the imperfect."¹³

We have noted that Barth's theological reorientation was a gradual one. It is erroneous to single out one event as the cause of the new theological direction he was to pursue. The Blumhardts and the religious-socialist movement each had its effect. One must also recall that for Barth the prevailing school of theological liberalism lost much of its luster when ninety-three German intellectuals, including some of Barth's former theological teachers, signed a manifesto in August, 1914, supporting the Kaiser and the German war policy. Gradually but surely it became evident to Barth and Thurneysen that liberal theology had been weighed in the balances and found wanting. They gave themselves assiduously to the preparations of their sermons and serious biblical study, and published the first of several jointly authored sermon books in 1917 entitled *Suchet Gott, So Werdet Ihr Leben!* (Seek God and You Shall Live).

The clearest indication of Barth's changing position can be found in an address from 1916 entitled "The Strange New World Within the Bible." In it he enjoins his hearers to turn to the Bible in faith when in search for the Word of God for their day. "The Holy Scriptures will interpret themselves in spite of all our human limitations. . . . the Bible unfolds to us as we are met, guided, drawn on, and made to grow by the grace of God."¹⁴ The real question with which Barth was wrestling in these days was that of the content of

the Bible. He concedes that history, morality, and religion are all to be found in the Bible, but they do not represent its central interest. The answer concerning its content which Barth proposes remained characteristic of his later theological position:

It is not the right human thoughts about God which form the content of the Bible, but the right divine thoughts about men. The Bible tells us not how we should talk with God but what he says to us; not how we find the way to him, but how he has sought and found the way to us; not the right relation in which we must place ourselves to him, but the covenant which he has made with all who are Abraham's spiritual children and which he has sealed once and for all in Jesus Christ. It is this which is within the Bible. The word of God is within the Bible.¹⁵

It was this Word within the words of the Bible which Barth sought to hear more clearly. Increasingly, he immersed himself in exegetical studies. Thurneysen informs us that in addition to the two published editions of his commentary on Romans, Barth completed unpublished studies of Ephesians and 2 Corinthians. It was, however, Barth's exposition of Romans which was destined to mark the dawn of a new theological era. Beginning in 1916, Barth kept extensive notes of his interpretation of that epistle which had so often effected reformation in the history of the church. By 1918, he had completed a lengthy commentary, but had difficulty in finding a publisher. Finally, in 1919 a small publisher in Bern printed 1,000 copies of the first edition of *Der Römerbrief*. Barth tells us of his intention in this book in the opening words of the preface to the first edition:

Paul, as a child of his age, addressed his contemporaries. It is, however, far more important that, as Prophet and Apostle of the Kingdom of God, he veritably speaks to all men of every age. The differences between then and now, there and here, no doubt require careful investigation and consideration. But the purpose of such investigation can only be to demonstrate that these differences are, in fact, purely trivial.¹⁶

In this vein, Barth acknowledges the rightful place of the modern historical-critical method of biblical interpretation. However,

he affirms that the traditional Protestant doctrine of inspiration operated on a deeper level in seeking to apprehend the true meaning of the text. Thus Barth broke with the concentration on the philological and historical study of the biblical text which characterized the commentaries of modern liberalism. His concern was “to see through and beyond history into the spirit of the Bible, which is the Eternal Spirit.”¹⁷

A brief word concerning the first edition of Barth’s commentary and its reception is in order. Clearly, this book marks the beginning of Barth’s break with the anthropocentric and cultural Christianity of theological liberalism. His concern throughout is to magnify the sovereignty of God rather than the religiosity of man. The Reformation emphasis upon man’s radical fallenness is sounded with prophetic power. However, at this stage Barth had not yet broken completely with the concept of man’s capacity to see his oneness with God once the divine kingdom has entered history. In short, Barth was still under the influence of Platonic and idealistic thought forms, and therefore could still speak more of continuity between God and man than he was subsequently able to do. Nevertheless, this book struck a responsive chord among many experiencing the bitter aftermath of the Great War. Though some acknowledged Barth’s prophetic powers, others chided him for his disparagement of scientific exegesis. Yet others found his addiction to Kantian, Platonic, socialistic, and other categories reprehensible.

Barth learned from his critics where he could, but as was often to be the case, he remained his own severest critic. It was Barth’s dissatisfaction with what he had said which led to the radically revised second edition in which as he wrote, “it may be claimed that no stone remains in its old place.”¹⁸ It was this second edition of Barth’s commentary, published in 1922, which marked the rise of a new theological era associated with the name of Karl Barth. Confronted with the impact of this book, Karl Adam exclaimed that it “fell like a bomb on the playground of the theologians.”