

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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Karl Barth

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The following essay is the Foreword to Karl Barth's Theological Method by Gordon H. Clark. Clark's book – which is the best available on Barth – may be obtained from the Foundation for \$18.95.

Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) must be ranked as one of the most influential theologians of the twentieth century. That, of course, is a dubious distinction, since Adolf Hitler, V. I. Lenin, Joseph Stalin, and Mao Tse-Tung must be ranked among the most influential politicians of the twentieth century; John Cage and Elvis Presley among the most influential musicians; and Pablo Picasso and Andy Warhol among the most influential painters. For several decades in the middle of the century, Barth was a main attraction in the theological vanity fair, and his influence, now diminished, has not disappeared. Indeed, the Karl Barth Society of North America, founded in 1974, is flourishing, from all accounts, and many neo-evangelicals, some of whom are in the (neo) Evangelical Theological Society, are trying to revive the Barthian corpse and corpus.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the volume of his work (his unfinished *Church Dogmatics* is nine times as long as Calvin's *Institutes* and twice as long as Thomas' *Summa Theologiae*), Barth remains an enigma to many Christians, for several reasons. First, his theological views changed over the years, even during the decades in which he wrote *Church Dogmatics*. Educated in modernism, liberalism, and the historical-critical method by

Adolf von Harnack, Wilhelm Herrmann, and other members of the theological company of Korah in Germany, Barth's first voice spoke modernism fluently. In his own words, "I had made myself a committed disciple of the 'modern' school, which was still dominant up to the time of the First World War, and was regarded as the only school worth belonging to."

After leaving the university, in 1909 Barth served first as a pastor in Geneva, and then, from 1911 to 1921, in Safenwil, Canton Aargau. During and after World War I, a conflict that shattered, in general, the naive optimism of many modernists and liberals, and, in particular, Barth's faith in his modernist teachers, Barth emotionally reacted against modernism and attacked it. During the second major phase of his thinking, roughly the 1920s, he was indebted less to the nineteenth century German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher than to the nineteenth century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard. In the 1930s Barth retreated from the paradoxical extremes of the 1920s and advocated a theology that he said was more in line with the Reformation.

These turns in his theology are confusing enough for the reader, but there are other, far more important, reasons for Barth's continuing opacity. A second reason that Barth remains a conundrum to Christians is his style. His turgid prose, not clarified by his English translators, does not lend itself easily to understanding; one might say of Barth's own

theology, as he said of someone else, "your enterprise... has neither head nor tail, and where one looks for the middle there is darkness."

Now there are three principal reasons why one's writing may be unclear: (1) confusion in one's thought, which is exhibited by confusion in one's writing; (2) insincerity, as George Orwell explained in his classic essay, "Politics and the English Language," which motivates a writer to disguise his true intention and meaning by using words in equivocal and subversive ways; and (3) a guiding philosophy which holds that the assertion of contrary and even contradictory statements is genuine philosophy and theology. Karl Barth seems to have been guilty on all three counts.

Ambiguous Language, Insincere Thought

Let us address the matter of insincerity first. One of the things that makes Barth so puzzling to Christians is that he perfected the art of using all the right words to say all the wrong things. Barth claimed to be standing squarely in the "Reformation tradition"; he had offered some "correctives" to Calvin, such as saying that all men are elected in Christ to salvation, but Barth clearly claimed to be a child of the Reformation. This deception – and it is an incredible deception by which Barth may have deceived himself as well – is seductive. Barth wrote frequently of grace – G. C. Berkouwer's book was titled *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Barth wished the title had been *The Triumph of Freedom in Jesus Christ*); he relentlessly attacked modernism; he defended the revealed Word of God; he even defended the ideas of *sola Scriptura* and *solo Christo* – but in his mouth the meaning of these words changed, just as the meaning of "election" changed.

In Barth's theology the "Word of God" is not to be identified with the Bible, which contains errors and myths (or sagas). The meaning of Scriptural authority, Barth wrote, "is not the 'fundamentalist' one, which would have it that the sacred text as such is the proper and final basis of knowledge." In fact, "The concept 'truths of revelation,' in the sense of Latin [or Greek or Hebrew, presumably] propositions given and sealed once for all by divine

authority in wording and meaning, is theologically impossible." Barth's theology, all the while emphasizing "revelation," makes propositional revelation impossible. Revelation is not a proposition, but an event. "The Word of God still happens today in the Bible," Barth wrote, "and apart from this happening the Bible is not the Word of God, but a book like other books." (The reader should understand that the beatnik and hippie "happenings" of the 1950s and 1960s, like Barth's theology, were effects of the philosophy and theology of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.) The "creation story" is a myth or poem, as Barth explained in a letter to his grandniece; evolution does not contradict Genesis. Evolution is what scientifically happened. And had a newspaper reporter been present when Christ rose from the grave, there would have been no news to report.

Barth on Justification

Barth, echoing Luther and Calvin, taught that justification is by faith alone, but in Barth's mouth, neither "justification" nor "faith" (and perhaps not even "alone") meant what Luther and Calvin had meant. In 1964 Thomas Nelson and Sons published Roman Catholic theologian Hans Kueng's book, *Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection*. Kueng wrote: "There is no essential difference between the Barthian and the Catholic position." Barth praised Kung's book in a letter to Kung that was printed in the book itself, for Kueng, Barth wrote, understood his doctrine of justification as Barth wished it to be understood. What was that understanding? It was nothing new; it was the same doctrine of justification put forward in the nineteenth century by Anglican turned Roman turned Cardinal, John Henry Newman. In

Kueng's own words:

God's *declaration* of justice is, as *God's* declaration of justice, at the same time and in the same act, a *making* just.... The term "justification" as such expresses an actual declaration of justness and not an inner renewal. Does it follow from this that God's declaration of justice does not imply an inner renewal? On the contrary.

It all comes down to this, that it is a matter of *God's* declaration of justice and not man's word: the utterance of the Lord, mighty in power. Unlike the word of man, the word of God *does* what it signifies. God said, "Let there be light" and there was light.... The sinner's justification is exactly like this. God pronounces the verdict, "You are just." And the sinner *is* just, really and truly, outwardly and inwardly, wholly and completely. His sins *are* forgiven, and man is just in his heart.

Barth himself wrote:

Certainly we have to do with a declaring righteous, but it is a declaration about man which is fulfilled and therefore effective in this event, which corresponds to actuality because it creates and therefore reveals the actuality. It is a declaring righteous which without any reserve can be called a making righteous.

Barth not only did not stand in the Reformation tradition, he opposed it. He rejected *sola Scriptura*, *sola gratia*, *solo Christo*, and *sola fide*, all the while smiling with the words on his lips. It is impossible to believe that Karl Barth did not know what he was doing, as many of his defenders have suggested. They have praised Barth for his grasp of the history of theology. Surely, then, Barth was aware of the source of his doctrine of justification. Barth's defenders impute to Barth a degree of stupidity that has never before been reached in the annals of theology. But Barth was not stupid, as his defenders imply. The result of Barth's systemic equivocation is a sort of evangelical mysticism. Although he uses many Christian words and phrases, Barth's theology is not Christianity. It is, just as modernism itself is, another religion. Barth is a wolf bleating.

Dialectical Theology

But Barth's insincerity is not the whole reason for the obscurity of his theology. His theology itself is dialectical. It prides itself on the assertion of contradictories. It sees contradiction as essential to theology. Barth is always saying "Yes" and "No" to the same things. His theology involves theses and

antitheses, with no resolution of the two. God is "wholly other" than man. In Christ God is "wholly hidden" and "wholly revealed." There is an "infinite qualitative difference" between time and eternity, God and man, but yet we cannot speak of God in the abstract. In this respect, Barth remained indebted to Kierkegaard all his life. And in this respect, Barth's dialectical theology must remain opaque to any reader. No person can believe contradictions, knowing them to be contradictions. But contradictions and dialectical theology are useful, not only for confusing one's readers, but for allowing one to accomplish a purpose without clearly stating what the purpose is.

Barth's dialectical theology permitted him to use old words and phrases – Biblical words and phrases – while giving them new, and quite un-Biblical, meanings. What the liberals had done partially with phrases such as the "divinity of Christ" and what the Roman Catholics had done with terms such as "justification," "church," "saint," and "grace," Barth was able to do with the entire theological discourse of the Reformation. His equivocation was not occasional and partial, as in liberalism, but throughout and complete. Barth made Protestant theological equivocation systematic and systemic.

Although his theology was deliberately inconsistent, Barth's actions displayed an underlying consistency. Barth wanted to make room in the church and in the world for irrationality and socialism. Barth saw Christ as a "form of the Word of God," and he emphasized Christology as the key to understanding "revelation." But Barth also wrote in *Church Dogmatics*, "God may speak to us through Russian Communism, through a flute concerto, through a blossoming shrub or through a dead dog. We shall do well to listen to him if he really does so." In the light of such statements, one wonders why Barth was so concerned in 1934 in the Barmen Declaration to deny that God can speak to us through Adolf Hitler. The likely answer – the answer that explains his vociferous condemnation of Nazism in the 1930s and his deliberate and lifelong refusal to condemn Communism, and even his praise for Communism – is not his theology, but his political philosophy: Barth was a lifelong socialist of the Marxist variety.

Barth the Socialist

Although his theological views changed over the decades, Barth's political views did not. Barth's socialism colored his theology, in ways that many of his readers did not understand. In 1956 Barth explained in an interview, "I decided for theology because I felt a need to find a better basis for my social action." His theology was a tool to be used in furthering his socialism; a justification for his political views. While at Safenwil, Barth was "Comrade Pastor," according to his biographer. "Socialism," Barth claimed, "is a very important and necessary application of the gospel." In 1916 he wrote that the "capitalistic order and... the war [are] the two greatest atrocities of life." In the first edition of his commentary on Romans, written during World War I, he declared that a time will come "when the now dying embers of Marxist dogma will flare up anew as world truth, when the socialist church will rise from the dead in a world become socialist." In "Jesus Christ and the Movement for Social Justice," an essay Barth published in 1911, he explained the relationship between Jesus and socialism:

If you understand the connection between the person of Jesus and your socialist convictions, and if you now want to arrange your life so that it corresponds to this connection, then that does not at all mean you have to "believe" or accept this, that, or the other thing. What Jesus has to bring us are not ideas, but a way of life. One can have Christian ideas about God and the world and about human redemption, and still with all that be a complete heathen. And as an atheist, a materialist, and a Darwinist, one can be a genuine follower and disciple of Jesus. Jesus is not the Christian world view and the Christian world view is not Jesus.

This separation between "Jesus" and ideas Barth maintained all his life, whatever form his theology appeared in. He never escaped the influence of Schleiermacher. Barth's view of revelation as "event" or "happening" rather than as information or

ideas may be traced to his statements in the essay cited above.

Barth vehemently attacked capitalism and private property as well, and wrote often of the "class struggle":

Class contradiction, says socialism, is the daily crime of capitalism. This system of production must therefore *fall*, especially its underlying principle: private property – not private property in general, but private ownership of the means of production... the boundless *competition* between individual producers must fall; and the state, the whole, must itself become the producer and therefore the owner of the means of production. Jesus is more socialist than the socialists.... Jesus' view of property is this: Property is sin, because property is self-seeking.

This last statement logically implies, of course, a condemnation of private property in general, not merely in the means of production. Since socialism is defined as common ownership of the means of production, Barth qualifies as a socialist in either case, and as a Christian in neither.

Barth the Communist

Skipping ahead nearly 40 years, one finds Barth praising the good intentions of the Communists and even specific Communist dictators, such as Joseph Stalin, butcher of the Ukraine. Writing in "The Church Between East and West" (1949), Barth defended his vocal anti-anti-Communism:

[I]t is pertinent not to omit to discriminate in our view of contemporary Communism between its totalitarian atrocities as such and the positive intention behind them. And if one tries to do that, one cannot say of Communism what one was forced to say of Nazism ten years ago – that what it means and intends is pure unreason, the product of madness and crime. It would be quite absurd to mention in the same breath the philosophy of Marxism and the "ideology" of the Third Reich, to mention

a man of the stature of Joseph Stalin in the same breath as such charlatans as Hitler, Goering, Hess, Goebbels, Himmler, Ribbentrop, Rosenberg, Streicher, etc. What has been tackled in Soviet Russia – albeit with very dirty and bloody hands and in a way that rightly shocks us – is, after all, a constructive idea, the solution of *a* problem which is a serious and burning problem for us as well, and which we with our clean hands have not yet tackled anything like energetically enough: the *social* problem.

Then, in a revealing statement, Barth declared that Communism was not – and by its very nature could not be – anti-Christian:

[I]n its relationship to Christianity, Communism, as distinguished from Nazism, has not done, and by its very nature cannot do, one thing: it has never made the slightest attempt to reinterpret or to falsify Christianity, or to shroud itself in a Christian garment.... There is nothing of the false prophet about it. It is not anti-Christian.

Finally, writing in 1963 to his friend the Czechoslovakian Communist and theologian, Joseph Hromadka, Barth lamented the fact that he, Barth, had been accused of pro-Communist sympathies, even by such liberal theologians as Emil Brunner and Reinhold Niebuhr. He defended his lifelong socialism: "I have, however, always spoken out loudly and consistently as an opponent of western and especially Swiss anti-Communism, against the cold war, atomic armament, ten years ago against the remilitarizing of West Germany...."

Despite his apparently orthodox words, Barth's dialectical theological enterprise was always shaped by his prior and lifelong commitment to socialism. He chose theology as a basis for his social action. The theology of the nineteenth century could not do so, in Barth's view; a new theology was necessary.

Clark on Barth

Karl Barth's Theological Method is not an attempt to present either an explanation or a critique of all of Barth's theology. Dr. Clark focuses on the method by which Barth developed that thought, with the understanding, of course, that if the method is faulty, the result cannot be good. In his usual efficient, dispassionate, and surgical manner, Clark dissected Barth's jugular, with predictable results: Barth is dead.

Dr. Clark, always the scholar and gentleman, did not mention in this book the fact that Barth in June 1961 refused to answer questions that Dr. Clark and Dr. Cornelius Van Til had posed to him one year prior to Barth's 1962 tour of the United States. We should, however, take notice in this new edition not only of Barth's refusal to answer Clark's questions, but of the insulting manner in which he stated that refusal. Collections of Barth's letters show that he answered many questions of less importance and in much less time; but perhaps those questions were not as probing as Dr. Clark's, or perhaps his other questioners were not despised "fundamentalists." Dr. Clark had posed two questions to Barth:

1. Was it reasonable for Paul to endure suffering in his ministry (or is it reasonable for us) if all are in Christ and will perhaps be saved anyhow, and if, as you once said, [Ludwig] Feuerbach and secular science are already in the Church?
2. In your *Anselm* (E[nglish] T[ranslation], p. 70) we are told that we can never see clearly whether any statement of any theologian is on one side or the other of the border between divine simplicity and incredible deception. Does not this make theology – your own included – a waste of time?

The questions were forwarded to Barth by Carl Henry, editor of *Christianity Today*, via Geoffrey Bromiley, Professor of Church History at Fuller Theological Seminary and co-translator of Barth's books. Barth replied directly to Bromiley:

I cannot and will not answer the questions these people put.... even if I had the time

[Barth had a year] and strength I would not enter into a discussion of the questions proposed.... I cannot respect the questions of these people from *Christianity Today*.... Such a discussion would have to rest on the primary presupposition that those who ask the questions have read, learned, and pondered the many things I have already written about these matters. They have obviously not done this.... The decisive point, however, is this. The second presupposition of a fruitful discussion between them and me would have to be that we are able to talk on a common plane. But these people have already had their so-called orthodoxy for a long time.... These fundamentalists want to eat me up.