

Guest Lecture on Karl Barth
Rick Wadholm Jr

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Karl Barth's Life

- May 10, 1886-December 10, 1968, Swiss theologian, considered one of the most significant theologians of the 20th century.
- He was the son of a pastor in Basel and studied at the University of Bern, University of Berlin (under Adolf von Harnack), University of Tübingen, and University of Marburg (under Wilhelm Herrmann).
- He was a Reformed pastor in Geneva (1909-1911) and Safenwil, Switzerland (1911-1921) where he also ministered as a chaplain to prisoners.
- Professor of theology at Göttingen (1921-1925), Professor of Dogmatics and New Testament Exegesis at Münster (1925-1930), and Professor of Systematic Theology at Bonn (1930-1935). While at Bonn he was the primary writer of the “Barmen Declaration” (1934) along with two Lutheran scholars (it is still in use within the Presbyterian Church USA “Book of Confessions” [HERE](#)) as a three-fellowship (Reformed, Lutheran, United) confession responding to the, then current, crisis in Germany. Shortly after this he lost his faculty post in Germany and was deported back to Switzerland for not signing the Oath to Hitler.
- In Switzerland, he became Professor and Chair of Systematic Theology at the University of Basel (1935-1962).

Karl Barth's (Select) Works

- *Der Römerbrief* (1st edition: 1918-199) or “Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans” was written while pastor of a rural congregation in Safenwil and earned Barth the ascription of being “like a bombshell on the theologian’s playground” for German liberalism of the period. He would radically revise it in a second edition (1921-22).
- *Barmen Declaration*.
 - Eberhard Busch (biographer of Barth) offering a reflection on Barth’s contributions to the Barmen Declaration: “Barth described it like this: ‘The Lutheran Church slept and the Reformed Church kept awake.’ While the two Lutherans had a proper three-hour siesta, ‘I revised the text of the six statements, fortified by strong coffee and one or two Brazilian cigars.’ ‘The result was that by that evening there was a text. I don’t want to boast, but it was really my text.’”¹
- *Dogmatics*. Multiple attempts at a Dogmatics that included an early *Christian Dogmatics* that was abandoned for the two volume *Göttingen Dogmatics* and developed significantly into the incomplete thirteen books in four volumes of his *Church Dogmatics* (officially consisting of five volumes with issues within volumes).
- Collections of Significant Articles and Presentations.
 - *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (1928)

¹ Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 246.

- *Dogmatics in Outline* (1947) a short presentation on the Apostles' Creed
- *God Here and Now* (1949-1964) brief lectures delivered over 15 years and gathered together
- *The Humanity of God* (1953-1957) three short essays
- *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (1963) lectures delivered during his short visit to the U.S.

Karl Barth and Liberalism

- Barth early on embraced liberalism, but his professors signing public support for Wilhelm II during World War 1 became a crisis moment where he believed this theology led to the German notions involved in knowledge, history, power, etc. His early pastoral life played into his break but it was his later developments which further distinguished his project as emphatically focused upon the "Word of God" and the strong Christo-centricity which separated his work from the Liberalism of his day. He rejected the historicization and religious experience as definitive for knowing within Liberalism. For Barth this was a turn from the anthropocentrism of Liberalism to theo-centrism, or more properly in his case, trinitarian Christo-centrism. He sought to re-ask and re-answer the question "Who is God?" from the presuppositional vantage of "God is!" and "God has made God's-self known definitively." His former professor, von Harnack, and he presented papers at a conference in 1923 where von Harnack attended Barth's presentation and was shocked (as testified in a letter) at the ways in which Barth had so removed God from humans that God had become unapproachable and unknowable. This "othering" of God would continue to play a prominent role in the distinction between Barth and the Liberalism he had earlier embraced. However, it would be tempered in his more emphatic turn to Jesus.

Karl Barth: A Few Key Take-aways and Controversies

- *Word of God*. Threefold: enfleshed, en-scripturated, and proclaimed. He famously referred to the "strange new world of the Bible". His ideas of theology were that of one who seeks to faithfully answer the already self-revealing God as having already addressed creation and humankind.
- *Dialectical theology*. Also called a "theology of crisis." It presumes God is unknowable by humans outside of God's self-revelation and that the knowability involves all manner of seeming paradoxes (thus, creating a "crisis"). It is meant as a contrast to ideas of Natural Theology (as might be found in the works of Friedrich Schleiermacher and his theological heirs).
- *Christo-centricity*. The centrality of God's self-revelation and self-giving freedom in love in Christ Jesus. Jesus as the God for man and Man for God. The elect electing one. In this way, for example, God did not elect some for salvation and some for damnation but elected Christ Jesus as the damned and saved and in this fashion, all are taken up into the "Yes" of Jesus.
- *Rejection of Natural Revelation*. He famously replied to claims by Emil Brunner that natural revelation was sufficient for human capacity to know God, with a one word "Nein!"
- *Universalism*. The above has sometimes been argued to lead persons to claim Barth was a universalist, but Barth rejected such a definitive claim as a rejection of the freedom of God's love to do as God pleases. Here is the most direct answer he gave when asked:

“1. One should not surrender himself in any case to the panic which this word seems to spread abroad, before informing himself exactly concerning its possible sense or non-sense.

2. One should at least be stimulated by the passage, Colossians 1:19, which admittedly states that God has determined through His Son as His image and as the first-born of the whole Creation to ‘reconcile all things to himself,’ to consider whether the concept could not perhaps have a good meaning. The same could be said of parallel passages.

3. One question should for a moment be asked, in view of the ‘danger’ with which one may see this concept gradually surrounded. What of the ‘danger’ of the eternally skeptical-critical theologian who is ever and again suspiciously questioning, because fundamentally always legalistic and therefore in the main morosely gloomy? Is not his presence among us currently more threatening than that of the unbecomingly cheerful indifferentism or even antinomianism, to which one with a certain understanding of universalism could in fact deliver himself? This much is certain, that we have no theological right to set any sort of limits to the loving-kindness of God which has appeared in Jesus Christ. Our theological duty is to see and understand it as being still greater than we had seen before.”²

- *Evil*. His notion of *das Nichtige* (nothingness?) in his *Church Dogmatics* concerning evil and its end is difficult to grasp.
- *His assistant, Charlotte von Kirschbaum*, aided him from 1924-1964 in much of his research and writing. This was controversial in that she moved into his home with he and his wife and children for the last 35 years and joined in their vacations and posthumously letters on the complexities of the relationship emerged.

Select Secondary Introductory Resources to Aid in Reading Barth

Folsom, Marty. *Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics for Everyone: A Step-by-Step Guide for Beginners & Pros*. 4 vols (when completed; 2 volumes are currently published). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2022-???

Guretzki, David. *An Explorer's Guide to Karl Barth*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016.

Mueller, David L. *Karl Barth*. Makers of the Modern Theological Mind. Waco, TX: Word Books, 1972.

Nimmo, Paul T. *Barth: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London: T&T Clark, 2017.

² Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (trans. Thomas Wieser; Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1960), 61-62.