

Ben Weger

Profile of a Christian Theologian

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### Karl Barth

Born in Switzerland in 1886, Karl Barth (pronounced “Bart”) is considered to be the most influential Swiss theologian on the twentieth century. The eldest son of a Swiss Reformed minister, Barth grew up in Bern, Switzerland where his father had become a professor of New Testament and early church history. As a child, Barth was resistant to attending school and was known for leading a local street gang that was responsible for fights at school and in the community. Later on, Barth followed in his father’s footsteps and began studying theology at the University of Bern in 1904. He was then ordained and served as a pastor at a church in Geneva. Barth married his wife, Nelly Hoffman, in 1913 and together they had five children. One of the more interesting details of Barth’s life is that his long-time assistant, Lollo, came to live with him and his wife. This has been referred to as a “35-year-long household arrangement” that was taxing on all who were involved.

Early in his pastorate, Barth established himself as an author and wrote his first commentary, *The Epistle to the Romans*. This writing soon gained international attention and eventually became one of the cornerstones of Barth’s life’s work. The international attention also resulted in Barth being appointed as a professor in Germany at the University of Gottingen, he was later appointed to professorial chairs at Münster (1925) and Bonn (1930), even though he lacked a doctorate degree. One of Barth’s most notable works is his 9,600 pages of writing, *Church Dogmatics*. Though never considered to be complete, *Church Dogmatics*, “grew year by

year out of his class lectures” and “eventually filled four volumes in 12 parts, of which Barth regarded volume 2, parts 1 and 2” (ibid.). Barth primarily operated as a theologian out of the historical-critical method. Barth is known and credited for his opposition to National Socialism and the Nazi uprising of Adolf Hitler. His writing contributions to the *Barmen Declaration*, a document articulating opposition to the Nazi uprising, “became one of the founding documents of the Confessing Church in Germany, which led the spiritual resistance against National Socialism”.

Barth is most well known for his theology of freedom, however this theology is not one of a liberation theology essence or origin. Barth was an advocate for the freedom of humanity both *from* a life of sin and *for* a life of humanity with God and others. He is considered a Christocentric theologian by most and a pneumocentric theologian by some (Guretzki, 8). One of Barth’s central modes was to frame any question in the lens of what we can know in the revelation of God in the person of Christ. It should be mentioned that many of the specific dynamics of Barth’s theology are still being investigated and debated. The overarching and guiding themes of Barth’s work would be the goodness of God and the unlimited reach of God’s grace. In terms of Barth’s work in opposition to National Socialism, he became one of the founders of the Confessing Church, “which reacted vigorously and indignantly against the attempt to set up a “German Christian” church supported by the Nazi government” (Torrence). As a result of Barth’s theology and his unwillingness to take the oath of allegiance to Hitler, which was required of all professors, he lost his chair at Bonn in 1935 (ibid.).

Barth was largely regarded primarily as a socialist in his lifetime, preaching and teaching about socialism. However, “he not only preached, lectured, and wrote about socialism. He was also a practical activist, helping to organize three trade unions. He gave courses for workers on issues like “working hours, banking [and] women’s work” (Green, 14). In his early years, Barth was wholly identified as a reformation theologian and devoted a great deal of his work to

reviving Scripture as the Word of God (ibid. ,15-16). Indeed, Barth was a student of the historical-critical method, however he expressed that if he “were driven to choose between it and the venerable doctrine of inspiration, [he would] without hesitation adopt the latter” (ibid., 17). A ‘buzz phrase’ that is associated with Barth is “double predestination” because, in his *Church Dogmatics*, he completed a significant revision to the classical reformed doctrine. This movement is often reflected upon as “Barth’s Mature theology”. “Barth’s revision consisted, above all, in the thesis that God elected God’s Self for “reprobation” (i.e. for the experience of the definitive destruction of sin and death in union with Jesus Christ) and salvation and blessing for all others. In taking this step, Barth had turned “double predestination” into good news, a message of hope for all humanity” (<http://barth.ptsem.edu/>). Barth’s work and message was all about “God’s revelation in Jesus Christ as witnessed to in Scripture” (Green, 23). Barth is noted, both positively and negatively, for his approach to measure everything in light of the subject matter.

Post World War II, Barth was invited back to Bonn in 1947 (Torrence). “Barth made regular visits to the prison in Basel, and his sermons to the prisoners, 1959; *Deliverance to the Captives*, reveal in a unique way the combination of evangelical passion and social concern that had characterized all of his life. Barth died in Basel at age 82” (ibid.). Barth’s contributions to the way in which humanity deserves equal treatment and consideration as unique, individual creations of God is supremely relevant in today’s world, especially as it relates to the concept and praxis of socialism. Barth tends to be more well known for his earlier ideas, but his theology matured to a place that offered hope to many.

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