Karl Barth

1886-1968

Karl Barth is considered by some the greatest Protestant theologian of the 20th century and possibly the greatest since the Reformation. More than anyone else, Barth inspired and led the renaissance of theology that took place from about 1920 to 1950. The son of the Swiss Reformed minister and New Testament scholar Fritz Barth, Karl Barth was born in Basel, May 10, 1886, and was reared in Bern, where his father taught. From 1904 to 1909, he studied theology at the universities of Bern, Berlin, Tübingen, and Marburg. In 1913 he married Nelly Hoffman; they had five children. Barth became known as a radical critic both of the prevailing liberal theology and of the social order. Liberal theology, Barth believed, had accommodated Christianity to modern culture. The crisis of World War I was in part a symptom of this unholy alliance. In his famous commentary Epistle to the Romans (1919; trans. 1933), Barth stressed the discontinuity between the Christian message and the world. He rejected the typical liberal points of contact between God and humanity in feeling or consciousness or rationality, as well as Catholic tendencies to trust in the church or spirituality.

Barth held professorships successively at Göttingen and Münster universities from 1923 to 1930, when he was appointed professor of systematic theology at the University of Bonn. He engaged in controversy with Adolf von Harnack, holding that the latter’s scientific theology is only a preliminary to the true task of theology, which is identical with that of preaching. He opposed the Hitler regime in Germany and supported church-sponsored movements against National Socialism; he was the chief author of the Barmen Declaration, six articles that defined Christian opposition to National Socialist ideology and practice. In 1934 he was expelled from Bonn and returned to Switzerland; from 1935 until his retirement in 1962 was professor at Basel, exercising a worldwide influence. During this period he worked on his Church Dogmatics (1932-68), a multivolume work of great richness that was unfinished at his death. He remained in Basel until his death, December 10, 1968.

The principal emphasis in Barth’s work, known as neoorthodoxy and crisis theology, is on the sinfulness of humanity, God’s absolute transcendence, and the human inability to know God except through revelation. His objective was to lead theology away from the influence of modern religious philosophy back to the principles of the Reformation and the prophetic teachings of the Bible. He regarded the Bible, however, not as the actual revelation of God but as only the record of that revelation. For Barth, God’s sole revelation of himself is in Jesus Christ. God is the “wholly other,” totally unlike mankind, who are utterly dependent on an encounter with the divine for any understanding of ultimate reality. Barth saw the task of the church as that of proclaiming the “good word” of God and as serving as the “place of encounter” between God and mankind. Barth regarded all human activity as being under the judgment of that encounter.

Barth’s first attempt at dogmatics was a volume of a Christian Dogmatics, published in 1927, which he judged to be a false start. Then in his study of Anselm of Canterbury he found a catalyst leading to what he called a breakthrough. He discovered in Anselm’s “faith seeking understanding” that theology did not have to justify itself by some outside criterion; it has its own rationality and internal coherence in the form of witness to the event of Jesus Christ. This gave him confidence in his study of the gospel and in the fact that theology was a fully rational procedure, and he began his Church Dogmatics.

The Church Dogmatics is in four “volumes,” each comprising between two and four large tomes. Volume I is on the doctrine of the Word of God. Volume I/1 is about the three forms of the Word of God (preached, written, and revealed) and the nature of the Trinity. Volume I/2 treats the three forms in more detail -- the revealed form in the incarnation of the Word of Jesus Christ, the written form in Scripture and the preached form in church proclamation.

Volume II is on the doctrine of God. Volume II/1 treats the knowledge of God, the main emphasis being on God’s initiative in revealing himself.

Then Barth treats the reality of God. He describes God as “one who loves in freedom,” and there is an exposition of the “perfections of the divine loving” (grace, holiness, mercy, righteousness, patience, and wisdom), and the “perfections of the divine freedom” (unity, omnipresence, constancy, omnipotence, eternity, and glory). Volume II/2 is on the election of God, Barth’s term for predestination. Barth transforms the
Karl Barth

doctrine of his own Calvinist tradition of double predestination by centering rejection and election in Jesus Christ, who takes all rejection on himself and also both elects all and is himself elected. Christ's election leads to the election of the community of Israel and the church, and only in that context is it right to talk about the election or rejection of the individual.

Volume III is on the doctrine of creation. Volume III/1 is on God's work of creation, its goodness and the relation of creation to God's covenant.

Volume III/2 is on human being. Jesus Christ is the "real" human being and the criterion for true humanity. Volume III/3 covers providence, evil as an "impossible possibility" which has no future, and heaven, angels, and demons. Volume III/4 treats the ethical side of the doctrine of creation.

Barth completed the first three parts of Volume IV and partially completed part 4. Considering the doctrine of reconciliation, in Volume IV he interweaves the themes of Christology, sin, soteriology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, justification, sanctification, and vocation. Christ is the servant, the judge who is judged in our place and who empties himself, the royal man who is raised up by God; He is the true witness, the victor over all that opposes him, and the light of life. Specific aspects of sin are exposed by each aspect of Christ -- pride resists accepting what God become man does for us; sloth refuses to take an active part in the new life given by Christ; falsehood resists and distorts the witness of Christ. The way of human salvation is justification by faith through which the Christian community is gathered, sanctification in love through which the community is built up, and vocation in hope, which sends the community out as witnesses in word and life. Barth did not live to write any of the projected final Volume V on eschatology.

Although Barth's uncompromising positions were a great strength during the period of Nazi power, his views were increasingly subjected to criticism in the following decades. Some argue that he was too negative in his estimate of mankind and its reasoning powers and too narrow in limiting revelation to the biblical tradition, thus excluding the non-Christian religions. He gives such radical priority to God's activity that some critics find human activity and freedom devalued. Barth sees revelation and salvation as given by God and valid quite apart from the subjective responses of human beings, and this is questioned as regards how far it takes account of the importance of human response to God. Barth's realism apparently aroused controversy; Barth takes a middle way between literalism (a one-to-one correspondence between our language and God) and pure symbolism or expressivism (no real preference at all). He takes a similar position on the historicity of the Gospel narratives; they are not necessarily literal history, nor are they myth or fiction.

Among Barth's other better known works are The Word of God and the Word of Man (1924; trans. 1928), Credo (1935; trans. 1936), and Evangelical Theology, an Introduction (1962; trans. 1963). His works have influenced many theologians positively and negatively, including Rudolf Bultmann, Paul Tillich, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Hans K Å ng, J Å rgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Eberhard J Å ngel, and many theologians from beyond continental Europe.