

# Recent work on Barth

## A survey of literature since 1975

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### 1. Works by Barth

The *Gesamtausgabe* (Complete Works) is in progress, and numbers more than a dozen volumes at present. Of greatest interest to English readers will be the translations of various volumes which make available material which offers a fuller

perspective on Barth's development than has hitherto been possible.

Of these, perhaps the most interesting is the volume of fragments from the *CD*,<sup>1</sup> entitled *The Christian Life*, which compose the unfinished part of the 'ethics of reconciliation'. Barth's main concern is to show how his 'Christocentrism' does not detract from the sense of man as authentic ethical subject and agent. Using the Lord's Prayer as a

<sup>1</sup> *CD* = *Church Dogmatics*.

basis, he tries to relate the human act of invocation of God ('Our Father') to the exclusively divine act for which man appeals ('thy kingdom come'). In this way, he continues the correlation of divine and human agency attempted in IV/4, the fragment on baptism. These ethical reflections from the late Barth might be contrasted with the recently-published lectures from 1928-29, *Ethics*, which show Barth at an important transitional stage in his thinking, before the beginning of the *CD* but after he had left behind the phase represented by the commentary on Romans. Much of the material was reworked later in the *CD*. But apart from these historical interests, the volume deserves attention for the basis it lays for theological ethics, as well as for the practical problems on which it reflects.

Shortly after these lectures were delivered, Barth began serious work on Anselm, and the resultant book *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum* has recently been re-issued. It is a classic quarry for insights into the theological method which informs the *CD*. Also re-issued in a new translation by G. W. Bromiley (to whose heroic translation efforts every English reader of Barth is deeply indebted) is *CD I/1*, originally translated by G. T. Thompson in 1936. Further, we have a re-issue of an early volume of sermons by Barth and his friend Thurneysen, entitled *Come Holy Spirit*. Preached between 1920 and 1924, the sermons come from Barth's last years as pastor at Safenwil and his first spell of academic life as professor at Göttingen. Quite apart from their own inherent value, the sermons demonstrate the seriousness with which Barth wrestled with the problems of preaching at this time in his life, and offer many insights into the nature of his thinking at a seminal period.

Indeed, Barth was always insistent that one of the major aims of his theology was that of undergirding and serving the ministry of the proclamation of the Word of God from the pulpit. It is, accordingly, fitting that there should appear two volumes of helps for the preacher derived from the *CD*. The volume *Preaching through the Christian Year* selects some of the best exegetical passages from the *CD* and arranges them according to the church year, with the intention of offering stimulus to the preacher in his preparation and meditation, making available to him resources he might not easily be able to get hold of. Of course, much of Barth's exegesis could be disputed; but the book invites the preacher to enter into the exegetical and expository task with the same enthusiasm and dedication as Barth himself. In the same way, the *Index Volume* of the *CD* contains a long section of 'Aids for the Preacher', arranged

again around the Christian year. Barth's comments on the selected passages for the Sunday in question are given, again to stimulate pulpit preparation. Both books should help to show how Barth saw the theologian's task to be closely linked to that of the preacher; and both amply demonstrate the rich kerygmatic resources which his work contains.

Finally, on a more biographical note, the volume of *Letters 1961-1968*. These letters from the last period of his life are an invaluable source of material for Barth's own biography and for the history of contemporary theology. Some of the letters are academic in nature: comment on the new theological generation of Pannenberg, Küng, Moltmann and Jüngel, or upon the new moves in Catholic thought represented by Vatican II. Some are personal: letters to friends, or to ordinary folk who had asked for advice. All testify to Barth's intellect, charm, humour and warmth, as well as occasionally to the melancholy which often afflicted him at the end of an extraordinarily rich life. Readers who find Barth 'scholastic' should perhaps study these letters with care.

## 2. Books about Barth

The translation in 1976 of Eberhard Busch's biography *Karl Barth* was a major event in Barth scholarship. The first full-scale biography, Busch's book was especially valuable because of its presentation of so much material from Barth's own hand: letters, unpublished manuscripts, autobiographical pieces. All this makes it a treat to read. And for the serious student of Barth, it is essential reading, despite its lack of a firm critical appraisal, for it places Barth's theological writing in its historical and personal context and traces an overall picture of its development.

Two full-scale surveys of Barth's theology have recently appeared in English, both sympathetic to Barth and both offering excellent maps of the territory for the prospective reader. The first, J. Thompson's *Christ in Perspective*, analyses Barth's theology from the vantage-point of its Christological centre, showing how Barth uses the doctrine of the person of Christ as a basis out of which to explain all other doctrinal material. After surveying Barth's Christology, he goes on to look at the doctrines of God and man as well as Barth's eschatology. His enthusiasm is evident throughout, and he conveys the excitement of engaging with Barth's work. Yet one feels that, despite Thompson's excellent expositions and his references to scholarly German literature, he is *too* enthusiastic, and often pulls up short of critical

comment, so that critics are dismissed by a word from the master himself. Nevertheless, as a first taste of Barth, the book has much to commend it.

G. W. Bromiley's *Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth* takes the reader sequentially through each paragraph of the *CD*, eschewing the thematic approach. He summarizes the main emphases of the passages in question and gives invaluable guidelines to the student of part or whole of Barth's *magnum opus*, as well as making suggestions for critical evaluation. The great virtue of the book, despite its occasional heaviness, is that of furnishing a map of Barth's work in which evaluation is not allowed to obscure the balanced presentation of Barth's own thinking.

We turn to books on specific topics. Klaas Runia offers an excellent survey of Barth's doctrine of the Word of God in *Karl Barth and the Word of God*. His presentation of Barth's Christology, his view of Scripture and his view of preaching are lucid and generally just, and though he is in many ways strongly critical of Barth, particularly on the doctrine of Scripture, he never fails to draw out the positive insights to be gained from Barth's work.

On the doctrine of God, Colin Gunton's *Becoming and Being* interprets Barth's doctrine by comparing it with that of process-philosopher Charles Hartshorne. Originally a D.Phil thesis, the book is not for the beginner. After an unsympathetic presentation of Hartshorne's thinking, in particular of the notion of divine relativity, the author shows that in Barth's doctrine, the divine becoming is an aspect of God's freedom. Barth comes off lightly, and is certainly not subjected to the searching criticism with which Gunton faces Hartshorne; but nevertheless this dense book is a shrewd guide to some fundamental motifs in Barth's account of the divine nature.

Gunton relies on Eberhard Jüngel's study *The Doctrine of the Trinity*. Originally published in 1964, Jüngel's book is a short and masterful treatment of Barth's Trinitarian dogma, although again not for the beginner. He seeks to show how Barth's doctrine is the refusal of metaphysical ideas of divine absoluteness or aloofness, and that it offers an account of the divine being in which God's freedom is actualised in his loving self-renunciation at the cross. Jüngel is acutely sensitive to the nuances of Barth's thinking, and in this book he established himself as perhaps the foremost interpreter of Barth today.

The doctrine of the Holy Spirit is often thought to be squeezed out by Barth in the *CD*, because of the massive emphasis on Christology. P. J. Rosato's study *The Spirit as Lord* is an eminently

readable study of the problems in this area, in which he seeks to show how much of a theologian of the Spirit Barth in fact is. After an introduction which traces the growth of Barth's pneumatology, Rosato turns to the mature work, and then in a final section offers 'improvisations' in which he suggests how Barth might be taken further. Rosato argues that the presence of a large body of material on the Holy Spirit in the *CD* means that Barth is not so hostile to the natural order as is frequently thought. Yet he is sufficiently critical to propose that Barth's doctrine of the Spirit freights his doctrine of the Trinity towards Father and Son, and thus to a degree away from the created order. In all, he gives us a balanced and judicious survey which repays careful study.

G. G. Bolich's study *Karl Barth and Evangelicalism* seeks to commend Barth as a way out of the impasse of current evangelical theology in the USA. But, for all his evident fascination with the topic, Bolich is not a perceptive analyst of Barth, and his style is rather immature in its breathless admiration for the old man of Basel. And in addition some more conservative evangelicals may be unhappy with some of his theological recommendations.

Sensitive and appreciative accounts of some major themes in Barth's work are offered in W. A. Whitehouse's collection *The Authority of Grace*. Covering such topics as the doctrine of man, providence, angelology, and the doctrine of creation, helpful guides to Barth's thought are offered, and the essays are especially notable for the scientific background from which they come. The author intends them to show the interdisciplinary potential of Barth's work. If the possibility of correlation of Barth's work and that of the natural scientist is sometimes overstated and problems glossed over, this should not blind the reader to what is valuable here, namely Whitehouse's facility with the material and his ability to let Barth speak for himself.

S. W. Sykes has edited a very significant collection of essays on aspects of Barth's theology, *Karl Barth: Studies in his Theological Method*. The editor contributes a valuable account of the reception of Barth by British theologians, as well as a perceptive critique of Barth's concept of Jesus Christ as the 'centre of theology'. D. F. Ford and R. H. Roberts both give condensed versions of their doctoral theses. Ford argues that the concept of 'realistic narrative' is basic to Barth's treatment of the Bible. Roberts urges that Barth's programme revolves around a concept of time in which the natural world is swallowed up by the divine, and that

it is accordingly to be repudiated. Where Ford is sympathetic and Roberts hostile, R. D. Williams is both sensitive and critical in his exposition of Barth's doctrine of the Trinity. He shows how the later work of Barth, where the humanity of Jesus has a larger role, demands a more pluralist doctrine of the divine Trinity than the earlier exposition will allow. His essay is arguably the most persuasive in some of the best English work on Barth of recent years.

A similarly impressive collection is that edited by T. Rendtorff, *Die Realisierung der Freiheit*. Rendtorff has always been a searching critic of Barth, and his own contribution, on Barth's doctrine of baptism and its place in his ethics, is no exception. Besides this essay, particular attention should be given to F. W. Graf's essay, which argues against the prevailing trend by claiming that Barth's 'Christocentrism' is in fact a covert theocentrism which tends to threaten the value of the natural order. Once again, as in so much recent writing on Barth, it is questions concerning the dignity, freedom and authenticity of man which are in the forefront of the debate. At this point, mention should be made of the very full study of Barth by A. Quadt, *Gott und Mensch*. Writing from a Roman Catholic viewpoint, Quadt argues with a wealth of material from Barth that the latter's theology is, indeed, one which treats God and man, and, indeed, that because Barth is concerned with God's *humanity*, man is affirmed in his work.

### 3. Articles on Barth and references in other works

Eberhard Jüngel's article on Barth in the new *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* gives a succinct and judicious account of its subject's biography and theological work, and has some particularly interesting material on analogy. The same author has also produced a commentary on the volume *The Christian Life* mentioned above, entitled 'Anrufung Gottes'. This essay introduces the reader to the main themes of Barth's last fragments, but also gives some indications as to the relevance of the unfinished parts of the *CD* for the construction of a theological anthropology. Those who are concerned with Barth's view of man and the natural world will not wish to pass over this important study which does much to break new ground in these areas.

Like Jüngel, Chr. Link has sought to stress that in his later work at least Barth was not at all the determined foe of the natural order but rather sought to accord to man and his world their proper, derivative status. His important and lengthy study *Die Welt als Gleichnis* treats Barth in the context of

an examination of some problems in the history of natural theology, arguing powerfully in support of Barth's view that the world may become a 'parable of the Kingdom of Heaven'. Many of the same insights are applied to Barth's understanding of 'religion' in the same author's article 'Das menschliche Gesicht der Offenbarung', where it is proposed that a more positive evaluation of human religion can be found in the later writings. Some of these themes are taken up in W. Krötke's article 'Karl Barth und das Anliegen der "natürlichen Theologie" '.

Also amongst those who find Barth more sympathetic towards man and nature is S. D. McLean, whose article 'The Humanity of Man in Karl Barth's Thought' gives a useful survey of Barth's material, although with little real engagement with problems raised by critics of Barth. A recent and very powerful statement of such criticism is made by R. H. Roberts in 'The Ideal and the Real in the Theology of Karl Barth', where Barth is accused of seriously undervaluing the goodness and, indeed, the reality of the natural order. Roberts' highly rhetorical article has many very incisive comments and offers much food for thought, although he does tend to overstate a case which needs to be made with greater subtlety.

More attracted by Barth, through no less searching in their criticism, are recent studies which have fastened onto Barth's doctrine of the Trinity as one of the reasons for his ambiguity in affirming the natural order. W. Pannenberg's recent collection of essays, *Grundfragen systematischer Theologie II*, has three pieces ('Person und Subjekt'; 'Die Subjektivität Gottes und die Trinitätslehre'; 'Der Gott der Geschichte') which argue that in seeing the Trinity in strongly unitary, even monist, terms, Barth not only inherits the legacy of Hegel but also fails to appreciate that the Trinity is an open, plural society directed towards the affirmation of the world. The works of Rosato and Williams mentioned above offer instructive parallels here, as does the recently-translated study by J. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, which suggests that Barth's doctrine of the Trinity is unable fully to offer a basis of human freedom. R. H. Roberts' essay 'Karl Barth' has similar reservations about Barth's doctrine of the Trinity. In contradistinction, L. During in 'Hegel, Barth, and the Rationality of the Trinity' points to differences between Barth and Hegel, and J. Thompson urges that the heart of Barth's doctrine of God lies in the concept of God's humanity, in 'The Humanity of God in the Theology of Karl Barth'.

The earlier period of Barth's development is treated in two historical studies. W. Groll in *Ernst Troeltsch und Karl Barth* looks at their relationship with an eye for implications for current systematic theology. And Chr. Gestrinch examines some of the debates about natural theology in which Barth was embroiled in *Neuzeitliches Denken und die Spaltung der dialektischen Theologie*; his work offers some fascinating insights into the history of German theology in the earlier part of this century.

Finally, M. Kwiran has produced an invaluable *Index to Literature on Barth, Bultmann and Bonhoeffer*. This is a veritable mine of information which is an indispensable tool for the serious student.

Even during his life-time, Barth's work was frequently repudiated by a new theological generation as an out-of-date scholastic edifice of little use for the construction of a vital contemporary dogmatics. The charge is often repeated today. Yet the Barth industry continues, and keeping abreast of the research and publications in the field is becoming a full-time occupation. Here we have surveyed the most major items which have appeared since 1975, intending to give a brief analysis of the major pieces and to show some of the main themes in the debates over Barth's work. Much of the writing we have considered is good; some of it is very weak, and a few pieces quite splendid. But all of it, good or bad, testifies to the fact that — despite pronouncements to the contrary — the understanding and critical reception of Barth's work is a task which is still not at all finished. There could hardly be a better testimony to a theologian's continuing fruitfulness.

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