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# 1 Introducing Barth

JOHN WEBSTER

‘As a theologian one can never be great, but at best one remains small in one’s own way’: so Barth at his eightieth birthday celebrations, characteristically attempting to distance himself from his own reputation.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, Barth is the most important Protestant theologian since Schleiermacher, and the extraordinary descriptive depth of his depiction of the Christian faith puts him in the company of a handful of thinkers in the classical Christian tradition. Yet firsthand, well-informed engagement with Barth’s work remains – with some notable recent exceptions – quite rare in English-speaking theological culture. His *magnum opus*, the unfinished thirteen volumes of the *Church Dogmatics*, is not always studied with the necessary breadth and depth, and his theological commitments are still sometimes misconstrued or sloganized. The significance of Barth’s work in his chosen sphere is comparable to that of, say, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Freud, Weber, or Saussure in theirs, in that he decisively reorganized an entire discipline. Yet Barth’s contribution to Christian theology is in many respects still only now beginning to be received.

Barth’s life and work are inseparable, and his writings need to be read in the light of his biography and vice versa. He was at or close to the centre of most of the major developments in German-speaking Protestant theology and church life from the early 1920s to the early 1960s, and even his academic writings are ‘occasional’, emerging from and directed towards engagement in church life and theological teaching. At least part of the cogency of his writing derives, therefore, from his sheer urgent presence in what is said. No critical biography of Barth exists, though his last assistant, Eberhard Busch, assembled a great array of raw material in what is so far the standard account.<sup>2</sup> A projected autobiography started by Barth towards the end of his life was quickly abandoned; but a good deal of incidental autobiographical material is available in letters, published writings, and other forms. Barth was highly self-conscious about the course of his life, and especially about his intellectual development. In his mature writings, he

often traced the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century theology by describing his relationship to it and his own role in bringing to a close the era of Liberal Protestant high culture. Moreover, his theological concern not to drift away from hard-won conviction about the true nature of the Christian confession disposed him to keep revisiting the question of the continuity of his own work, and on fairly frequent occasions to look back over the course of his development. All of this means that, though much remains unknown about Barth's inner life, much can be said at the biographical level.

### BARTH'S LIFE

Barth was born on 10 May, 1886, in Basel, Switzerland; his family background placed him at the centre of Basel religious and intellectual life. His father, Fritz Barth, taught at the College of Preachers, but when Barth was young moved to teach at the University of Bern. In later life, Barth came to regard his father as '[t]he man to whom I undoubtedly owe the presuppositions of my later relation to theology', and as one 'who by the quiet seriousness with which he applied himself to Christian things as a scholar and as a teacher was for me, and still is, an ineffaceable and often enough admonitory example'.<sup>3</sup> Barth records that his confirmation instructor 'brought the whole problem of religion so closely home to me that at the end of the classes I realized clearly the need to know more about the matter. On this rudimentary basis, I resolved to study theology.'<sup>4</sup> He began theological studies in Bern in 1904, finding much of the teaching a dull though (as he later saw it) effective inoculation against the excessive claims of historical criticism.<sup>5</sup> Bern did introduce him to Kant, whose *Critique of Practical Reason* he called '[t]he first book that really moved me as a student',<sup>6</sup> and also to the lively excesses of student society life. From here Barth went to Berlin, then one of the great centres of Protestant liberalism, where he heard Harnack with unbounded enthusiasm. After Berlin, Barth studied briefly back in Bern and then in Tübingen, until finally he went to Marburg in 1908.

One thing drew him to Marburg: Wilhelm Herrmann, then at the height of his powers as dogmatician and ethicist. 'I absorbed Herrmann through every pore.'<sup>7</sup> And his influence on Barth, both immediate and long term, was profoundly formative. Partly, he offered a commanding example of lived theological vocation; partly, he articulated a coherent account of Christianity which took Kant and Schleiermacher with full seriousness. No less importantly, he also enabled Barth to set a limit to his liberalism: Herr-

mann's stress on the autonomy of the life of faith (*autopistia*) signified to Barth that, for example, Ernst Troeltsch's subsuming of Christianity under the history of moral culture was a point at which 'I must refuse to follow the dominant theology of the age.'<sup>8</sup> After finishing his studies, Barth deepened his immersion in the Marburg theological scene by working there for a year as an assistant editor for the journal *Christliche Welt*, edited by a leading liberal, Martin Rade. From here Barth went on to pastoral work in Switzerland. After a brief period as suffragan pastor in Geneva (where he was led 'to plunge into Calvin's *Institutio* – with profound impact'),<sup>9</sup> he began his work in 1911 as pastor in the small town of Safenwil in the Aargau.

The ten years Barth spent as a pastor were a period of intensely concentrated development, and most accounts of his work (including those from Barth himself) make much of how the realities of pastoral work, which were brought home to him during this decade, led to his abandonment of theological liberalism and his adoption of a quite different set of commitments. Barth's liberal assurances were initially undermined by his exposure to the Swiss social democratic movement, then at its height. His immersion in local social and political disputes, fed by the writings of Christian social thinkers such as Kutter and Ragaz, not only made his early years in the pastorate highly conflictual but also began to eat away at his confidence in the bourgeois religious ethos of his teachers. The outbreak of hostilities in 1914 further disillusioned him, especially because of what he saw as the collusion of mainstream theology with the ideology of war. At the end of his life, Barth described the crumbling of liberal Protestantism which this represented to him: 'An entire world of theological exegesis, ethics, dogmatics, and preaching, which up to that point I had accepted as basically credible, was thereby shaken to the foundations, and with it everything which flowed at that time from the pens of the German theologians.'<sup>10</sup>

In the crisis brought about by the loss of his operative theology and the apparent impossibility of pastoral work which this entailed, Barth began to search for illumination. Above all he immersed himself in an amazed rediscovery of the biblical writings, and especially of the Pauline corpus: '[B]eyond the problems of theological liberalism and religious socialism, the concept of the Kingdom of God in the real, transcendent sense of the Bible became increasingly more insistent, and the textual basis of my sermons, the Bible, which hitherto I had taken for granted, became more and more of a problem.'<sup>11</sup> In the summer of 1916 he began intensive study of the epistle to the Romans: 'I read and read and wrote and wrote.'<sup>12</sup> From his working notes there emerged the first edition of the Romans commentary, published early in 1919, in which he offered an extraordinarily vivid and

#### 4 John Webster

insistent characterization of Christianity as eschatological and transcendent.

Toward the end of his pastorate, Barth was consumed by the task of reconstructing his account of the Christian faith, as lectures from the time (collected in English as *The Word of God and the Word of Man*) indicate. As a result of a lecture in Germany in 1919, Barth discovered himself at the centre of a new theological movement. 'I suddenly found a circle, and the prospect of further circles, of people to whose unrest my efforts promised answers which at once became new questions in the fresh contacts with these German contemporaries.'<sup>13</sup> One unexpected consequence of this new fame was that in 1921 Barth found himself appointed as Honorary Professor of Reformed Theology in Göttingen. Deeply aware of his own lack of preparedness for the role – 'at that time I did not even possess the Reformed confessional writings, and had certainly never read them'<sup>14</sup> – he began the work of theological teaching which was to occupy him for the rest of his life.

'These were, of course, difficult years, for I had not only to learn and teach continuously but also, as the champion of a new trend in theology, I had to vindicate and protect myself in the form of lectures and public discussions of every kind.'<sup>15</sup> In his teaching in these first years as professor, Barth was buried beneath the task of reacquainting himself with the classical and Reformed Christian tradition, largely under the pressure of the classroom. He took his students through texts like the Heidelberg Catechism or Calvin's *Institutes*, as well as offering theological exegesis of a variety of New Testament books, and eventually teaching a full-scale cycle on dogmatics (published posthumously as the so-called *Göttingen Dogmatics*). Barth also positioned himself more clearly vis-à-vis his liberal heritage, notably in a lecture cycle on Schleiermacher (which gave a remarkably mature and sympathetic critique of its subject), but also in external lectures, some of which can be found in the early collection, *Theology and Church*.<sup>16</sup> Barth's central role in the new trend which came to be called 'dialectical theology' demanded much of his energy and took him all over Germany, bringing him into alliance with figures such as Bultmann, Brunner and Gogarten. The journal *Zwischen den Zeiten*, founded in 1922, became the chief organ of the group.

Barth moved to teach at Münster in 1925 where he remained until 1930. During these years Barth consolidated the theological positions forged in the early part of the decade, and became more deeply acquainted with the Catholic tradition, notably through contact with the Jesuit theologian Erich Przywara. Above all, Barth devoted himself to lecturing and writing on dogmatics, publishing the first volume of his *Christian Dogmatics* in 1927



(the project was later abandoned in favour of the *Church Dogmatics*). Around this time Barth also gave a lengthy series of lectures on ethics (which he already understood as intrinsic to dogmatics), published only posthumously: some of the material found its way into the *Church Dogmatics* in a revised form.<sup>17</sup> Barth's immersion in dogmatics was one of the chief causes of friction with other leading figures in the circle around him. Bultmann, for example, suspected Barth of relapsing into arid scholasticism; Barth's increasingly profound internalization of the thought structure of classical dogmatics pushed him to judge his associates to be clinging to the wreckage of theological liberalism, whether in apologetic, anthropological, or existential form. By the end of the 1920s the group had all but dissolved (*Zwischen den Zeiten* lingered on until 1933), not without some personal bitterness on all sides. Looking back on the episode shortly before the Second World War, Barth reflected on 'the loss of a host of theological neighbours, co-workers, and friends . . . they and I, little by little or all at once, found ourselves unable to work together any more in the harmony of one mind and one spirit. We quite definitely got on different roads.'<sup>18</sup>

This distancing of himself from his 'theological neighbours' was part of a larger process whereby Barth rid himself of vestiges of his theological inheritance, and articulated a theological identity formed out of biblical and dogmatic habits of thought with rigorous consistency and with a certain exclusiveness. This process had begun, of course, during the writing of the *Romans* commentary and was continued during his first two professorships. However, with the publication of the first part-volume of the *Church Dogmatics* in 1932 (two years after Barth moved to teach in Bonn), Barth demonstrated more than hitherto a calm and unapologetic confidence about his theological commitments which gave his writing its characteristic descriptive richness and depth. He himself identified his study of Anselm at the beginning of the 1930s as an important intellectual episode in the gradual evolution towards the *Church Dogmatics*. In the book which resulted from this study, Barth noted 'the characteristic absence of crisis in Anselm's theologizing',<sup>19</sup> and the phrase says much of the theological style which became increasingly characteristic of his own work. The confidence had many roots: the fact that Barth felt that he had divested himself of 'the last remnants of a philosophical, i.e., anthropological . . . foundation and exposition of Christian doctrine';<sup>20</sup> the fact that by now he was thoroughly familiar with great stretches of the history of Christian theology – Patristic, Medieval, and Reformation – which made available to him compelling examples of theology done in other than a modern mode; and Barth's personal self-assurance as the leading Protestant thinker in Germany. Above

all, Barth discovered in the course of the preparation of the early volumes of the *Church Dogmatics* the freedom to think and write confessionally without anxiety about securing extra-theological foundations for the possibility of theology. 'I can say everything far more clearly, unambiguously, simply, and more in the way of a confession, and at the same time also much more freely, openly, and comprehensively, than I could ever say it before.'<sup>21</sup>

Barth remained a sharply critical thinker, of course, even when he settled into a more confessional and descriptive manner. His repudiation of the hospitality to natural theology shown by his former associate, Emil Brunner, in a rather savage occasional piece entitled 'No!'<sup>22</sup> not only sealed the grave of the former dialectical theology group, but also provided evidence to generations of North American readers that Barth was at heart a polemicist (and a rude one at that), rather than a constructive church theologian. For Barth, a much more important critical task lay to hand in articulating a theological basis for the church's action in response to the Nazi takeover of Germany. In the early 1930s Barth found himself occupying a key role in church politics, in the face of 'a gigantic revelation of human lying and brutality on the one hand, and of human stupidity and fear on the other'.<sup>23</sup> His leadership, both in a stream of writings—most of all *Theological Existence Today*<sup>24</sup> – and in active participation in the nascent Confessing Church – symbolized in his major role in drafting the Barmen Theological Declaration in 1934 – was of critical significance. More, perhaps, than any other Protestant leader in Germany at the time, Barth was free of the desire to retain the social and cultural prestige of the church at any price, and could bring to bear on the events of the Nazi takeover a startlingly clear theological position in which the church was wholly defined by its confession of Jesus Christ as 'the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death'.<sup>25</sup>

His leadership in German church life was cut short by his dismissal from his teaching position and his return to Switzerland in 1935. Barth taught at Basel for the rest of his teaching career. His main task there was the production of the *Church Dogmatics*, first as lectures to ever-increasing crowds of students, and then in volume after volume of the final text. '[D]ogmatics has ever been with me,' he wrote in the middle of World War II, 'giving me a constant awareness of what should be my central and basic theme as a thinker' (*CD* II/2, p. ix). The task was utterly absorbing for Barth, and massive enough to be a compelling object both for his intellect and his will. As he wrote, the bulk of the project increased. He found himself reworking the biblical and historical grounds for dogmatics; he felt driven to reconstruct some crucial tracts of Reformed teaching (the doctrine of

election is a telling example), or to handle topics in a fresh way (the doctrine of reconciliation, for example, weaves together Christology, soteriology, anthropology, and ecclesiology in a wholly unprecedented fashion). Above all, he discovered that the portrayal of the Christian confession upon which he had embarked could not be done 'except in penetrating expositions that will necessarily demand both time and space' (ibid.). As early as the end of World War II, Barth was expressing frustration with his slow progress and wishing that he 'could run his trains on two or more parallel tracks' (CD III/1, p. 10), and the work remained unfinished at his death, largely laid aside after retirement as he and his long-time assistant, Charlotte von Kirschbaum, became ill and the stimulus of teaching no longer goaded him to produce.

For all its demands upon Barth's energies, the *Dogmatics* did not eclipse other activities. He was constantly in demand as lecturer and preacher; he played a leading role in the ecumenical movement in the late 1940s, particularly the Amsterdam Assembly of the World Council of Churches; he had wide contact with others through correspondence and personal meetings; he devoted a great deal of time to the many students who came to Basel to write theses under his direction; and he kept up a constant stream of less major writings. Moreover, Barth never entirely avoided controversy on some front or other. He often found himself at odds with the Swiss political establishment; he spoke out vigorously in the 1950s against American and European anti-Communism and against German rearmament, to a storm of protest. As retirement approached, he became embroiled in a tangle about his successor, and at the end of his last semester of teaching was publicly criticized by the pro-Rector of the University for his political views. Even after his retirement he evoked considerable church controversy by his opposition to infant baptism in the final fragment of the *Church Dogmatics*, observing wryly that the book left him 'in the theological and ecclesiastical isolation which has been my lot for almost fifty years' (CD IV/4, p. 12).

After retiring at the end of the winter semester 1961–2 (his swan song was the series of lectures published as *Evangelical Theology*),<sup>26</sup> Barth undertook a lecture tour in the United States, and kept up a full schedule of writing, speaking, and informal teaching until his health broke down early in 1964. For much of the next two years he was in hospital or convalescent at home, and the long illness left him unable to work at major tasks for the rest of his life. He did travel to Rome in 1966 to talk with those involved in the Second Vatican Council, and prepared a last fragment of the *Church Dogmatics* for publication, along with a number of minor pieces. But Barth's closing years were often clouded by feelings of 'vexation, anxiety, weariness,

humiliation, and melancholy',<sup>27</sup> especially in view of the constrictions imposed on him by old age: 'in every respect my feet can now move only in a small compass. Gone are the trips and runs and walks and rides of the past, gone the addresses to large groups, gone the participation in conferences and the like. Everything has its time, and for me all that kind of thing, it seems, has had its time.'<sup>28</sup> Barth felt the loss of his professional life with great acuteness; yet at times he was able to express a kind of mellow calm and simplicity, along with an untroubled freedom in limitation, as in the little collection of his writings from the months before his death, *Final Testimonies*.<sup>29</sup> He died on 10 December, 1968.

Barth was a powerful, complex personality. His life, as well as his literary work, demonstrates a highly developed attentiveness and curiosity: he found people, places, events, and ideas utterly interesting and absorbing. He was fascinated by all the different manifestations of the secular world. He took great delight in the international student body in Basel, and students often experienced his teaching in seminars and lectures as something in which they could 'witness the dynamics of newly-created thoughts'.<sup>30</sup> Barth was able to sustain at one and the same time a vigorously active public life and the continuous interior concentration and focus required to produce his writings, above all the *Dogmatics*. He experienced intense fulfilment in what he once called 'the necessity and beauty of serious and regular intellectual work'.<sup>31</sup> 'How fine a thing it is to be occupied with this great matter,' he wrote in the preface to *Church Dogmatics* IV/2 (p. ix). And yet he did not resist public activity; however much he felt harassed by the demands made of him, he appeared to need an external counterpoint to the intellectual. These two strong aspects of Barth, the internal and the external, coalesce in the fact that his personal identity was strongly defined in vocational categories. He thought of himself in terms of the tasks – intellectual, political, and so forth – which he felt called to undertake and which sustained his very firm sense of his own identity, rooted no doubt in the particular cast of his personality, but reinforced by his inhabitation of a broad imaginative space peopled with the figures and texts of classical Christian (and European) culture, and maintained by a commanding sense of calling to an engrossing set of tasks. This combination of interior breadth and highly focused vocation afforded him both a rootedness in his particular context and a freedom from its potential inhibitions.

There was also a certain alienating effect to Barth's personality. He could be devastatingly critical of people, views and institutions, and in both public and private life he experienced relationships which were strained or which ended in estrangement. Experiences here often led Barth to cast

himself in the role of outsider, explaining his isolation to himself and others in terms of his sense that the primary ideas which drove his work had not been grasped or heeded or were contravened by the teachings and actions of others. At other times, his defence lay in irony and humour, through which he not only evaded his critics but also softened the negative impact which the weight of his own personality could have.

It is this restless, many-sided personality which lies behind Barth's writings. This does not, of course, mean that his theology should be read as a sort of encoded autobiography, for he was a sternly objective thinker. But there is an intensely personal aspect to all that he wrote (he wrote almost nothing in the way of pure 'detached' scholarship), precisely because his thinking and writing were who he was.

#### READING BARTH

Reading Barth is no easy task. Because the corpus of his writing is so massive and complex, what he has to say cannot be neatly summarized. Moreover, his preferred method of exposition, especially in the *Church Dogmatics*, is frustrating for readers looking to follow a linear thread of argument. Commentators often note the musical structure of Barth's major writings: the announcement of a theme, and its further extension in a long series of developments and recapitulations, through which the reader is invited to consider the theme from a number of different angles and in a number of different relations. No one stage of the argument is definitive; rather, it is the whole which conveys the substance of what he has to say. As a result, Barth's views on any given topic cannot be comprehended in a single statement (even if the statement be one of his own), but only in the interplay of a range of articulations of a theme.

Moreover, many readers of Barth find in him an unpalatable assertiveness, what Tillich called 'a demonic absolutism which throws the truth like stones at the heads of people not caring whether they can accept it or not'.<sup>32</sup> There are certainly traces of this in Barth (they are not simply restricted to his occasional writings), and there are plenty of places where he is polemical. But this aspect of his work is best read as a way of making a case for strong (and, judged by the canons of the theological establishment, deviant) views by severely critical attention to other voices. Like, for example, some feminist writers, Barth often feels the need to undermine dominant intellectual traditions which stand in the way of a proper appreciation of his own convictions. But it should also be noted that critique is usually subordinate to description, especially in Barth's later work. Nor should it be forgotten

that Barth is capable of finely drawn and generous readings of those from whom he is theologically distant, and that the thinker whom he studied most critically and with the greatest disagreement – Schleiermacher – is also the thinker whom he read with the greatest deference and sensitivity.

Barth was emphatically a *church* theologian. He devoted his very considerable intellectual and literary gifts to articulating the great themes of the church's faith and practice, and the primary public for his writing was the Christian community (not the academy). But, more than this, Barth understood the activity of theology itself as a church exercise – as a spiritual undertaking which in the end can only be described by talking of God. Theology was not, for Barth, simply one more academic discipline, but an aspect of the holiness of the church, the sanctification of its speech and thought. As a church theologian, Barth was a 'positive' rather than a 'speculative', 'apologetic' or 'critical' thinker. He did not consider it the task of church theology to follow paths other than those indicated by the Christian gospel, or to identify common ground between Christian faith and other views of life, or to look for reasons for faith other than those already established in God's revelation. As a 'positive' theologian, he considered that Christian theology is called to govern itself by the given reality of Christian truth, and thereby to exemplify the obedience of faith to which the whole church is committed. And it was on precisely this basis that Barth was so often vigorously critical of the church: the theological task is to measure the church's speech and action against the gospel, not out of hostility towards the church, and certainly not from a safe distance, but as a modest instance of self-critical utterance in the Christian community.

For many readers, this churchly orientation means that the first encounter with Barth is fraught with obstacles. He seems remarkably assured where many others have not even begun to establish their certainties; he is immersed in the culture of Christian faith, intimately familiar with its great texts, themes, and episodes; his rhetoric is addressed to those whose minds are shaped by the architecture of Christian, and especially Protestant, dogmatics. Contemporary readers rarely find such a theology accessible, and so reading him makes quite heavy demands: neither its content nor its procedures make much sense to those schooled to think that one best approaches Christian theology by first putting in place an understanding of religion, or by establishing universal criteria of rational inquiry.

But this unfamiliarity of Barth's world of thought is an aspect of a larger issue which faces readers of his work. He persistently goes against the grain of some of the most settled intellectual habits of modernity. In his early writings this comes across in, for example, his refusal to allow that 'history' is

a more comprehensive and well-founded reality than 'revelation'. In the *Church Dogmatics*, it expresses itself, for example, in his rejection of modern understandings of human moral selfhood which focus on ethical consciousness, deliberation, and choice as axiomatic. At key points, that is, Barth distances himself, sometimes dramatically, from the idealist and subject-centred traditions of modern intellectual culture. Those traditions still enjoy considerable authority in Western Christian theology, both in its liberal Protestant and its revisionist Catholic expressions, and still make Barth's work difficult to assimilate. And, it might be added, where they have waned – as in some recent 'post-liberal' theology – a recovery of Barth's thought has often been either a precipitating cause or a significant consequence.

Because of this, one of the most fruitful ways of reading Barth is to look at his thought in the more general context of the breakdown of 'modernity' – the decline, that is, of idealist metaphysics and of the philosophical, moral, and religious culture of subjectivity. Barth's relationship to modernity is very complicated, and it is too easy to reduce the complexities by making him appear to be either merely dismissive and reactionary or a kind of mirror image of modernity who never shook himself free of its grip. Barth is certainly a central figure in the break up of the modern tradition in its theological expression: for forty years he mounted a vigorous critique of that tradition, exposing what he took to be its fatal weaknesses and articulating a quite different way of doing Christian theology. What is less often discerned is that Barth was also in important respects heir to that tradition, and that even when he argued vociferously against it, it sometimes continued to set the terms of the debate. Barth was referring to much more than his age when he wrote at the end of his life: 'I am a child of the nineteenth century.'<sup>33</sup> One of the major ways in which Barth was in conversation with his nineteenth-century heritage was in his preoccupation with giving an account of the relation of God to humanity. In early work, the preoccupation expressed itself in urgent attempts to find a satisfactory answer to the question: How is God *God* for us? In the mature dogmatic writings, it came across in the centrality of the notion of 'covenant', through which Barth phrased his answer to a slightly different question: How is God *God for* us? Barth's answers always involved him in denying some of the basic premises of nineteenth-century theology – the priority of religious subjectivity and experience, the identification of God with ethical value, and the presentation of Jesus as archetypal religious and moral consciousness. And, as his thought developed, Barth became increasingly confident that no answer to the question of God's relation to humanity can be considered satisfactory which abstracts from the axiomatic reality of God's self-presence in Jesus

Christ. The brilliance of Barth's account of that reality was enough to bring large parts of the edifice of nineteenth-century liberalism crashing to the ground. Yet even so, it must not be forgotten that there is substantial continuity, in that, as Barth put it, 'the nineteenth century's tasks remain for us, too'.<sup>34</sup> In Barth, then, we will encounter a thinker who was both deeply indebted to the intellectual traditions of modernity and also their rigorous critic. If Barth dismantled modern Protestant theology as it developed in Germany in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, he did so from the inside.

#### INTERPRETING BARTH

The landscape of Barth studies has changed dramatically over the last two decades. In English-speaking theology, this is one fruit of a somewhat more hospitable attitude to Christian dogmatics, as liberal or revisionist theology has in some measure waned and more constructive engagement with Christian orthodoxy has gained momentum. Partly, again, it is because in the decades after Barth's death it has proved easier to reach more considered judgments about his project, informed less by partisanship (for or against) and more by close reading of his writings. Above all, however, the landscape now looks very different because the ongoing Swiss *Gesamtausgabe* (collected edition) of Barth has made available a good deal of unpublished material, making the corpus of Barth's writings a good deal more extensive than hitherto. This includes not only a large bulk of materials more peripheral to his academic writings (sermons, letters, confirmation addresses, and so forth), but also major lecture cycles, especially from the first decade of his work as theological professor. These include the already mentioned Göttingen dogmatics lectures from 1924–5; the cycle on theological ethics; an exegetical course on the first chapters of the Gospel of John; lectures on Calvin, Schleiermacher, and the Reformed confessional writings; and a volume of lecture texts from the end of Barth's career which substantially amplifies the published material on the ethics of reconciliation on which he was at work when he retired.

The effect of this new material, when read alongside what Barth published in his own lifetime, can be felt at a number of levels. Perhaps most strikingly, it has led to a substantially revised narrative of Barth's development, especially in his early years. What has established itself as the conventional picture of Barth (one with which Barth himself at times agreed) was that his theology changed gear twice: once when he moved away from theological liberalism, and once more when he moved beyond



'dialectical' theology into his mature dogmatic work. The more precise analysis of the genetic questions surrounding Barth's work that is now possible on the basis of the early lecture cycles and other published work shows that this map of Barth will not quite fit. On the one hand, 'dialectic' is a permanent feature of Barth's theology, not a temporary phase left behind in the 1930s. On the other hand, Barth's dogmatic interests start very early (within two years of the first commentary on Romans). As a result, the continuity of Barth's work after his break with liberal Protestantism is now much more evident, however much in later work he may have retracted or modified one or other early position.

Moreover, it is now clear that the driving force of Barth's development before the *Church Dogmatics* was specifically theological; his mind was shaped by his reading of the Bible and by his intense scrutiny of the classical traditions of Christian theology and their modern offspring. From the beginnings of his work as theological teacher, it was theology which afforded Barth the projection through which he mapped the world. At first, this task was performed by the great texts of the Reformed tradition: the Heidelberg Catechism and other confessions, Zwingli, and above all, Calvin. But soon it became a great store of Patristic, Medieval, Reformation and post-Reformation materials which drove his thought, always alongside the text of Scripture. Whatever else absorbed his attention, the decisive impulse was always theological. If those accounts of Barth which see him as, for example, a religious equivalent of Weimar expressionism or a Christian socio-political critic fail now to carry much weight, it is because they rest on an incomplete reading of Barth's work.

Beyond this, the materials now available demonstrate the crucial importance of two areas of Barth's theology which have not always been factored into accounts of his theology, but which are now claiming more attention. The first is biblical exegesis. In the 1920s, Barth lectured as much on biblical texts as he did on dogmatic and historical theology; moreover, the *Church Dogmatics* itself contains massive tracts of exegetical material. Not only is there renewed interest in Barth's exegetical practice and hermeneutical principles, but also a growing awareness that Barth's *magnum opus* is itself to be read as (like Calvin's *Institutes*) a guide to, rather than a speculative replacement for or improvement upon, Scripture. The second is Barth's interest in ethics, long left largely unnoticed but now coming to light as one of the clues to understanding his project as a whole. The posthumous ethical materials from the 1920s and the late 1950s (whose similarity of tone and content offers further evidence for the continuity of Barth's thinking), and the light they shed on the lengthy ethical reflections which round off

each volume of the *Dogmatics*, show that Barth's theology was unified around a twofold concern: for God and humanity, agents in covenant, bound together in the mutuality of grace and gratitude. If one wishes to discover the sheer humanity of Barth's thinking, one need look no further than his writings on ethics.

In the end, however, it was as dogmatician that Barth's contribution to the history of church and theology was made; the best scholarship on his work will always be that which takes very seriously his dogmatic intention, and reads, argues with, and criticizes him as such. Most of the chapters in the present volume are given over to the analysis of and critical conversation with the major dogmatic themes to which Barth gave his attention with such vigour and constructive power. The best interpreters of Barth have also been and continue to be those who not only take the time to read and reflect upon his work with the respect and readiness for surprise which we are to adopt towards the classics, but also are themselves engaged in the task of church theology, whether they may find themselves agreeing or disagreeing with this vivid, provocative, at times infuriating but never dull pupil of the Word:

Th[e] source of theology (which can also be called Gospel) is also its subject-matter, to which it is tied just as all other branches of knowledge pursued at the university are tied to their subject-matter. Without it theology could and would dissolve into amateurish excursions into history, philosophy, psychology, and so on . . . Bound to its subject matter though it is in this way, it enjoys complete freedom of inquiry and doctrine . . . and it accepts no instructions or regulations from anyone; it even serves the Church in the independence of its own responsibility. And since the God from whom it takes its name is no dictator, it cannot behave dictatorially. Bound only to his subject-matter, but also liberated by it, the teacher of theology can have and desires to have only pupils who are free in the same sense.<sup>35</sup>

#### Notes

- 1 'Karl Barth's Speech on the Occasion of his Eightieth Birthday Celebrations', in *Fragments Grave and Gay* (London: Collins, 1971), p. 112.
- 2 E. Busch, *Karl Barth. His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Fragments* (London: SCM, 1976).
- 3 Barth's entry in the Münster Faculty Album; text in K. Barth, R. Bultmann, *Letters 1922-1968* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982), p. 157.

- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 K. Barth, 'Concluding Unscientific Postscript on Schleiermacher' in *The Theology of Schleiermacher* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982), p. 262.
- 6 Münster Faculty Album, p. 152.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 154.
- 10 Barth, 'Concluding Unscientific Postscript', p. 264.
- 11 Barth, Münster Faculty Album, p. 154.
- 12 Barth, 'Concluding Unscientific Postscript', p. 265.
- 13 Münster Faculty Album, p. 155.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 156. See also Barth's 'Foreword' to H. Heppel, *Reformed Dogmatics* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1950), pp. v–vii.
- 15 Münster Faculty Album, p. 156.
- 16 K. Barth, *Theology and Church* (London: SCM, 1962).
- 17 K. Barth, *Ethics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981).
- 18 K. Barth, *How I Changed My Mind* (Richmond, Va: John Knox Press, 1966), p. 41.
- 19 K. Barth, *Anselm. Fides Quaerens Intellectum* (London: SCM, 1960), p. 26.
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- 27 K. Barth, *Letters 1961–1968* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981), p. 295.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 254.
- 29 Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977.
- 30 D. Ritschl, 'How to Be Most Grateful to Karl Barth without Remaining a Barthian', in D. McKim, ed., *How Karl Barth Changed My Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), p. 87.
- 31 Barth, *Letters 1961–1968*, p. 167.
- 32 P. Tillich, *Systematic Theology* III (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 186.
- 33 K. Barth, *A Late Friendship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 3.
- 34 K. Barth, 'Evangelical Theology in the Nineteenth Century', in *The Humanity of God* (London: Collins, 1967), p. 12.
- 35 K. Barth, 'The Faculty of Theology', in *Fragments Grave and Gay*, p. 23.

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