

*Editor's note: George Hunsinger's new book, How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology (Oxford University Press, 1991), has just come off the press. George has given the Newsletter permission to reproduce the following portion of the opening chapter:*

## How to Read Karl Barth

George Hunsinger

OFTEN REFERRED to as the greatest theologian of the 20th century, Karl Barth has achieved the dubious distinction of being habitually honored but not much read.

Although many reasons might be found to explain this, surely one of them is that reading Karl Barth can be a discouraging experience. What reader of the *Church Dogmatics* has not gotten bogged down in one of those long, complicated, and seemingly interminable sentences? At such times Barth's writing may seem reminiscent of a famous quip by Mark Twain. The German sentence, Twain declared, is like a dog that jumps into the Atlantic Ocean, swims all the way across to the other side, and climbs out at the end with a verb in his mouth!

Yet long sentences are not the only problem. Not only can it be difficult to keep track of the antecedents to pronouns, but Barth apparently keeps repeating himself as he unfolds his thought.

Furthermore, the content seems to present as many problems as the style. It can seem to be too familiar to be interesting, or paradoxically, too strange to be revelant.

As though all this were not enough, his dialectic can be very bewildering, seeming to take away with one hand what he has just established with the other.

Why then should anyone bother to make the effort?

PERHAPS THE best answer is that those readers who have managed to get past the initial difficulties find that they are in the midst of something truly magnificent.

Barth's theology in the *Church Dogmatics* could be compared to the cathedral at Chartres. Once one's eyes get used to the light, one discovers that one is inside an awesome and many-splendored structure, soaring with vaulted arches, arrayed with intricate passageways, adorned with exquisite statuary, and crowned above all by rose windows dancing with fire.

The problem, then, is for one's eyes to get used to the light. But once they do, no other architecture, no other theology, is likely to be quite the same.

Back in the light of day, some contemporary theologies will begin to look more like lecture halls than cathedrals, others will stand out as respectable but limited sanctuaries, still others perhaps as monuments to suburban kitsch.

There will of course be other cathedrals to visit, but they will have been constructed long ago. One effect of getting to know the cathedral of Barth's theology is that it can help one appreciate the older cathedrals and make one want to spend time in them, too.

But none of this will happen if one leaves the cathedral before one's eyes get used to the light.

IT MIGHT help the beginning reader who feels bogged down in Barth's syntax to remember that one is reading a translation. The translation, which of course we are fortunate to have, is certainly workmanlike; but it is also stolid, uneven, and generally uninspired. Frustrated beginners are sometimes surprised to learn that Barth was awarded the prestigious Sigmund Freud Prize for the eloquence of his academic prose.

Even with our English translation (such as it is), attentive readers can still perceive that in the style of composition there is a certain music to the argument. What first appears as mere repetition turns out on closer inspection to function rather like repetition in sonata form. It is the author's method of alluding to themes previously developed while constantly enriching the score with new ideas.

Here it can be helpful to remember Barth's great love of Mozart, whose music he listened to every morning.

Like Mozart, Barth preferred to work with sharply contrasting themes resolved into higher unities and marked by regular recapitulations. Themes or fragments of themes, once dominant, are constantly carried forward into new settings where other themes take the ascendancy. Materials are constantly being combined, broken up, recombined, and otherwise brought into contrapuntal relationship.

Part of what Barth seems to share with Mozart, in other words, is a certain taste for thematic interplay, a taste which includes the custom of complex recapitulation, modification, and allusion.

The more deeply one reads Barth, the more one senses that his use of repetition is never pointless. Rather, it serves as a principle of organization and development within an ever forward spiraling theological whole.

*(Continued on next page)*

AN INTIMATE connection exists between this style of composition and Barth's understanding of the subject matter. No one ever seems to have had a stronger sense that in Christian theology every theme is connected to every other theme.

It is as if he envisioned the whole subject of Christian theology as forming one great and many-faceted crystal.

He would, as it were, take the great crystal in his hands and say, "Now we are going to look at the basic structure of the crystal through this facet, this particular doctrine of the Christian faith. Notice how it connects not only with those facets which adjoin it, but also with those more remote and those on the opposite side. Above all, notice that the light which infuses the whole is the very light which refracts through this facet as well."

Having conducted this examination, Barth then turns the great crystal in his hands and directs our attention in a similar way to yet another facet of the whole.

The technique of allusion and recapitulation thus expresses his profound sense of the interrelatedness of all Christian doctrines. The task of theology, in this view, is to describe as carefully as possible, from many different angles, the network of interconnections which constitute the great crystal in its totality.

HOWEVER, THE image of theology as being concerned with a crystalline subject matter could easily become misleading. It could suggest that theology is a more "systematic" enterprise than Barth actually conceived it to be.

In this sense the image of musical composition is probably a more reliable indication of Barth's theology than imagery of stability and order, complete in itself, like a cathedral or a crystal.

Barth thought systematically about the subject matter of theology but he did not think in terms of a system. The subject matter of theology, as he understood it, is richly dynamic, endlessly surprising, and deeply mysterious. Even the most refined theological conceptualities are too crude to capture it.

Because it is more nearly musical than architectural, more nearly verbal than substantive, it cannot be imprisoned in a system. Theological construction must therefore in principle be more like musical invention than like architectural formation. It must try to correspond to the subject matter without containing it.

## Report from Switzerland

In July 1990 the annual conference at Leuenberg focused on the concept of sin within the horizon of Barth's doctrine of reconciliation. The lectures were high in quality and will be published in the *Zeitschrift für Dialektische Theologie*.

Student groups from Göttingen and Wuppertal prepare throughout the year to meet annually with Barth scholars and others interested in Barth's thought. They work together to discuss thoroughly a topic of mutual concern. This year was especially exciting due to the new situation of Europe and the international attendance. Barth's understanding of sin had been a regular subject of debate during the last several years. Focusing on this question helped to drive home the point of Barth's unique contribution to contemporary theology.

Paul Matheny  
Barton College

## Book Notes

A new book about Barth by Thomas F. Torrance has recently appeared -- *Karl Barth: Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (T&T Clark).

According to the publisher's announcement, this is a major study of Karl Barth. It highlights the major convictions that inform all Barth's theology and give it a unified structure. Additionally, Torrance portrays Barth as a "theological Einstein" who can deliver us from obsolete forms of thought.

Mark I. Wallace (Swarthmore College) has just published *The Second Naiveté: Barth, Ricoeur, and the New Yale Theology* (Mercer University Press).

The book's thesis in the first three chapters is that the like and unlike hermeneutics of both Barth and Ricoeur seek to establish a thoughtful openness toward the "world" portrayed in the biblical witness.

The world of the text for both thinkers is neither what traditional biblical critics investigate as the historical or authorial background behind the text, nor, as many postmodernist readers of the Bible argue, is it the self-contained and indeterminate play of meaning within the text.

The world of the text, rather, is the subject matter "in front of the text" that potentially can liberate a "critical" (Barth) or "second" (Ricoeur) naiveté toward the text's claims on the reader's life and thought.

In chapter 4 this model is compared and contrasted with the so-called new Yale theology, and a final chapter brings together the book's three conversation partners -- Barth, Ricoeur, and the Yale theologians -- around a proposal for a model of biblical revelation that is right for our time.

Jeffrey C. Pugh (Elon College) has written *The Anselmic Shift: Christology and Method in Karl Barth's Theology* (Peter Lang).

This book traces Karl Barth's theological pilgrimage from Schleiermacher and the 19th century theological legacy to Barth's distinctive perspective, based in large part on his interpretation of Anselm's *Proslogion*.

Pugh argues that Anselm provides a new direction and rationale for the increasing emphasis on incarnational Christology in Barth's work.

John Godsey comments: "Numerous books on aspects of Barth's theology have been published, but I know of none that have the 'mix' of this work: Barth, Anselm, and Schleiermacher. The author traces and evaluates the influence of Anselm on the development of Barth's Christology, all the while keeping an eye on Barth's relationship, positive and negative, to his liberal heritage, especially that of Schleiermacher."

*Editor's note: Authors are encouraged to send in announcements of recent books. We would also like to publish substantive book reviews; volunteers for such assignments are solicited.*

*If you have anything to contribute (articles, reviews, news items) or any other suggestions, please send them to the editor: Russell W. Palmer, 5061 Blondo, Omaha NE 68104. Telephone (402) 558-9725, or leave a message with Monica Saxion, Department of Philosophy and Religion, University of Nebraska at Omaha, at (402) 554-2628.*

# "Life Is at Stake"

*Introduction by Paul D. Matheny:*

In April of 1954 Albert Schweitzer sent an open letter to the *Daily Herald* challenging nuclear physicists to speak the truth to the world. Three years later, on April 12, 1957, the declaration of 18 nuclear physicists of Göttingen University became public. On April 17, 1957, Karl Barth wrote *Es geht ums Leben* ("Life Is at Stake") -- only a few days after the declaration of the physicists became public.

In this statement made on Good Friday, Barth pleads with humankind, and especially the citizens of the East and the West, to take things into their own hands. As long as their governments insisted on escalating the nuclear threat, he believed, they were left with no other choice.

At this point Barth was working on the Doctrine of Reconciliation within his *Church Dogmatics*. There he develops an ethics in relation to his doctrine of the cross, as the place of the final triumph over nothingness. He presents a thesis here which is directly related to the stand

he takes against the escalating proliferation of atomic weaponry.

He argues that human sinfulness and destructiveness has been totally overcome in Christ. We may not, under any circumstances, behave as if this were not the case.

To follow the path of destructiveness, like the governments of the East and West, is to behave as if the crucifixion had not taken place. To do so is to ideologize destruction and to turn our backs on God. This is to behave as if God's reconciliation with humankind did not call for a corresponding reconciliation of the entirety of humankind with each other.

Barth's protest did not end with this contribution. He protested frequently and with clarity (1). He turned not only to the West with his plea, but also to the East. In June of 1957 he sent a similar letter to Radio Warsaw (2).

Barth did not see his protest against nuclear weapons as being separate from his dogmatics. They were of a piece.

When reading contemporary American responses to Barth's thought

one is struck by the extent to which American theologians rejected Barth's thought, not on theological grounds, but on political grounds. Many just could not understand why Barth was "no longer on our side." Perhaps they should have spent more time with his theology. It is only from the perspective of his dogmatic and ethical thought that one can understand the full character of his moral conviction.

(1) In March 1958, in response to the problem of the "Grenzfall berechtigter Notwehr und die Unmöglichkeit atomarer Abschreckung" he wrote *Zehn Thesen zur Frage der atomaren "Bewaffnung"*; in November of 1958 he participated in the formulation of a minority report of a Swiss theological commission entitled, *Ob die Möglichkeit des Atomkriegs im Gehorsam gegen das Evangelium zu bejahen ist*; and in January of 1959 he wrote a letter to the European Congress against atomic proliferation.

(2) K. Barth, "Telegram an Radio Warschau," in *Kirchenblatt für die Reformierte Schweiz*, 1957.

Dr. Albert Schweitzer's plea to the Scientists to tell us the truth about the preparation for atomic war has not fallen on deaf ears. Eighteen renowned German physicists, representing those responsible for this field of study, have told us the truth. They have done so on the basis of their knowledge and from their perspective. I summarize:

1) What today are called small or tactical atomic bombs are weapons whose capabilities are similar to those dropped on Hiroshima in 1945.

2) There is no certain technical possibility to protect large portions of the population from the devastation caused by (large) hydrogen bombs, or even from the (small) tactical weapons.

3) The continuance of the so-called atomic experiments will, in time, increase the radioactive contamination of the earth until life is endangered everywhere.

This declaration of truth has been characterized and treated by those in high political positions and within the greater political press as inappropriate involvement in an arena for which they consider themselves alone to be responsible. They attempt to comfort us with the argument that efforts toward a controlled de-escalation will continue. There can be no doubt that the preparations for nuclear warfare, including "practical" experimentation, will continue. Given the disposition of

those in public power, there is nothing left for us to do but to appeal directly to the entirety of humankind: You should not allow yourselves to be satisfied by such a dismissal. You should take the situation in your own hands. You should let the government and the press know, with every means at hand, that you do not wish to exterminate others or to be exterminated -- even for the defense of the "free world," or even for the defense of socialism. You should shout "stop" to those responsible in the West and East with a piercing and deafening cry.

The preparation for war with weapons which from the very beginning make war senseless for all involved must stop! The reciprocal threat to use such weapons must stop! Both those in the West and those in the East should stand up against the madness which has begun with this escalation. You should establish with this protest a political reality, which even the governments and presses of the world will have to listen and react to with responsibility. Principles, ideologies, and systems are not at stake. Life is at stake. We are at stake. It concerns us -- humankind. Help the world come to its senses, before it is too late!

This is what I have to say to the situation established by the declaration of the atomic scientists.

Karl Barth  
Good Friday 1957

(Translated by Paul D. Matheny)

## Correspondence

### Survey of Recent Literature on Barth

Bruce McCormack (New College, Edinburgh) recommends the survey of recent literature on the theology of Karl Barth by Ernst Amberg in the August number of *Theologische Literaturzeitung*. This survey will be completed with a second part on monographs in a later number.

Bruce is currently reworking his dissertation on the early Barth (1921-31) for publication. (George Hunsinger says that the book will be definitive.)

### Translation of Göttingen Dogmatics to Appear

John W. Simpson (Eerdmans Publishing Co.) writes that in the fall of 1991 or thereabouts, Eerdmans will publish the first of a two-volume English translation of Barth's Göttingen Dogmatics, the "Instruction in the Christian Religion" edited by Hannelotte Reifen in the *Gesamtausgabe*. The translator is Geoffrey Bromiley.

### Barth's Interpretation of Israel

David Demson (Emmanuel College, Toronto) has an article on "Israel as the Paradigm of Divine Judgment: An Examination of a Theme in the Theology of Karl Barth" in the Fall, 1989 issue of the *Journal for Ecumenical Studies* (Vol. 26, No. 4).

### A Reader's Response to our First Issue

I am happy to see the Newsletter for 2 reasons: (1) to keep in touch with events, books/articles, people concerned with either KB or his legacy, and (2) to provide documentation such as the Darmstadter Confession. Translation remains a task to be completed.

My own interest is on KB as the leading "post-modern" theologian of the 20th century. But I also work the Schleiermacher tradition (less unlike than many think) and the American pragmatist tradition. Strange mix.

Thomas Parker  
McCormick Theological Seminary  
Chicago

### Barth in an East Asian Context

As a Korean theologian...I have a particular interest in the interpretation of Karl Barth's theology in the East Asian context (whose common culture is Neo-Confucianism). I am writing a Ph.D. dissertation under the title of "Sanctification and Self-Cultivation: A Study of Karl Barth and Neo-Confucianism (Wang Yang-ming)." I believe that there are remarkable similarities between the theology of Barth and teachings of Neo-Confucianism in method and content. Barth can be a good partner of intra-religious dialogue if properly understood. I also think that contemporary Barth scholarship will benefit from the challenges of Confucian wisdom...

Heup Young Kim  
Graduate Theological Union  
Berkeley

### Apostle to the Lutherans?

I want to express my deep appreciation for your efforts in preparing and sending out this newsletter...I am glad to hear that the Karl Barth Society will be revived...I have had a long-standing interest in the theology of Karl Barth. For the past 5 years I have taught an annual course on his theology to Lutheran students at Trinity Lutheran Seminary.

Wayne C. Stumme  
Institute for Mission in the U.S.A.  
Trinity Lutheran Seminary  
Columbus, Ohio

(Dr. Stumme distributed 100 copies of the first issue of the Newsletter to those attending the Barth conference in St. Paul, Minn. in June.)

### Ethics of Reconciliation

In response to the questionnaire in the first issue of the Newsletter, John Webster (Wycliffe College, Toronto) suggests that it would be especially useful to have details of work in progress on Barth and related areas. He reports that he is working on a book length exposition of the ethics of reconciliation.

### Left-Wing Barthian

Joseph Lough, a graduate student in History at the University of Chicago, writes that he is doing research on the relationship between dialectical theology and critical theory in Germany, 1915-1930. He describes his theological interests as "left-wing Barthian" along the lines of Marquardt and Joe Bettis. "I find myself in general agreement with the line argued by Karl-Heinz Anton in his *Kritik der Identität: Barths Hegelkritik und das theologische Denken des Unterschieds* (Frankfort, 1986)."

He suggests an annual listing of the names, mailing addresses, and interests of members of the Barth Society. What do others think of that idea?

### Where to Study Barth?

This is a letter of inquiry regarding the state of Karl Barth studies in North America. After returning from a year of study in Göttingen, I have become increasingly interested in Barth's life and thought...

Any insights into the possibilities of graduate work in the area of Barth would be welcomed. In short, I would like to know *where* one could go to study Barth's theology (graduate schools) and with whom (professors). I am currently a pastor in the United Methodist Church.

Andrew Kinsey  
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### A Word of Encouragement

Re: the question in the first issue (what would you like to see in the newsletter?), I. John Hesselink (Western Theological Seminary, Holland, Mich.) answers: "Just what you are doing: research reports, literature about Barth, interesting tidbits from books and articles, news about meetings." He is technically the acting president of the Karl Barth Society, having been elected vice president at the last official meeting in the 1970s and having outlived the president! He writes: "I appreciate your willingness to undertake the Karl Barth Society newsletter....Keep up the good work!"

*Editor's Note: Mel Vance, a United Methodist pastor in Omaha, attended the latest Barth conference sponsored by the Lutheran Institute for Mission in the U.S.A. at Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary in St. Paul, Minn. Here are his impressions:*

## Consequences of Christology

### 4th Barth Conference Held at Luther Northwestern Seminary

A conference entitled "Consequences of Christology" was held at Luther Northwestern Seminary June 27-29. It was the fourth in a series of "Barth conferences" co-sponsored by the Institute of Mission in the U.S.A. Organizer Wayne Stumme promises another conference (tentatively set for June 22-25, 1992) on "Barth and the Christian Hope."

The following summaries of speakers' ideas give one a picture of the way Lutheran academics are responding to Barth and the way Barth is still raising questions for the whole theological community.

**Gerhard Forde** ("Karl Barth on the Consequences of Lutheran Christology") sees the movement from Luther to Barth as a deterioration. It is Forde's view that, after rejecting Luther's doctrine of the communication of properties between Christ's two natures, Barth sometimes heads in the direction of Nestorianism. Barth splits salvation into a non-temporal happening in the Trinity and an historical event. According to Forde, Barth trusts too much in abstract theological reasoning and fails to testify adequately to proclamation and sacrament as the place where the Word becomes concrete. So he fails to show us where our theology can find its corrections.

**Mary Knutson** ("The Cruciform Word: Narrative Christology and the Theology of the Cross") showed Barth as emphasizing the depth of Christ's sufferings by playing them off against other people's sufferings. She accused Barth of realized eschatology -- Barth sees Easter too much as "fulfillment" and not enough as "promise." But we find in Luther (and Mark's Gospel too) a "theology of the cross" in which the victory of Easter is still paradoxically intermingled with the sufferings of Good Friday. This type of theology can speak to the experiences and longings of "the outraged and the oppressed."

**Robert Jenson** implied that the previous criticisms of Barth come from not giving Barth a serious hearing. His lecture, "Salvation Is in the Particular," was an attack on "soterio-centrism." This is the assumption that there is some general thing ("salvation") to which the various religions lead. But such "salvation" really receives different qualities from the characteristics of its savior or way of salvation. Contemporary students of religion are ignoring biblical insights that God is a particular, a person, known through a particular history, which is forming us in a particular way for a specific salvation. Jenson referred to Barth's discussions of the "Otherness" of God and of the ontological Trinity as places where Barth calls us to acknowledge God's particularity.

**Timothy Lull** ("Jesus Christ and the Struggle for Human Righteousness") showed how Barth leads to a solidarity with the world that can still be critical of ideology, the state, money, and the rest of the "lordless powers" Barth wrote of in *The Christian Life*.

Two non-Lutherans brought more controversy into the proceedings:

**Charles Villa-Vincencio** from South Africa ("Liberation Struggles and the Many Names of God") called on us to abandon theological "complexification" and to see Jesus as "leader of a people's movement." The word "God" is used by different interest groups to point to various social realities. But the Bible uses it to point to a "liberating presence" in history. The liberating presence known in the Bible is seen today in the "self-sacrificing love" of Christian, Muslim, atheistic, and other strugglers for the oppressed. Barth's worldliness and Barth's criticism of religion prepared the way for this kind of theology.

There were some fireworks during the panel that followed this presentation. Villa-Vincencio was accused of seeking a "Jesus" behind the Scripture after the fashion of the 19th century questers for the historical Jesus. Parallels were also drawn with the social gospel movement which could play morality off against doctrine. Some felt this has led America to a moralistic Christianity that replaces the Gospel with the culture's ideas of progress. Villa-Vincencio countered that "theology as usual" gives tacit support to American imperialism.

**George Hunsinger**, speaking next ("Salvator Mundi: Three Types of Christology and the Mission of the Church"), criticized Americans for hiding from international issues. Yet he also criticized those for whom Jesus is a "parable" of something else, rather than God coming to us. He also quoted Barth's call to neither use or fear force, in a kind of "practical pacifism."

Hunsinger presented a typology showing a "high" Christology which is always accompanied by a "high" soteriology. It forms a tradition which has passed through Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and Barth.

Many pacifists, on the other hand, have had "middle" or "low" Christologies. They have tried to demonstrate the reality of "universal principles." They have depended on calling others to "imitate Christ" in the power of their good wills. Those pacifists with high views have another confidence on which to make radical refusals and take radical actions.

Finally Hunsinger appealed to Lutherans to see in Barth one of their few allies in the contemporary situation in Christology.

**Carl Braaten** ("God Without Christ in American Theology") followed with criticisms of contemporary theology for abandoning Trinitarianism for natural theology and for deserting Christology for preoccupation with world religions. He concluded that the rationales for both the missionary movement and the ecumenical movement are threatened by the "different gospel" implicit in most contemporary theology.

Lutheran theologians are divided about Barth. But those speaking at this conference are with Barth and some of his interpreters in questioning contemporary theological directions. I was impressed by the relevance of Barth's battle cries from *Romans* quoted at this conference.

### **How should the KBS Newsletter be funded?**

The Barth Society business meeting held at the Hans Frei Colloquium in June reached no decision as to whether KBSNA should be a membership organization with dues. Perhaps the meeting at the AAR will make some decision.

It has been suggested that a portion of the society's annual dues (if any) could be earmarked for the Newsletter. On the other hand, if the Barth Society is not going to be a membership organization, the question becomes: should there be a subscription fee for the Newsletter, or should we continue to rely on voluntary contributions?

For the present, since there is no provision for funding the Newsletter other than reader donations, we appeal for your support.

### **Contributors Acknowledged**

We appreciate those who have taken the time to send a check to help underwrite the expenses of the Newsletter. Contributions have been received from the following:

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**Update:** At the KBS meeting in New Orleans on November 16, it was decided to establish a \$10 annual fee for membership in the Karl Barth Society, which will include a subscription to the Newsletter. Please send your check, made out to the Karl Barth Society, to Russell W. Palmer, 5061 Blondo St., Omaha NE 68104.

### **KARL BARTH SOCIETY NEWSLETTER**

c/o Russell W. Palmer, editor  
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