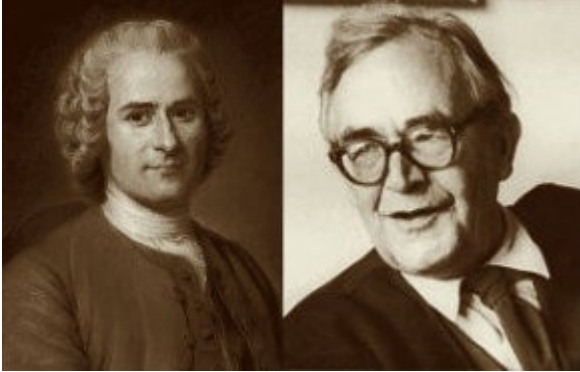


Truth is proportional: The limits of what we can know

by [Michael L. Lindvall](#) in the [April 18, 2012](#) issue



Portrait of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, by Maurice Quentin de La Tour. Photograph of Karl Barth, [Attribution](#) Image not found or type unknown [Some rights reserved](#) by [Wames](#).

The late Johan Christian Becker, for many years professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary, was a riveting classroom lecturer, especially when the subject was the apostle Paul. Paul was his specialty, and Becker had famously passionate convictions about the apostle. By the end of a lecture, Becker would have often ascended to a paroxysm of academic passion. He paced the dais in his classroom, his Dutch accent thickening as he became increasingly animated by some question of Pauline scholarship. He was convinced of his convictions and often rhetorically lacerated scholars who stubbornly held to what Becker considered patently absurd notions. He waved his arms and jabbed his index finger this way and that; his voice rose; his face reddened.

More than once this performance would be interrupted by the bell. I recall several occasions when the sound of the bell drew Becker back to earth, and he looked out at the class and said in an even voice, "Then again, this may be all wrong." Actually, he usually made that confession in scatological language, as in "This may all be bull." His point was clear. "I am right about this, *but* . . ." Becker was not saying that truth is subjective or relative. He was simply admitting the limits of his mortal ability to know truth perfectly and completely— about Paul, to be sure, but more so about God.

Many Christians today are attending with renewed enthusiasm to the drawing of boundaries around the perimeters of Christian conviction: "What, precisely, must you absolutely believe (or not believe) to be a 'real' Christian?" In my own Presbyterian world we are circling around the definition (or lack thereof) of the "essential tenets" of belief. Those in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) who would be ordained as ministers, elders and deacons are asked to "sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church."

There are 11 official confessions in the denomination's collection. They represent significant theological diversity. Some are ancient, some are modern. But nowhere has the denomination delineated which tenets in this generous confession corpus are essential. Moderate and liberal members of the denomination are generally comfortable with the theological latitude, while more conservative voices argue that this lack of precision has led to doctrinal laxity.

Often overlooked in such theological boundary-drawing and quests for clarity is the fact that what we mortals can know about God is never absolute or complete but always proportional. First, what we can know of God is proportional to the incomprehensible mystery of the divine being, the transcendent reality that mortal minds can never fully plumb. Second, the truths we affirm about God are proportional in their relationship of importance to one another. Some truths about God are obviously truer than others, and some truths about God are more importantly true than others.

This affirmation of the proportionality of truth inclines toward what has sometimes been named "generous orthodoxy." The "orthodox" aspect of this inclination implies the church's unshakable centeredness in Jesus Christ, in holy scripture and in historic confessions that faithfully explicate scripture. The "generous" aspect of this inclination reminds us that the truths that the church would know, teach and require of members and leaders are proportional to each other and proportional to the perfect truth of God.

Two significant but radically dissimilar thinkers illustrate this proportionality of truth convictions. Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Karl Barth were both prolific writers. Each imagined himself arriving in heaven with the books he had written. Each also imagined heaven's reaction to his life's work. But the celestial response that each anticipated could hardly have been more different.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the 18th-century Swiss-French social theorist, had a profound effect on both his contemporaries and later secular thinkers, notably some of the more radical voices of the French Revolution who took his books as gospel. Karl Barth is remembered by many as the greatest Christian theologian of the 20th century. Also Swiss, he did most of his work in the years shadowed by the horrors of World War I and the totalitarianisms of Hitler and Stalin. Barth laid out neoorthodoxy, a radically God- and scripture-centered theology built on the ashes of 19th-century theological liberalism.

In the first pages of his final work, ironically titled *Confessions*, Rousseau imagines himself having "died and gone to heaven." He approaches the heavenly gates with head held high, no bowing or praise, no hint of fear. He carries a copy of his *Confessions*. As he passes the pearly gates, all heaven turns toward him. The heavenly host actually set aside their praise of God to listen to his story: "I have bared my secret soul as Thou thyself hast seen it, Eternal Being! So let the numberless legion of my fellow men gather round me, and hear my confessions. Let them groan at my depravities, and blush for my misdeeds. . . . But let each of them reveal his heart at the foot of Thy throne with equal sincerity, and may any man who dares, say 'I was a better man than he.'"

Depravities and misdeeds there were—ranging from his desertion of assorted illegitimate children to his venomous hatred of rival intellectuals. But heaven's angels attend to him because Rousseau is sincere and because his words are the truth that even angels long to hear.

In his biography of Karl Barth, Eberhard Busch quotes the great theologian speculating on his appearance at heaven's gate. Barth wrote far more pages than Rousseau and imagined himself pushing along a cart full of books. The angels do not turn to him for a reading, however. Instead they laugh. "In heaven," Barth said, "we shall know all that is necessary, and we shall not have to write on paper or read more. . . . Indeed, I shall be able to dump even the *Church Dogmatics*, over the growth of which the angels have long been amazed, on some heavenly floor as a pile of waste paper." Barth stands justified not by his copious works probing the divine truth, not by his sincerity, but by the grace of a God who was always beyond even Karl Barth's earthly ken.

The contrast between these two thinkers lies in their utterly distinct understandings of the way in which their attempts to know and articulate truth mattered. Rousseau's

understanding of the truth of his ideas is in no sense proportional to other truths or to any transcendent truth. He and his understanding of truth are humble before nothing, not even God. He dares to imagine that both God and the angels might be illuminated by what he has to say. It is he and his thinking that are at the center of the cosmos. In such an intellectual geography, it's only natural that the angels would cease their praise of God to hear what Jean-Jacques has decided.

Karl Barth knew that his theology mattered profoundly. He would not have poured his life into his work had he not held the highest estimation of the importance and truth of what he wrote, taught and believed. But Barth understood that his mortal understanding of the divine truth was proportional. He fathomed that God's thoughts were not finally the same thing as Barth's thoughts. He understood that his theology and the truth it captured must be set next to his awareness that even the *Church Dogmatics* would end up "on some heavenly floor as a pile of waste paper."