

Barth and beyond: Making grace real

by [William Stacy Johnson](#) in the [May 2, 2001](#) issue

With a new generation of theologians reevaluating the theology of Karl Barth, some are suggesting that this pivotal figure of the 20th century may enjoy his greatest influence in the 21st. Doubtless many readers will recoil at such a prospect, but that may be because their own assumptions about Barth do not correspond to the vitality of Barth's own work. The purpose of Christian theology for Barth was not to pursue any sort of "ism" but to understand the gospel, to hear the Word of God afresh, and thereby to resolve at every turn "to begin again at the beginning."

From his ground-breaking reflections on the deity of God in the *Epistle to the Romans* (1919) to his uncompromising opposition to Adolf Hitler and National Socialism in "The Barmen Declaration" (1934), to his always painstaking, sometimes innovative doctrinal reflections in the *Church Dogmatics* (1932-1967), Barth changed the way an entire generation in Europe and America confronted the task of theology. By the time of his death in 1968, however, Barth's theology had degenerated into the subject of caricatures and clichés. "Christocentrism," "dogmatism," "obscurantism"—these were the dismissive terms by which Barth's theology was characterized, and from which the perception emerged that his theology was more concerned with repristinating the past than with facing the present.

Such dismissals will not stand up to the cutting edge of Barth's life itself. Take just one example from the historical work of Eberhard Busch, who was Barth's last assistant in Basel and now holds the same chair Barth once occupied at the University of Göttingen. Busch's work, soon to be translated from German into English, shows that, contrary to what critics claim, Barth perceived immediately how radical was the menace posed by Hitler against the European Jews and took ongoing measures to protest it.

In the way the story is usually told, the Confessing Church movement in Germany pursued a valiant opposition to Hitler in behalf of the church but did not yet see clearly how dire and unique was the threat against the synagogue. Not so, argues Busch. In a number of little-known addresses and letters, Barth had proclaimed as

early as 1933 that one was not preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ in Germany if one was not also preaching specifically against the persecution and disappearance of the Jews. It was this advocacy in behalf of the Jews that led to Barth's expulsion from Germany, insists Busch, and not just some general failure on Barth's part to support Hitler. As a matter of fact, his pro-Jewish position brought him into mounting conflict with the Confessing Church leadership and led eventually to his being unwelcome at its meetings. To put it plainly, the reason Barth had to leave Germany was because the compromised leadership of the Confessing Church movement itself no longer supported him.

To reckon with Barth, then, is to encounter one whose theology later inspired liberation theologians in Latin America and antiapartheid theologians in South Africa—a theologian who felt that what you pray for, you must also work for. To invoke the mantle of Barth for the cause of a narrow doctrinal confessionalism, in other words, simply defies the record of history, as is happening today when ultraconservative activists appeal to Barth and the Confessing Church movement to justify their stands against such things as the full inclusion of people who are homosexual or against any sort of new thinking in theology. Not only is the birthright of the Confessing Church movement more ambiguous than they suppose, but Barth himself is more complex and his pronouncements more determined by his social situation than some would care to admit.

The importance of context is emphasized by Timothy J. Gorringer, professor of theological studies at the University of Exeter, who interprets Barth's central task as setting forth a theology of freedom. The aim of Christian theology is not to baptize the world as it is but to seek the world as it ought to be. The gospel has priority over politics, but one misses the gospel if one ignores its vision of a new society predicated on liberating grace. For example, Gorringer sees Barth's declaration in the 1940s, "Humanity that is not co-humanity is inhumanity," as more than just the sentiment of an idealistic humanism; it is a ringing call to repentance and hope against the backdrop of the Second World War and the Holocaust.

Understanding the contextual nature of Barth's theology helps us see why he steadfastly refused to provide anything like the "summary" of his theology, a summary for which so much Barthianism seems to be striving. Gaining a stranglehold on the letter of Barth's theology runs the risk of denying its spirit, argues Gary Dorrien, professor of religious studies and dean of Stetson Chapel at Kalamazoo College. Dorrien wants to learn from Barth, while harboring no desire to

become a Barthian. He makes specific criticisms of such things as the overly dogmatic tenor of Barth's theology, its patriarchal stance with respect to feminist issues, and its lack of interest in interreligious dialogue. He also thinks Barth is too much of a "biblicist," which I take to mean that despite Barth's often fascinating and imaginative exegesis there are some issues that require much more of a theologian than exegesis alone.

The key to Barth's theology for Dorrien is its confessional and nondefensive approach. Barth's perspective, according to Dorrien, "was always more subversive, open, and dialectical than the school movement he inspired." This claim may seem a strange one given Barth's relentless pursuit of theology as "dogmatics." Theology is dogmatic for Barth in that it embraces the classical dogmatic definitions of the ecumenical councils, and especially Chalcedon, as to the meaning and significance of Jesus Christ: in Jesus Christ we confront both what it means to be divine and what it means to be human.

Yet a dogmatic theology, Barth maintains, must also inquire into the truth of its message. This inquiry entails providing not merely a description of the past but something constructive for today. For Barth, God is revealed in Jesus Christ—this much we know—but, since revelation is a still-unfolding event, and since our apprehension of that event is thoroughly fallible and subject to revision, the theologian must inquire continually into what revelation really means.

A number of theologians of late, myself included, have been arguing that Barth inaugurates a theological movement that has some affinities with the intellectual currents running through postmodernity. With the revision and republication of the second edition of his *Epistle to the Romans* in 1922, Barth sounded with piercing clarity the theme that God is simply greater than all the attempts of theologians—whether liberal or conservative, whether modern, premodern or postmodern—to capture God within the confines of a single, self-contained framework of linguistic meaning.

In his fascinating study of Barth's use of rhetoric, Stephen Webb presents a Barth for whom our language is quite incapable of containing or domesticating the power of the gospel. Similarly, Walter Lowe sees the early Barth calling all human complacency into question and insisting that the church's historical reality is one of fundamental ambiguity. For Lowe, this situation sets the stage for a theology that cannot be merely a "correlation" between Christianity and culture à la Paul Tillich,

but one that must move in both a constructive and a deconstructive direction. In the same way that Jacques Derrida's deconstructionism questions whether meaning and truth are simply "present" to us for the taking, Lowe sees Barth resisting all reductionistic approaches to the gospel and opening up the whole constructive task of theology from beginning to end.

The standard objection to this line of interpretation is that *Romans* did not represent Barth's final position: the disruptiveness of the early Barth was displaced later on by the more placid, doctrinal tones of the *Church Dogmatics*. This objection has been seriously discredited, however, by the painstaking reconstruction of Barth's development advanced by Bruce L. McCormack. Though he himself is skeptical of some of these recent readings of Barth, McCormack's work clearly shows how the dialectical theology of *Romans* continues into the *Church Dogmatics* as well. At the heart of this dialectic is God's revelation of who God is in Jesus Christ by the Spirit's power, an "unveiling" that is always at the same time a "veiling" in human form. The Word became flesh, but because the Word comes to us in a mediated fashion, we receive it only as a gift and not as a license to triumphalism. Revelation is not simply a "given."

Whereas McCormack advances an historical study of Barth's early writings that emphasizes its dialectical transformation of the modern theology that preceded it, my own study of Barth's mature writings inquires into what his theology might contribute to a postmodern, nonfoundational theology that is yet to come. I have tried to show that Barth's theology, in both its early and mature forms, is nonfoundational in the sense that the grace made real in revelation cannot simply be read off of events, nor can it be reduced to something that is a straightforward "given," either within the human situation in general or within the situation of the church in particular. This is evidenced in such things as Barth's eschatologically oriented framework of creation, reconciliation and redemption; his focus on promise and hope rather than the present possession of God's reign; the reconfiguration of experience as a determination toward the future; the placing of the divine summons to action—the ethical life—at the summit of each volume of his doctrinal work; and, above all, his refusal to make his theology an apology for Christendom or to give priority to the established church. The church's witness to the reign of God is crucial but also provisional, for the mystery of God is beyond all domestication, as evidenced in Barth's radical rethinking of baptism and the Lord's Supper as witness to something from on high rather than as the established "sacraments" of

Christendom.

Nevertheless, there are some who want to read Barth's nonfoundationalism in a more circumscribed way. John Webster of Oxford University, who is one of the finest interpreters of Barth, argues that Barth's theology is nonfoundational only in the narrow sense that it does not appeal to non-Christian sources to make its claims. In a keynote essay published in *Karl Barth: A Future for Postmodern Theology*, Webster complains that so-called postmodern interpreters of Barth fail to appreciate the extent to which the revelatory action of God does in fact function as a "given" for the church. Webster is especially dismissive of the efforts not only of Lowe but of Isolde Andrews and Graham Ward to chart the affinities between Barth and the open-ended philosophy of language of Derrida.

The resolution of this dispute depends on what is meant by revelation as a "given." If by a "given" we mean that in Barth's theology God's grace is made real in Jesus Christ, then Webster is surely right: Barth sees Jesus Christ as God's gracious gift to the world. Nevertheless, there is more that needs to be said. Revelation is not something that can be understood simply by learning to parse the cultural-linguistic system of Western Christendom. By the Spirit's power, there are myriad ways of saying who God is in the human being Jesus of Nazareth, no one of which can exhaust the richness of who the human being Jesus of Nazareth is as God. Hence, for Barth the event of revelation in Jesus Christ is not simply a "given" to be possessed or described but an event that is still unfolding, a dramatic "giving" of God the Creator, Reconciler, Redeemer, which invites a dynamic, constructive response.

The scholarly comparisons between Barth and Derrida that bother Webster and others have focused on Derrida's early work on language. The more interesting comparison, I believe, would be to confront Barth's radical theology of grace with Derrida's later work of the 1980s and 1990s, in which, on behalf of a skeptical culture, he raises the question whether there is any such thing as a gift, or grace at all (see the work by John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon). Rather than fighting over which side of Barth's dialectic to emphasize—the givenness or the nongivenness of the dynamic gift of grace—we should be seeking to proclaim the gift itself to a world that finds it increasingly hard to believe in such things.

Barth reverses the emphasis on a static understanding of God and God's grace and gives priority to revelation as a dramatic self-giving in history. Christian theology, in both its classical and modern forms, has had a difficult time freeing itself from pagan

antiquity's assumption that divinity is an abstract aseity, a fixed arche whose essence is to remain forever as it was in the beginning. Beguiled by this assumption, Western Christian theology has become an inadvertent effort to protect this "God" from the vagaries of finitude and surprise—in short, from the very things we ordinarily associate with the ability to have meaningful relationships with others.

Barth understands God's incarnation in Jesus Christ not as some static property inhering in Jesus of Nazareth but as a dramatic happening that encompasses the whole of Jesus' life, death and resurrection by the Spirit's power. The divine drama of graciousness, focused in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, is unintelligible apart from its background in Israel and its continual unfolding in the life of those gathered, built up and sent forth in God's name. It has its nexus in the relationship between Israel and the church, yet only for the sake of something beyond that relationship. By embracing our full humanity in Jesus Christ, God shows us that nothing human can any more be seen as cast off from God's love.

For Barth this drama is nothing less than the being-in-act of God. God is within the intimacy of God's very own being as God is in the external human drama of revelation. It is in interpreting this word as that Barth's theology becomes supremely interesting. For Barth there is no distinction between God and God's revelation. God is identically the same in revelation as God is in self-being. The interesting question is whether what God is in revelation is also constitutive for who God is in self-being. Does revelation "reveal" in the sense of simply disclosing to us who God already is? Or when God says, "Behold, I am doing a new thing," does this "new thing" accomplish something not only for us but also for God? To put it another way, does God have anything personally at stake in what happens in revelation?

This is an issue that Barth's theology raises but without giving us any final answer. In addressing this question, George Hunsinger emphasizes the prior actuality of God. In so doing, Hunsinger is being true to the letter of Barth's theology. God already is in self-being "as" God is in revelation.

Yet Robert W. Jenson—perhaps the most creative contemporary theologian with leanings toward Barth—pushes things in a different direction. Jenson, a distinguished Lutheran theologian who is the senior scholar for research at the Center for Theological Inquiry in Princeton, wants to take with utter seriousness what Barth's theology implies about the stakes for God in revelation. As Jenson sees it, God is not only identified by the biblical drama but with the drama as well. At no point is God

somehow hovering “above” the story of Jesus Christ, but the story of Jesus Christ is God’s very own story.

Though Jenson is often thought of as an ecclesiastical conservative—and with good reason—this aspect of his appropriation of Barth’s theology is nothing less than radical. For Jenson, the drama of God’s own life, made real in revelation, is a genuine drama with harrowing crises and pivotal turning points, a drama whose outcome makes a real difference in God’s being God. Mind you, this is not the same as process theology in which God is somehow becoming something new as God lures us toward God’s goal. The claim here is that grace is something eternally real in the life of God, but that it is being played out on the stage of human history in a way that makes God all the greater for it. When Jesus wrestles with a decision in the Garden of Gethsemane, for example, it is a real decision with real consequences. The same is true with the resurrection. In so identifying with the executed Jesus of Nazareth as to raise him from the dead, God made it clear once and for all what sort of God our God is eternally determined to be.

Barth’s Chalcedonian theology seems to be saying something like this: God has become human for our sakes in Jesus Christ, and precisely in becoming human is seen to be most fully divine. What happens in the drama of salvation is God determining to be God for us in a definite way. God is so much the God who is “for” us as to be also irreversibly “with” us. What happens in Jesus Christ, in other words, is constitutive for who God is. So committed is God to being with us that God has also determined not to be God without us. The stakes for God could not be higher. By embracing our humanity in Jesus Christ—truly human, truly divine—God determines to bring salvation to human beings in a thoroughly human way. Which means that our human response to what God has done on our behalf now makes a real difference to God. The God who is for us and with us in Jesus Christ wants us, by the Spirit’s power, to be for and with one another. For Barth the gospel is always precipitating something new out in front of us.

It should be clear by now that Barth’s theology is being read today in provocative new ways by a generation of interpreters who see well the contradiction in trying to recapture the doctrinal propositions of Barthianism without the dynamic movement of revelation in which Barth himself was caught up and in which he placed his hope. If there is to be any future for Barth’s theology, therefore, its lies in looking far beyond the theology itself and toward the grace to which Barth was seeking to bear witness.