

God is for us

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I went to [Austin Seminary](#) to help teach an alumni event this past week. I attended the seminary, so going back is always wonderful. [Bill McKibben](#) writes that people often look at their college years as the happiest years of their life because of the intense community they experienced. I'd agree, except I lived through that intensity more at seminary than college. And, I would add that personally the nostalgia also has to do with the fact that I started reading Karl Barth.

Am I Barthian? No, not really. The truth is, I've never felt so closely aligned to a particular theologian to construct my thoughts in the likeness of that theologian. Because I'm Presbyterian, I'm considered to be a Calvinist, but I can deconstruct the Reformer right alongside most thinkers.

It's just that I when first settled down to read Barth, I had to make sure that I had Kleenex close at hand. We went a bit out of order (according to Barth), and read about God the Creator first. The words clinched me, each time I read, "God is for us." Four simple words that could fit on a bumper sticker. Yet they changed me.

I grew up in a strange stew of divine ideas. There was the God who was a judge, who would hold me up above the fires of hell like a vengeful boy would dangle a spider up to a candle flame. The heat scorched me as I imagined how easy it would be to make a mistake and spend an eternity in suffering.

Even as the back of my neck felt chafed by the hands of an angry God, I sang praise songs. I didn't roll my eyes as I clapped. I didn't have any speech ready about how simple the music sounded or how theologically shallow the words were. I was not a Mainliner at the time. I was a teenager, and I liked them. They were intensely personal, and made me feel that mystical union with God that I would read about later in the writings of [Meister Eckhart](#) or [Marguerite Porete](#).

Then there was the God of prosperity gospel—the God of the economic boom who let me know that wealth was God’s blessing on a person. It was okay to want extravagant things, because luxury was a sign of God’s favor.

When I combined these popular ideas in my mind, I ended up with a lover God who would torture me with fire if I stepped out of line and bless me with diamonds if I obeyed. In other words, my ideas of God had a serious borderline personality disorder.

Then, I began to read that *God is for us*. I started to understand that God, who created the universe, was *for* us in creation. Barth wrote a lot of words, and the volumes stood in a long line of black binding on my shelf. But it was that small preposition that made me reach for the Kleenex. I began to play the four words like a skipping CD in my mind.

When I would succumb to anxiety, anger, addiction, or depression, I no longer imagined that God would punish me. Instead, God was *for* us, and so God hoped for my healing and wholeness. I began to walk and feel the support of the earth below me and the sustenance of the air around me.

When I couldn’t get my financial act together, and my salary didn’t come close to matching the student loans that I incurred, I no longer imagined it was because God was not blessing me. Instead, I began to see the sun setting each evening, and I became enraptured in the vibrant beauty. I became grateful for the lavish colors in the sky. And I knew that God our Creator was *for* us.

When I woke up each morning, and I stared at the blank page of my computer screen, and I don’t know exactly what to write. I thought about the article rejections that had piled up, all of the jobs that I didn’t get, and the academic programs that turned me away. My mind conjured up all the people who told me that I can’t write and I recalled the red ink that professors bled all over my papers when I did try to write. But somehow I moved beyond the clattering echoes, because I had that preposition.

Those three tiny letters had become a powerful force from the moment I opened those Dogmatics and I suddenly needed the box of tissues, because I realized for the first time in my intense spiritual life that *God is for us*. And I have been fed by the words ever since.