Intimate partners

by Katherine Sonderegger in the September 8, 1999 issue

Charlotte von Kirschbaum and Karl Barth: A Study in Biography and the History of Theology, by Suzanne Selinger

Were they lovers? That question haunts the relationship of Charlotte von Kirschbaum and Karl Barth. And it haunts Suzanne Selinger's book. The question can be neither easily stared down nor dismissed. During my seminary days Von Kirschbaum was refered to as the "second Mrs. Barth." It was assumed that Barth kept her as a live-in lover, and those who showed doubts about it were, as Selinger notes, considered painfully naïve.

No one who admires Barth, has learned from him and still relies on his dogmatic and political courage enjoys the prospect of having his reputation damaged by charges of infidelity and the exploitation of women. Even his opponents can find only cold comfort in thinking of him as a Christian theologian who shares hypocrisy and patriarchalism with the worldly wise. In the first two parts of her book Selinger attempts to address, assess and, in part, lay these rumors to rest. It's an uphill climb.

As a young theologian, Barth met von Kirschbaum through friends in the mid-1920s. Barth desperately needed secretarial help—he knew how unprepared he was for the German professoriate—but he even more desperately needed an intimate, a *Gegenüber* or counterpart. Von Kirschbaum became that counterpart. She was trained in languages, academic theology and secretarial skills; she adopted wholesale the starting point, idiom and urgency of Barth's dogmatic theology. From 1929 until her admission to a nursing home in 1966, von Kirschbaum lived with Karl and Nelly Barth and their children. Suffering from acute dementia, she died in 1975; Barth died in 1968.

Barth accepted "responsibility and blame" for the situation; it brought about, in the words of Barth's biographer and secretary, Eberhard Busch, "a burden which caused them unspeakably deep suffering . . . and shook them to the core." He considered divorce, but Nelly refused. They soldiered on together, these three, until illness and

death parted them. What should Christians, and in particular Christian feminists, make of this situation, so touched by pathos and human failing?

Selinger, a librarian and professor of historical theology at Drew University, considers carefully both the Christian and the feminist response. She tries to be evenhanded, often pointing out that we cannot know for certain the nature of the relationship, but she cannot resist carrying water for others: she constructs her story on the basis of a handful of private reports. She succumbs to reporting an anonymous confidence that Barth and von Kirschbaum shared a room at Princeton Seminary in 1962—six years before Barth's death, when von Kirschbaum was already entering into dementia. Selinger argues that Barth exploited von Kirschbaum—working her too hard, tying her to him at the cost of her reputation, swallowing up her insights and living on her labor. Von Kirschbaum seems to have seconded that opinion, accusing Barth of "stealing" material from her.

Though the evidence Selinger gathers is significant, I remain unpersuaded, even troubled, by her analysis. Feminists, whether religious or not, should be wary of the presuppositions of conventional or "bourgeois" marriage. It is by no means clear that the profound suffering and pathos of these three lives should be traced to a romantic liaison between Barth and von Kirschbaum. We might wonder instead whether the jealousy and possessiveness of modern marriage deserves some of this blame. Von Kirschbaum's family objected to her public shame; Nelly and Anna Barth to Nelly's humiliation. Some of Barth's detractors, Selinger reports, objected to any emotional passion outside of marriage, regarding it as a form of adultery. All these reactions, deep and human as they are, depend on an understanding of marriage as excluding intimate friendships between men and women outside of marriage.

We need not question Christian commitment to monogamy and fidelity to see that such a narrowing of the emotional and affective life of adults is damaging and stifling. It is particularly so for women. It has long been assumed that productive men require full-time clerks to forward their careers. Many have had live-in secretaries. As Selinger shows, Eduard Thurneysen and Eberhard Busch in different ways played for Barth both the emotionally laden role of intimate counterpart and that of secretary. Men have been allowed the freedom to play these roles; women often have not. They still cannot join a man's household, whether he is married or single, without the assumption that sex is part of the relationship.

Feminists have taught us to see that full human liberation includes an embodied exuberance the French call "jouissance." And Barth himself, as Selinger makes clear, urged open-heartedness and eagerness for the other as the hallmark of human correspondence with divine mutuality. Selinger argues that the christological turn in Barth's dogmatic work was guided by his love for von Kirschbaum. Anyone who glances at the handsome photographs Selinger includes in her book will recognize the sense of exuberant encounter in the faces of von Kirschbaum and Barth as they work, heads bent together over the table on which the *Dogmatics* was built. Would it not be mature rather than naïve to see their intimacy as a sign of covenant in our darkened world?

A good half of Selinger's book deals with the second part of the charge against Barth: that he absorbed von Kirschbaum's work as his own, especially in the fine-print sections of the *Dogmatics*. Selinger addresses this controversy through a close examination of von Kirschbaum's lectures, *Die wirkliche Frau* (True Woman)—in which she analyzes women and women's role—and of Barth's exposition of man and woman in *Dogmatics* III.4.

Selinger places her reading over against important cultural and historical trends: German feminism, dialogical schools of thought, Weimar radicalism, psychoanalysis, and the churchly opposition to Nazism. None of these trends could be explored fully in a book of this length. But they are the right fields to introduce, and the psychoanalytic material is especially illuminating on Barth's hunger for companionship. Selinger concludes that von Kirschbaum and Barth braided their material together, each strand separable but dependent on the other for its form and function. But Barth remains guilty of exploiting von Kirschbaum, using her up in his consuming drive to produce. He achieved worldwide recognition; she lived a subterranean life in scandal and rumor.

Selinger speaks plainly and judiciously about a subject that has long needed the fresh air and light of disclosure. It has not been an easy task, and her frustration surfaces from time to time. I am not entirely convinced by her analysis of this charged subject matter, nor am I entirely ready to dismiss von Kirschbaum's claim, echoed by many, that she was content to be "called" to the work she performed for theology and for Karl Barth. This detailed, careful and honest book will enable readers to make up their own minds.