

KARL BARTH

REFINING OUR IMAGE OF GOD

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The deep significance of our image of God is often apparent to me in my work as a counselor and a spiritual director. I recall a striking example of a woman who is happy to share her story. Because of her rather strict Catholic upbringing, she had a heavy and repressive notion of God which helped produce neurotic guilt feelings and a rigid lifestyle. Shortly after getting married, she attended a weekend retreat which planted the seeds of a much more positive image of God, as the loving Father who desired her happiness and fulfillment. Gradually her confidence and self-esteem improved, leading to better personal relationships and increased involvement in the life of her parish. After many years, described as satisfying and rewarding, a series of tragedies struck her, including the breakup of her marriage. These events produced in her a deep rage against a God who had betrayed her. She quit going to mass and found it difficult to pray. The low-grade depression which pervaded her daily existence steadily eroded the self-esteem she had so carefully cultivated. She came to me seeking help to regain the warm and comforting relationship with God which provided her with such strength during the good years.

The story exemplifies not only the crucial role played by images of the deity in personal development, but also the close connection between our image of God and our self-image. My own sense was that the woman could not go back to her previous comforting but limited notion of God. Her tragic experiences had shattered that limited image. She needed a new and more comprehensive understanding of the divine-human relationship which would enable her to deal more effectively with the dark side of human existence.

In helping this woman discover a more balanced and effective image of God I drew on the thought of the great Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968). This and similar experiences have convinced me that we can all benefit from an encounter with the work of this giant of Protestant theology.

Both followers and critics of Barth (his name rhymes with dart) consider him to be among the most influential theologians of modern times. For instance, John Cobb, an important process theologian with serious reservations about Barth's work, calls him "the greatest theologian of our century" with "the greatest impact on the history of the discipline." Themes from Barth's thought have worked their way into Catholic theology, especially through Hans Kung, who wrote his doctoral dissertation on Barth's notion of justification, and the Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, who wrote the outstanding commentary *Karl Barth: A Presentation and Interpretation of his Theology*.

The power of Barth's work is generated by his intense single-minded effort to place the transcendent God, triune and incarnate, in the center of Christian thinking. This effort, enriched by his thorough and creative reading of the Western theological tradition, as well as his penetrating insights into the self-destructive tendencies of modern culture, produced one of the most comprehensive theological statements of modern times.

While Reformed Protestants hear in Barth's theology many familiar themes and approaches, Catholics exposed to his thought, especially those of a more liberal bent, find themselves in a somewhat strange and often challenging world. Precisely because Karl Barth calls into question many of the assumptions of contemporary Christian theology, he has an important message for liberal Christians in their search for a refined image of God.

ACCEPTING THE TRANSCENDENT GOD

Barth's theology challenges every tendency to identify God with our own personal desires, feelings, and thoughts. From the beginning of history, human beings have sought equality with God, often by reducing him to human proportions. The human heart knows the desire to manipulate and control the deity. Attempting to win divine favor by good works, or to stave off divine punishments by promises of improved behavior, is a recurring human temptation.

Prayer, so important to spiritual growth, can devolve into magical efforts to influence God. We can forget that our image of God inevitably reflects our own self-image with its limitations and distortions. Some individuals with low self-esteem, for instance, tend to view God as a heavy-handed ogre or an aloof judge. Others, like the woman in the opening example, construct a rosy image of God which effectively precludes facing the dark and tragic side of life. No doubt we can all find ways in which we tend to reduce the majestic God to our own finite proportions.

“God’s deity is thus no prison in which He can exist only in and for Himself. It is rather His freedom to be in and for Himself but also with and for us, to assert but also to sacrifice Himself, to be wholly exalted but also almighty mercy, not only Lord but also servant, not only judge but also Himself the judged, not only man’s eternal king but also his brother in time.”

---- The Humanity of God

Modern times have produced no stronger challenge to this common human temptation than that found in the early writings of Karl Barth. His personal story is crucial to understanding the development of this trenchant criticism. Born May 10, 1886 in Basel, Switzerland, Karl was greatly influenced by his father, a Reformed pastor and university professor who guided his son's early theological education in conservative directions. From 1906-1909, Karl had the opportunity to study with the most eminent liberal theologians in Germany, including Adolf von

Harnack and Wilhelm Hermann. These thinkers, heirs of Frederick Schleiermacher, who launched the liberal movement in 1799 with his famous book *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, spoke optimistically of the essential goodness of human beings and the inevitable progress of human history. They emphasized the fatherhood of God and the ethical imperative of love, while playing down the judgment of God, the miracles of Christ, and the reality of the Resurrection.

After completing these theological studies (it is ironic that this great theologian never did doctoral studies in theology), and being ordained in the Swiss Reformed Church by his father, Karl eventually became a pastor. He served from 1909 to 1911 in Geneva and from 1911 to 1921 in Safenwil, a remote village in north-central Switzerland. In this small parish, he became known as “the Red Pastor” because of his active involvement in organizing a union for textile workers and his continuing efforts to secure improved conditions for workers. During this time, he became a member of the Social-Democratic party, a very radical move for a pastor in those days.

“The well-known definitions of the essence of God and in particular of His freedom, containing such terms as ‘wholly other,’ ‘transcendence,’ or ‘non-worldly,’ stand in need of thorough clarification if fatal misconceptions of human freedom as well are to be avoided ‘In his free grace, God is for man in every respect; He surrounds man from all sides. He is man’s Lord who is before him, above him, after him, and thence also with him in history, the locus of man’s existence.’”

---- The Humanity of God

Barth’s dominant interest, however, was preaching the Word to his congregation. In carrying out his ministry, he became increasingly dissatisfied with the approach he had learned from his liberal teachers. He later accused them of being too individualistic in their emphasis on personal experience and too relativistic in their denial of the absolute truths of revelation. His disillusionment with liberalism was intensified when, in 1914, ninety-three German intellectuals, including some of his former teachers, signed a manifesto supporting the Kaiser and his war policy. Furthermore, the experience of World War I shattered the general optimism about human progress which provided the psychological matrix for liberal theology.

Barth reacted to his doubts about the pastoral effectiveness of liberal theology by joining with a friend and neighboring pastor, Eduard Thurneysen, in a renewed study of scripture, especially Paul’s Letter to the Romans. Barth’s intense study led to the writing of his first book, a commentary on Romans, published in 1919. This work brought him instant fame as well as an invitation to become a professor of Reformed theology at the University of Gottingen. Barth himself, however, was dissatisfied with the book, and made a complete revision which was published in 1922.

This second edition of *The Epistle to the Romans* (Oxford University Press, 1968), in the words of Karl Adam, “fell like a bomb on the playground of the theologians.” In this classic text of neo-orthodox theology, first translated into English in 1933, we hear Barth’s most striking attacks on the cherished assumptions of liberal theology. All efforts to reduce or domesticate the great God are challenged by his interpretation of Paul’s thought. While Barth later modified many of these views, even going so far as to say that he wished he had never seen the book, it is this volume with its intensely emotional message which shapes much of the popular understanding of the great Swiss theologian. It continues to serve today as the most powerful critique of any liberal tendency to reduce God to human proportions.

“WHOLLY OTHER”

Influenced by Soren Kierkegaard, Barth in his commentary insisted on the infinite qualitative difference between God and man. “The power of God can be detected neither in the world of nature nor in the souls of men” (p. 36). God is the “Wholly Other” and we all stand under the judgment of this God. “Men have imprisoned and encased the truth---the righteousness of God; they have trimmed it to their own measure and, thereby, robbed it both of its earnestness and its significance” (p. 45). God’s grace can never be earned, nor can we do anything on our own to escape the wrath of God. Even if we desire to cooperate with God in noble actions, we turn God into a mere notion, a projection of our own needs. “God alone is the merchant who can pay in the currency of eternity” (p. 62). Only when human beings discover that “all the world is guilty before God” will they be in a position to recognize God’s faithfulness (p. 88).

As the apostle Paul made clear in a key passage, “God has shut up all unto disobedience that He might have mercy on all” (Romans 11:31-32). Barth insists that the true God “is distinguished qualitatively from men and from everything human, and must never be identified with anything which we name, or experience, or conceive, or worship, as God” (pp. 330-331). The living God “is never a known thing in the midst of other known things” (p. 331). Recognizing the limitations of our knowledge prepares us to receive the divine favor: “What is demanded of us here is that we should know we are understood by God---in our own lack of understanding” (p. 390). Despite the efforts of the false prophets to domesticate God, we still long for a genuine prophet who will honestly “set before us the complete strangeness of the Wholly Other” (p. 446). Jesus Christ is that prophet “who exposes the gulf which separates God and man and by exposing it, bridges it” (p. 31).

In Barth’s commentary, this message of ultimate hope for salvation, founded in the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is never totally absent and is always presumed. The dominant refrain, however, is clearly the infinite gap between God and us and the impossibility of bridging it from our side. According to Barth, we cannot reach God by any human means; not through reason, with its natural theology and philosophical arguments; not through feelings or religious sentiments; not through experiences of nature or persons.

This theme, consistently argued and passionately proclaimed, continues to challenge Christians today, especially those whose image of God is formed by contemporary liberal theology. While Barth’s critique obviously exposes the shallowness of any efforts to control God for selfish purposes, it also alerts us to our more subtle tendencies to confine the great God within our own

images of the deity. The God we encounter in all aspects of our daily lives remains incomprehensible and beyond all words and images. Even our deepest religious experiences are only partial and incomplete pointers to the transcendent God. Self-experience, which is the vehicle of our experience of the deity, always remains ambiguous, pointing only indirectly to the transcendent One who infinitely exceeds our grasp. In the spiritual quest we must beware of cheap grace, naive optimism, and facile answers. In short, the early Barth continues to shout out his clear “no” to any liberal attempts to reduce the majestic Lord to human scale.

CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS

Barth not only challenges our narrow personal conceptions of God, but also the temptation to identify God with cultural expressions and national purposes. It is common for nations to call upon the deity in support of their national policies, including their wars. In the United States, we have our own brand of civil religion, which does indeed verbally proclaim the sovereignty of God, but still tends to assume that God made us the new Chosen People, and the vehicle of his will in international relations. The power of the civil religion is so pervasive that dedicated Christians, often with little conscious awareness, can easily adopt the standards of the flag rather than the cross, especially in dealing with social questions and public policy issues.

“(God) sanctifies us for eternal life as He sanctifies us for Himself. He wills the best for us as He seeks His own glory. He is Himself our hope as He is our Lord. He saves us from eternal death, and nourishes us to eternal life.”

----- Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of God

Karl Barth in his life and his writings provided a powerful critique of the rampant nationalism fostered by Hitler in Germany. After his initial fame, occasioned by the publication of *The Epistle to the Romans*, Barth became a university professor, lecturing in theology at Gottingen, 1921-25; Munster, 1925-30; and Bonn, 1930-35. In 1933, shortly after Hitler’s installation as chancellor of Germany, Barth founded a theological journal, using its pages to mount a vehement attack on Hitler as well as on church members who accepted an easy alliance between the gospel and the National Socialism espoused by Hitler.

Barth became a leader of the Confessing Church, a group of Christians who opposed Hitler’s policies. When this group met at Barmen in 1934, Karl wrote the famous Barmen Confession, signed by two hundred leaders, which insisted on obedience to Jesus Christ as the only leader (Fuhrer). Refusing to swear unconditional allegiance to Hitler or to begin his classes with the customary “Heil Hitler,” Barth was dismissed from his teaching post at Bonn and expelled from Germany in 1935. Quickly assuming a theological chair at the University of Basel in his home town, he continued to attack the Nazi philosophy and constantly encouraged people in other countries to resist Hitler. Immediately after the war, Barth, faithful to his intuitive sense of

God's mercy, called for a spirit of reconciliation which would lead to political freedom for Germany as soon as possible.

During the Nazi period, Barth continued to develop his theology. For him, Jesus Christ and no other is our victorious leader. Christ the Son of God bore the punishment of our sins, suffering on our behalf to meet the harsh demands of divine justice. Through the cross, divine love triumphs over the powers of darkness. Jesus Christ atoned for our sins, established the new order, and secured the grace of salvation.

Barth, in a theme which reminds us of contemporary liberation theology, insisted on the liberating power of the earthly Jesus. While Jesus did not identify himself with any particular group or champion any existing program, he did act with a remarkable personal freedom which called into question all existing programs and principles, thereby unsettling others, especially the authority figures. For Barth, ethics is always a part of dogmatics; moral imperatives flow from theological insights. Therefore, disciples of Christ must follow their Lord by saying a decisive "no" to all of the demonic forces in the world and to all the idols erected by human pride. In short, Jesus Christ is the victorious leader who gives us courage to deal with the dark forces of sin.

Barth's courageous actions and powerful writings challenge any lingering illusions that God can be enlisted on behalf of national self-interest. The struggle against the unspeakable cruelties of Naziism reminds us of the need to criticize the more subtle distortions of our civil religion, with its implicit assumption that God functions as an ally of the United States. Barth reminds us that, for Christians, Jesus Christ must remain the judge of all national policies and cultural expressions.

It is instructive for liberal Christians to remember that it was the Barthians, with their lofty image of the transcendent God revealed in Christ, who mounted the most concerted and sustained attack on Nazism. The natural tendency to identify God with cultural expressions and national aspirations is a continuing temptation even for committed Christians. Karl Barth not only forces us to face this dark inclination, but also provides the much-needed message of hope that God's cause, championed by Jesus Christ, will ultimately be victorious.

DIVINE-HUMAN RELATIONSHIP

Barth's later writings instruct us in the art of modifying and balancing our image of God. All of us are subject to limitations and distortions in our perceptions of the divine-human relationship. Our image of God is influenced not only by the ambiguities found in society, church and family, but also by the limitations built into our own self-image. Christians interested in self-growth, liberation of the spirit, and positive approaches to life have a tendency toward certain distortions in their image of God. We can, for example, be so caught up in the immanence of God that we forget the divine transcendence. Our sense of the mercy of God can be so strong that we neglect divine justice. We can be so dependent on a comforting sense of God's presence that any experience of divine absence becomes intolerable.

Karl Barth did not remain imprisoned by the notion of God he proclaimed so passionately in his early writings. During his years as a professor, he labored unceasingly to refine his understanding of God. Beginning in 1932, the fruits of his prodigious efforts were published as individual volumes under the general title *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark). He planned to develop his ideas under five major topics: The word of God, God himself, creation, reconciliation and eschatology. By the time of his death on December 10, 1968, he had completed twelve massive volumes, getting as far as the last part of his treatment of the fourth of his five major topics, the doctrine of reconciliation.

“Who God is and what he is in His deity He proves and reveals not in a vacuum as a divine being-for-Himself, but precisely and authentically in the fact that He exists, speaks, and acts as the partner of man, though of course, as the absolutely superior partner.

----- The Humanity of God

For those not inclined to wade through these volumes, it is helpful to consult the comprehensive and clear summary produced by the outstanding Barthian scholar Geoffrey Bromiley, entitled *Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth* (Eerdmans, 1979). In 1946, Barth himself produced a slim volume, *Dogmatics in Outline* (Harper & Row, 1958), which summarizes his intentions for his multivolume work.

Only an encounter with *Church Dogmatics* itself, however, provides a sense of Barth’s amazing scholarship and creative reading of the Western theological tradition. When treating the doctrine of election or predestination, for example, he not only does a detailed exegesis of all the relevant scriptural passages, but also comments on numerous theologians, including major thinkers such as Augustine, Bonaventure, Aquinas, Zwingli, Luther, and especially Calvin. In this 500-page section, which is part of his much longer treatment of the doctrine of God, Barth demonstrates a truly awesome grasp of the historical tradition. Moreover, his radical departure from the traditional Calvinistic doctrine of a double predestination to heaven and hell in favor of a single predestination to heaven, clearly demonstrates his bold creativity.

In *Church Dogmatics*, Barth refines his major ideas on God as enunciated in his commentary on Romans by placing them in a larger theological context and by balancing them with other insights. His uncompromising insistence on the transcendence of God, for example, while not forsaken, is now balanced by his teaching on the immanence of God. He now clearly affirms that the majesty of God does not annihilate our humanity nor detract from our freedom. Through the Incarnation, we enjoy the honor of having Christ as our brother. The doctrine of reconciliation means that God is not only with us but personally identifies himself with us. From this perspective, we can no longer define God as “Wholly Other” but must recognize that we are exalted to fellowship with God precisely because of our solidarity with Christ.

Barth's earlier insistence on the transcendence of God the just judge is now balanced by his understanding of the God of mercy and love. This forms the basis for his extremely optimistic notion that we can hope for the salvation of all human beings. Thus, the dark foreboding mood of the early Barth is now replaced by an upbeat joyful confidence in the power of God to save every person who has ever lived. Moreover, Barth now speaks about a "primal revelation" through creation and even admits, though cautiously, that theologically significant insights can be gleaned from the world of philosophy and the secular sciences.

The more positive understanding of the divine-human relationship found in *Church Dogmatics* seems to correspond with Barth's own great zest for life. This hard-working, intense theologian also enjoyed traveling, meeting people, and reading all kinds of literature, including mystery stories. He had a great interest in the history of warfare, and visited the Civil War battlefields during his 1962 trip to the United States. He loved wife, Nellie, and their four children. His eldest son, Markus, who became a highly respected biblical scholar, spoke of his father as his best friend, a close comrade who encouraged his children toward true freedom. Barth's passion for the music of Mozart was legendary. He said that when he went to heaven he would first inquire about Mozart and then about the theologians, such as Augustine and Calvin. Thus it seems fitting that the great Swiss theologian with his immense love for a wide range of human activities came to speak about the humanity of God, who produces in human culture "parables of his own eternal good will and actions," calling, in turn, for our "reverence, joy, and gratitude" (*The Humanity of God*, John Knox Press, 1982, p. 55).

THE GREAT "YES"

With all of his striking theological development, Barth still has serious limitations as a guide in our efforts to refine our image of God. He had, for instance, no sense of the power of mystical experience to reveal God, going so far as to call mysticism an "esoteric atheism." His vast writings on the nature of God demonstrated little appreciation of the revelatory power of the sacramental life of the church. He did not explore the insights of Eastern Orthodoxy or American theology.

A critic, Dietrich Ritschl, claimed that Barth never had a serious theological discussion with a communist, an atheist, a Muslim, or a Hindu. At times, he responded harshly to other theologians, failing to notice how they could have helped him refine his own notion of God. The prime example is the strident attack he mounted on his outstanding contemporary Emil Brunner for his openness to a limited form of natural theology. Even Barth's renowned ability to criticize pretensions to power which undercut the sovereignty of God had its limits, as he refused to condemn the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956---a failure which drew harsh criticism from the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr.

Nevertheless, Karl Barth remains an extremely helpful, if limited guide in the process of deepening our perceptions of the deity. Through his classic work *The Epistle to the Romans*, he utters a clear and enduring warning against all temptations to make God in our own image. His courageous stand against Hitler can provide much-needed inspiration as we struggle against the idols and demonic forces in our own culture. His refusal to confine himself within his early thunderous assault on liberal theology is a graphic reminder that we must avoid fixations in our

own notion of God, while always striving for a more adequate and integrated understanding of the deity.

Barth's comprehensive approach in *Church Dogmatics* to the doctrine of God, which is at once thoroughly trinitarian and consistently Christocentric, encourages us to stay in touch with the central doctrines of the Christian tradition as we probe the meaning of God's activity in the contemporary world. By treating ethical questions within the framework of his dogmatics, Barth reminds us that our image of God has ramifications for our everyday effort to live out the Christian message. Finally, Karl Barth's optimistic notion of a God who, despite our sinfulness and weakness, will ultimately accomplish the salvation of the whole human family, can offer hope to all of us increasingly aware of global threats, systematic evils, and personal tragedies.

Such hope, as this great giant of 20th-century theology often insisted, is founded on the great "Yes" of God which shelters all of us, empowering us to offer "stout resistance" to evil. "By this great Yes and by it alone" we are summoned to advance in the freedom of the sons and daughters of God (Romans 8:21) an enabled to live with "maturity and soberness."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is your dominant image of God and how does it affect your attitudes and behavior?
2. How did Barth's pastoral experience in Germany affect his understanding of God?
3. What does Barth's image of God as "Wholly Other" mean and how did it affect his major theological positions?
4. How does Barth's emphasis on divine transcendence challenge your own image of God as well as the claims of the American and civil religion?

SUGGESTED READINGS

Dogmatics in Outline (Harper & Row, 1958). A brief and readable summary of his major theological teachings.

Church Dogmatics, five vol. in thirteen parts (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark). His massive masterwork which serves best as a comprehensive reference on particular topics.

The Epistle to the Romans (Oxford University Press, 1968). A classic text of neo-orthodox theology which gives the best feel for Barth's thunderous attack on liberal theology.

Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth by Geoffrey Bromiley (Eerdmans, 1979). A faithful and clear summary of the *Dogmatics* by an outstanding Barthan scholar.