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In Memory of Karl Barth

I H. MARTIN RUMSCHEIDT

*A Thank You for Karl Barth**

We have come together this day, in this house of worship of God and of the study of his word, in order to pay our tribute also to Karl Barth. It is Karl Barth whom we remember, and even though his death last week is the immediate reason for what we are doing, we should nonetheless go about this service with gratitude and sheer joy. For whoever commemorates the work or the life of Barth must make sure that he has him on his side and not against him. And to have Karl Barth on your side means above all else to be joyful and happy – even now!

If we desire to be faithful to this primary intention, then we may not now make a 'graven image,' even a verbal one, of Barth. A monument, of whatever stuff, to Karl Barth is against Barth's spirit. He was no hero, and is not suited to hero-worship. On his eightieth birthday, two years ago, he scolded the guests at the celebration for having made that day an occasion for something resembling a personality cult. Barth never showed any sign of an awareness of a prophetic or, less spectacularly, a theological *mission* he was to carry out. He wanted to be no more than the servant of God's word in the Christian congregation, and therefore desired to be neither cheered nor honoured. Barth allowed us to love him as a man, but not as a theologian. Rather, he wanted to be *heard* as a theologian, as a witness to that which had won him over and to which he had committed himself. If some day someone absolutely insists on donating a stained-glass window in Barth's memory, and wants to make it look like those in the chapel of Victoria College on this campus where, around the – invariably sour- or stern-looking – faces of the famous men, a well-known saying of theirs is written, then let him choose this one, which Barth made in reply to a student at Richmond, Virginia, who had asked Barth what had been the most momentous discovery of his long, theological life: 'Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so!'

We shall have Barth against us if we speak of him as 'the greatest theologian of our century.' 'That expression really frightens me,' said Barth in 1966; 'there are still thirty-four years to come. Who knows,' he continued, 'what little creature wrapped in diapers, perhaps already wrapped up in his theological diapers, will become manifest, when they look back on this century, as its greatest theologian?' In his *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*,

*An address delivered in Knox College Chapel, Toronto, on 19 December 1968, at a memorial service for Karl Barth.

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Barth called the combination of the concepts 'greatness' and 'theologian' a wooden iron, and added that as a theologian one can never be great, but that in the best of cases one remains small in one's own way.

Therefore, my good friends, let us not today or tomorrow or at any other time call Barth the greatest theologian of our age or even a great theologian. We would do so only against his spirit. Nor should we call him the theologian who was most faithful to God's word. We are not permitted to make that judgment, since, as Barth also made plain to us, that is a judgment only God can make.

But we may call him, and therefore shall call him, the happiest theologian our age has known. Karl Barth was a joyful man, a man of humour. After all he is a son of Basel, and Baslers, once you get to know them, really are as witty and as humorous as their carnival pranks every year reveal. So we see Barth turning the focal light of humour on himself when he wrote: 'The angels laugh at old Karl. They laugh because he is trying to catch the truth about God in a book of Dogmatics! They laugh at the fact that volume follows volume and each one is thicker than the previous one. As they laugh they say to one another: Look! There he comes with his pushcart full of volumes of Dogmatics. But they also laugh about the men who write so much about Karl Barth instead of writing about the things he is trying to write about.' This same humour, this same gift of God, which ranks in stature just under the grace of God, is evident already in 1922, in the 'diastatic' Barth. Barth quotes to himself this very pointed, but humorous, remark by Luther: 'If you think that you stand quite firm and you tickle yourself with your own books, teachings and writings, if you think that you have done splendidly and have preached magnificently, and if then it pleases you to be praised before others, then, my friend, if you are man enough, put your hands to your ears and if you do it rightly you will find a lovely pair of big, long, rough donkey's ears. Do not spare the cost of decorating them with golden bells so that you can be heard in the streets and the people can point to you and exclaim: Behold, behold, there goes that splendid creature who can write such wonderful books and preach such magnificent sermons. Then you shall be blessed and doubly blessed in heaven, for the fire of hell is ready for the devil and all his angels.'

Yes, Karl Barth is a joyful theologian, a happy theologian, a man who, because he is concerned with the word, the *logos*, of *theos*, of God, can laugh. Theology, said Barth in his last semester in Basel, is a beautiful, a liberating, a happy science. Or rather, since that word 'happy,' which my friend Grover Foley used against my advice to translate the German 'fröhlich' can not give what the German word says, I would say, in greater accordance with Barth's intention, that theology is a 'gay' science, and say so consciously disregarding the contemporary implication of the word. 'The theologian, therefore, who has no joy in his work is not a theologian at all,' said Barth. 'Sulky faces, morose thoughts and boring ways of speaking are intolerable in this science.' (It should be pointed out here that in German the word 'theologian' includes in its meaning the parish priest, the minister, the monk, as well as the professor.)

Barth's humour is really humour from faith. A very appropriate ecclesiastical and academic honour to bestow on him would have been the doctorate *humoris causa!* Barth's humour is unrelated, however, to the common humourless inhumanity of the 'holy humour' found in much contemporary religiosity. His theological thought is marked by the syllable *eu* of the word *euangelion*. Precisely here, in the knowledge of faith about the mighty drive and finality of redemption, man can laugh about himself, laugh in the happy expectation that the word of him who will have the last word will most assuredly be a good word, a word which will be incomparably better than all the words man spoke or managed to mutter. The humour of Barth is of the 'nevertheless' kind, like the music of Mozart, in which the shadows of death and the dark hues of suffering are not absent, but are bathed in a radiance and a harmony which nevertheless sing praises to God's good creation.

'With the death of Karl Barth an era comes to an end,' some have said in the past days. I doubt very much that that is true; Barth himself would be the first to take those people to task. My evidence for this comes again from Barth's words of thanks on his eightieth birthday. 'May I speak once again about a donkey?' he asked when replying to the praises of his achievements. 'In the Bible there is talk of a real donkey, or to be quite correct, of an ass. It was allowed to carry Jesus to Jerusalem. If I have achieved anything in this life, then I have done so as a relative of the ass who at that time was going his way carrying an important burden. The disciples had said to its owner "The master has need of it." And so it seems to have pleased God to have used me at this time, just as I was. I was "around" – I just happened to be there. A somewhat different theology was apparently needed in our time from the one which was in use before, and I was permitted to be the ass which was allowed to carry or to try to carry as best I could this better theology a little piece.'

Barth's life has come to an end, yes; but has the carrying of a better theology therefore come to an end? Has the era come to an end when it had to be said that, even though man may and does let go of God, God does not let go of him? Has not Barth himself declared his own *Church Dogmatics* to be a tentative work, which was written only to be revised and refined by his students? The era of Karl Barth comes to an end only in that moment when his students – and it is my hope that we are among them – when his students give up going *beyond* Barth precisely by thinking and speaking *with* Barth in that direction in which he pointed. The era of Karl Barth comes to an end when we refuse to be 'asslets,' the little asses who also carry, or try to carry, as best as we can the witness to God who loved us in Jesus Christ – as the Bible tells us.

And now let me conclude with one reference of a personal nature. After his visit to the United States Barth met again with his students in 'the upper room' of the *Bruderholzhaus*. I was to leave for home a week after and felt quite sad about having to say what I thought was my farewell. (My wife and I met Barth again in 1964.) Anyway, I did manage to thank Barth for the immense enrichment, the encouragement, and the happiness which he had given me.

There he stood before me in his black corduroy jacket, his glasses on the tip of his nose and his hair very happily disorganized. He placed both hands on my shoulders, gave them a squeeze, and said 'Freely you have received, freely give.'

To us all, to the church and to the world, Karl Barth gave his all freely. Thanks be to God, therefore, for Karl Barth.

2 KARL BARTH

*A Letter to Eberhard Bethge**

Dear Pastor Bethge!

It was very kind of you to send me the *opus grande* of your book on Bonhoeffer. After having read it with rapt attention from the first to the last page, I do not want to miss expressing to you my sincere thanks for this gift. It is a good, informative book. If I were asked whether one should buy it or not, I would reply that one should do so indeed. Several aspects of Bonhoeffer were new to me, or have at least impressed themselves on me.

It was new to me that it was an early visit to Rome, of all places, that led Bonhoeffer to a living understanding of what the church (and in her the institution of penance!) might be, and that it was this which prompted him to leave the school of Seeberg, Harnack, and Holl.

It was new to me above all else that Bonhoeffer was the first – yes, indeed, almost the only one in Germany – who in the years after 1933 concentrated energetically on the question of the Jews and dealt with it equally energetically. For a long time now I have considered myself guilty of not having raised it with equal emphasis during the church-struggle (for example in the two Barmen Declarations I composed in 1934). But then such a text would not have been acceptable either to the Reformed or to the General Synod, given the spiritual predisposition of even the 'confessing Christians' in 1934. But this does not excuse the fact that I (my interests lay elsewhere) did not offer at least formal resistance in this matter at that time. It was your book which made me aware that Bonhoeffer fought here right from the start.

Then it was new to me that he considered going to India as seriously as you state. But why he wanted to do that is still not clear to me.

Also new to me was the idea that I, next to Bishop Bell, should have made and continued to make such an impression on him, until finally he thought it necessary to rebuke me with the concept of 'positivism of revelation,' a concept still incomprehensible and unintelligible to me. So far I have always

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thought that I was no more than a 'pawn' and not at all a 'bishop' or even a 'rook' on his chess-board.

But more important than these or similar discoveries was the desire which I felt, while reading your book, to think over once again the unfinished road of your brother-in-law and friend in its entirety. I believe that one must distinguish between three lines, which for him were certainly inseparable, but which in that inseparability are nonetheless not clearly drawn out for us (which is also true for your presentation and thus perhaps even for him, too).

There is first of all that which Mr Andreas Lindt, in his recent essay in *Reformatio*, calls Bonhoeffer's 'way from the Christian faith to political action' [*Weg vom christlichen Glauben zum politischen Handeln*]. Exactly that, however, was also my concern after my farewell to theological liberalism. It took for me the form of 'religious socialism' in its specifically Swiss appearance. When I began working on my *Römerbrief* – and after I went to Germany in 1921 – this concern moved somewhat out of the centre. My German hearers and readers knew me better for the attempt of mine, which had then become more central to my thought, to give a new interpretation of the Reformation and to make it an actuality, than for that other concern. Germany, burdened with the problematics created by her Lutheran tradition, was very much in need of a 'refresher course' in just the outlook which I presupposed without so many words, and merely emphasised 'in passing,' namely, ethics – brotherliness [*Mitmenschlichkeit*] – a servant Church – discipleship – Socialism – movements for peace – and throughout all these in politics. Obviously Bonhoeffer sensed this void and the need to fill it with increasing urgency right from the start, and gave expression to it on a very broad front. This overdue modification, for which he stood up so strongly, was and is (one hopes decisively) the secret to a great extent of the impression which he has justifiedly made and continues to make, especially since he became a martyr precisely for this matter.

Next to that, the renewal of private and common worship which Bonhoeffer had in mind appears to be something different. I think I know what it is that he envisaged, and I would draw it together in the concept of 'discipline.' If this is in fact correct, I quite approve of that intention as such, although I must confess that your book does not make this completely clear to me. What he meant – was this the 'secret discipline' [*Arkandisziplin*] of which he spoke at the end? – was obviously something different from the intentions of the Berneucheners and of Taizé. But what was it? As you know, his longing for India was highly perplexing to me. One would have had to be at Finkenwalde and be involved like you in order to have a clear idea on this aspect. By the way, did Bonhoeffer arouse as much interest in this, did he have as many pupils or create such a precedent in this, as he did in the matter just referred to?

Finally, Bonhoeffer's views of the renewal of theology in both the narrower and the wider senses of that term, the many-sided discussion of which was initiated and kept in high gear by his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, are something which is and remains a mystery to me, even after having read your

book. What is 'world come of age'? What does 'non-religious interpretation' mean? What am I to understand by the 'positivism of revelation' which he applied to me? I know everything, or certainly very much, of what the 'experts' [*Adepten*], including Heinrich Ott, have made of these things. But so far I do not know what Bonhoeffer *himself* meant and intended by all this, and I dare, therefore, to doubt gently that his real strength lay in theological systematics. (I also have his *Ethics* in mind.) Would he not have simply dropped these *bons mots* later? Was he really sure about what he meant when he phrased them? But even if I am mistaken here, I still maintain that those letters from prison were only one, and indeed, the last, of the stations of his life's way, which, right from the beginning, was a very lively spiritual venture. They certainly are not its goal. I would also maintain that he would have been capable of the most astounding evolutions in quite a different direction, and that one therefore does injustice to him – ranked all of a sudden in the same line as Tillich and Bultmann – to interpret him now on the basis of those passages (or to regard him as his own prophet in the light of them). It makes no difference whether this interpretation takes the form of an honestly bourgeois, new liberalism, whether it sees him (so Hanfried Müller) as forerunner of the East German ideology, or (so Regin Prenter) as the new Lutheran church-father. It is unthinkable – and I put myself in his place now – what people would have done to me had I died a natural or violent death after the publication of the first or even the second *Römerbrief*, or after the appearance of my *Christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf* in 1927! What I would not have wanted to happen to me in such a case I would very much have liked not to see in fact happening to Bonhoeffer.

Please, regard all these expectorations as a token of my thanks, and of the attention with which I have read your book.

With sincere greetings

Yours
Karl Barth

3 HAROLD G. WELLS

Karl Barth's Doctrine of Analogy

The theology of the late Karl Barth has often been credited in large measure with the recent strength of the ecumenical movement; certainly his influence upon several outstanding Catholic theologians is well known. It is worthwhile, therefore, to see clearly Barth's disagreement with Roman Catholicism, which continued until the end of his life, and which constitutes a major polemical theme throughout the *Church Dogmatics*. I would suggest that a close examination of his doctrine of analogy gives us a valuable insight into the nature of that disagreement, and for this point of view we have the direct support of Barth himself in the preface to *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, where he writes: 'I regard