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## Christian History BIOGRAPHY

### Neo-Orthodoxy: Karl Barth

*He revived orthodoxy when mere moralism and humanism had seemingly won over the theological world.*  
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Saturday, January 1, 2000

"The gospel is not a truth among other truths. Rather, it sets a question mark against all truths." Karl Barth (pronounced "bart") not only said this, he spent his life setting question marks, in the name of Christ, against all manner of "truths." In the process, he did nothing less than alter the course of modern theology.

He started out life conventionally enough: he was born in 1886 in Basel, Switzerland, the son of Fritz Barth (a professor of New Testament and early church history at Bern) and Anna Sartorius. He studied at the best universities: Bern, Berlin, Tübingen, and Marburg. At Berlin he sat under the famous liberals of the day (like historian Adolf Harnack), most of whom taught an optimistic Christianity that focused not so much on Jesus Christ and the Cross as the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man.

After serving a Geneva church from 1909 to 1911, Barth was appointed to a working-class parish in Switzerland. In 1913 he married Nell Hoffman, a talented violinist (they eventually had one daughter and four sons).

As he pastored, he noted with alarm that not only was Switzerland's close neighbor, Germany, becoming increasingly militaristic, but his former professors there were fully supportive of the development. Dismayed with the moral weakness of liberal theology, Barth plunged into a study of the Bible, especially Paul's Epistle to the Romans, to see what insights it could offer. He also visited Moravian preacher Christoph Blumhardt and came away overwhelmingly convinced of the victorious reality of Christ's resurrection.

Out of this search emerged his Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (1918). He sounded themes that had been muted in liberal theology. For example, liberal theology had domesticated God into the patron saint of human institutions and values. Instead, Barth wrote of the "crisis," that is, God's judgment under which all the world stood; he taught God's absolute sovereignty and complete freedom in initiating his revelation in Jesus Christ.

He spoke dialectically, in paradox, to shock readers into seeing the radical nature of the gospel: "Faith is awe in the presence of the divine incognito; it is the love of God that is aware of the qualitative difference between God and man and God and the world."

The first of six heavily revised editions of the commentary followed in 1922. It rocked the theological community. Liberal theologians gasped in horror and attacked Barth furiously, for in this and later works, he assaulted their easy optimism.

In response to their amiable view of humankind, Barth wrote, "Men have never been good, they are not good, they will never be good."

Against the liberal tendency to treat Jesus as a teacher of religion, Barth said, "Jesus does not give recipes that show the way to God as other teachers of religion do. He is himself the way."

In 1921 Barth was appointed professor of Reformed theology at the University of Göttingen, and later to chairs at Münster (1925) and Bonn (1930). He published works critiquing nineteenth-century Protestant theology and produced a celebrated study of Anselm.

In 1931 he began the first book of his massive *The Church Dogmatics*. It grew year by year out of his class lectures; though incomplete, it eventually filled four volumes in 12 parts, each densely printed with 500 to 700 pages each. Many pastors in the 1930s, '40s, and '50s, desperate for an antidote to liberalism, eagerly awaited the publication of each book.

His theology came to be known as "dialectical theology," or "the theology of crisis"; it blossomed into a school of theology known as neo-orthodoxy, which influenced theology for decades and included thinkers like Emil Brunner and Reinhold Niebuhr. Many Catholic theologians (like Hans Küng) and evangelical theologians (like Donald Bloesch) have acknowledged Barth's key influence on them.

Not that everyone fell at his feet. On the one hand, liberals mocked him as a Bible-thumping fundamentalist; on the other, conservatives wondered about Barth's orthodoxy because he refused to consider the Bible to be "infallible" (he believed, instead, that only Jesus is infallible). Others thought Barth's theology overemphasized God's transcendence, making God seem utterly distant, and others still argued that God, in fact, did show signs of his presence in nature and history (something the early Barth vehemently denied).

All in all, Barth was surprised at the waves he caused. Late in life he wrote, "As I look back upon my course, I seem to myself as one who, ascending the dark staircase of a church tower and trying to steady himself, reached for the banister, but got hold of the bell rope instead. To his horror he had then to listen to what the great bell had sounded over him and not over him alone."

Barth fought not just with liberals but also with allies who challenged some of his extreme conclusions. When Brunner proposed that God revealed himself not just in the Bible but in nature as well (though not in a saving way), Barth replied in 1934 with an article titled, "No! An Answer to Emil Brunner." Barth believed that such a "natural theology" was the root of the religious syncretism and anti-Semitism of the "German Christians"—those who supported Hitler's national socialism. (Later in life, he moderated his views and reconciled with Brunner).

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—*Karl Barth*

By this time, Barth was immersed in the German church struggle. He was a founder of the so-called Confessing Church, which was repulsed by the ideology of "blood and soil" and the Nazis' attempt to create a "German Christian" church. The 1934 Barmen Declaration, largely based on Barth's initial draft, pitted the revelation of Jesus Christ against the "truth" of Hitler and national socialism:

"Jesus Christ ... is the one Word of God. ... We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and beside this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God's revelation."

When Barth refused to take the oath of unconditional allegiance to the Führer, he lost his position at Bonn. His native Basel offered him a chair in theology and from there he continued to champion the causes of the Confessing Church, the Jews, and oppressed people everywhere.

After the war, Barth engaged in controversies about baptism (though a Reformed theologian, he rejected infant baptism), hermeneutics, and the demythologizing program of Rudolf Bultmann (who denied the historical nature of Scripture, instead believing it a myth whose meaning could heal spiritual anxiety).

Barth also made regular visits to the Basel prison, and his sermons to prisoners, *Deliverance to the Captives*, reveal a combination of evangelical passion and social concern that characterized his whole life.

Though his later years were relatively quiet, Barth remains the most important theologian of the twentieth century. When it looked as if a moralistic and humanistic theology had won over Christendom, Barth showed Christians—mainline, evangelical, and Catholic—how to continue to take the Bible seriously.

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