

Key Figure: Karl Barth

Introduction: Karl Barth is the most influential Protestant theologian of the 20th century.

Pope Pius XII said he was, “the greatest theologian since St. Thomas Aquinas.”

This is a guy whom you probably don’t know much about.

Unlike all of the other “key figures” in our church history series, this guy has to be taken with caution. He is both a friend of the faith and, on some issues, its enemy. Liberals don’t think he is liberal enough, and conservatives don’t think he is conservative enough.

He was hated by liberals such as Adolf von Harnack and Rudolf Bultmann. But he was also hated by conservatives such as Cornelius van Til, Carl Henry, and Billy Graham.

Understanding Theological Liberalism

Liberal theology replaces the traditional authority of Christianity (the Bible, creeds, confessions, etc.) with the enlightenment ideals of human rationality and experience. It seeks to remove all the supernatural parts of Christianity (all the actual good stuff!) and simply keep things which would be acceptable to human reason and experience (an internal feeling of religion and an emphasis on social work).

Who is Karl Barth?



-He was born on May 10, 1886 in Basel, Switzerland.

-As a kid he was interested in fighting and the military. He got into fist fights all the time and even joined a type of street gang.

“Today I did a good deal of bashing up and got bashed up by plenty of people myself.” - Karl Barth, from his diary at the age of 12

-He loved classical music, especially Mozart, and was a good violin player.

-Just before his confirmation and his 16th birthday he was resolved to become a theologian.

-He studied at the universities of Bern and Berlin (where Schleiermacher used to teach), and he studied under one of the most popular liberal theologians, Adolf von Harnack. He hated the conservative theology of Tübingen (where he also studied), and he got his biggest helping of liberalism from the University of Marburg.

-He was ordained in 1908, and took his first pastorate in Geneva in 1909.

-He married his fiancé, Nelly, in 1913. It was an arranged marriage and an unhappy one. The original love of his life had died in her twenties (Barth visited her grave for years). Barth eventually got an assistant that helped him tremendously. Her name was Charlotte von Kirschbaum but he called her "Lollo." However, Barth loved her and had, at the least, an emotional affair if not an actual affair.



-Barth suffered from depression and was almost always smoking tobacco out of a pipe.

-In his first pastorate he pushed all the liberal stuff (experience, feeling, social justice, etc.). He also had socialist leanings. He was called "comrade pastor" by the Workers Party. However, he eventually grew tired of liberal theology because *he saw that it didn't work, and it didn't glorify God*. He also grew disillusioned at his former professors because they blindly supported Germany as it entered WWI.

-At this time theological liberalism was very optimistic and many theological liberals were postmillennial. However, WWI, the Spanish Flu (which killed 50-100 million worldwide), and economic hardships caused many people to see that humanity would not bring about our own wellbeing. This laid the ground for needing God's help. In 1919 Barth's commentary on Romans was written. But it was its second edition, in 1921, that put him on the map. Against the background of theological liberalism it emphasized *divine freedom and radical human depravity*.

“[Barth’s Romans commentary] Fell like a bombshell on the playground of the theologians.” -F.F. Bruce

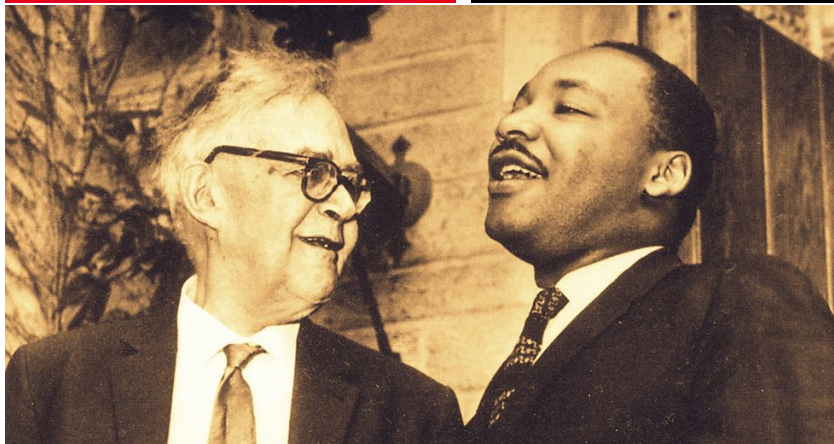
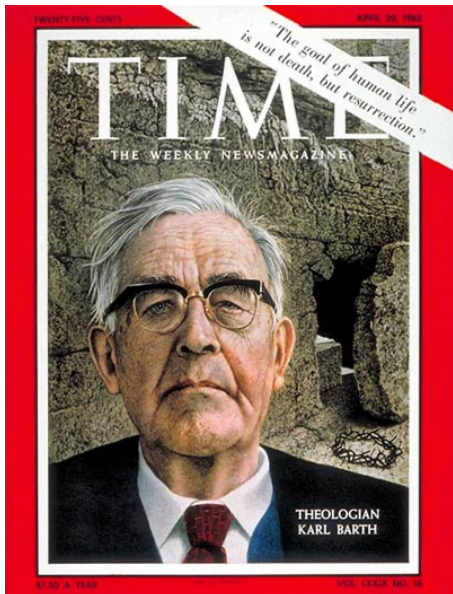
-Over his career he was a professor at the University of Gottingen, the University of Munster, the University of Bonn, and the University of Basel.

-His greatest work was the massive *Church Dogmatics*. It’s a 14-volume systematic theology that is twice as long as Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae*.

-In reestablishing orthodoxy and a focus on what God has done in Christ, he pushed back against the man-centered, squishy focus of liberal theology and reasserted the supremacy of God. This return to orthodoxy (but with several new shifts) was called “neo-orthodoxy.”

-He died on December 9, 1968 at the age of 82.

-His influence was massive!



Karl Barth and the Nazis

-Barth hated national socialism because he believed it was a form of idolatry.

-Barth had guts. In fact, he wrote a pamphlet against the German church's support of the Nazi's and had 37,000 copies printed before that publication was outlawed. In fact, a copy was even sent to Adolf Hitler himself, courtesy of Karl Barth!

-In 1933 a group of 20,000 German Christians gathered in Berlin where pro-Nazi speakers stated that no blacks or Jews should be allowed in church and that the Old Testament should be done away with. They also stated that we should not focus on Christ crucified, but on Christ militant and King. They even rebuked Barth by name.

-600,000 – 700,000 of the Evangelical Youth Organization were transferred to become part of the Hitler youth.



-Groups of Christians that opposed Hitler and his policies were called the “confessing church.”
-Barth was one of three authors influential in forming the Barmen Declaration (1934) which denounced the German church's acceptance of national socialism.

-The Barmen Declaration contains six articles that all begin with a quote from scripture, an affirmation of what that means, and then a denouncement of views held by the German Christian group (the Christians that supported the Nazis).

“We reject the false doctrine that the Church could have permission to hand over the form of its message and of its order to whatever it itself might wish or to the vicissitudes of the prevailing ideological and political convictions of the day... We reject the false doctrine that, apart from this ministry, the Church could, and could have permission to, give itself or allow itself to be given special leaders [*Führer*] vested with ruling authority... We reject the false doctrine that beyond its special commission the Church should and could take on the nature, tasks and dignity which belong to the State and thus become itself an organ of the State.” -The Barmen Declaration

-In 1934 Barth was fired because he would not give an unqualified oath to Hitler. All German professors were required to give an oath to Hitler, but Barth added the qualification that he could only be loyal to the Führer where it did not conflict with his responsibilities as an Evangelical Christian.

-He moved to Switzerland and enlisted in the army at the age of 54 in his willingness to fight the Nazis if need be.

Good things about Barth

-He is the one who helped save Christian theology from the liberals. His intellectual firepower was so much higher than his critics that he changed the course of theological history.

-He rejected natural theology. Humans are so depraved and God is so far above humanity the focus of Christian theology must be God's revelation of himself in Christ and in the Bible.

“We have found in the Bible a new world, God, God's sovereignty, God's glory, God's incomprehensible love. Not the history of man but the history of God! Not the virtues of men but the virtues of him who hath called us out of darkness into his marvelous light!” – Karl Barth

-He thought that pietism led to legalism and, therefore, didn't properly understand God's grace.

“Blessed are those who know they are not pious...they are the people of God because they know they are not.” -Karl Barth

Once, when he was told he had strong faith, he said:

“So you allow me good faith. I have never conceded myself good faith. And when once the day comes when I have to appear before my Lord, then I will not come with my deeds, with the volumes of my *Dogmatics* in the basket upon my back. All the angels there would have to laugh. But then I shall also not say, ‘I have always meant well; I had good faith.’ No, then I will only say one thing: ‘Lord, be merciful to me, a poor sinner!’” – Karl Barth

-Whereas liberalism focused on God's immanence (your feelings, “experiencing” God within yourself, etc.), he focused on God's absolute transcendence. There is nothing that puts you in contact with God; every thought you have about God is the thought of a creature and therefore wrong. God is wholly other. (As one commentator puts it, “You don't say ‘God’ by saying ‘man’ with a loud voice”).

-He focused on the importance of God revealing himself. Humans have no way of knowing God or communicating with God, so God must take the initiative to reveal himself to man. Man is the beggar and God is the one who must provide our theological food. All of this is due to God's radical grace.

“Grace is the incomprehensible fact that God is pleased with a man, and that a man can rejoice in God. Only when grace is recognized to be incomprehensible is it grace...Grace is the gift of Christ, who exposes the gulf which separates God and man, and by exposing it, bridges it.” -Karl Barth

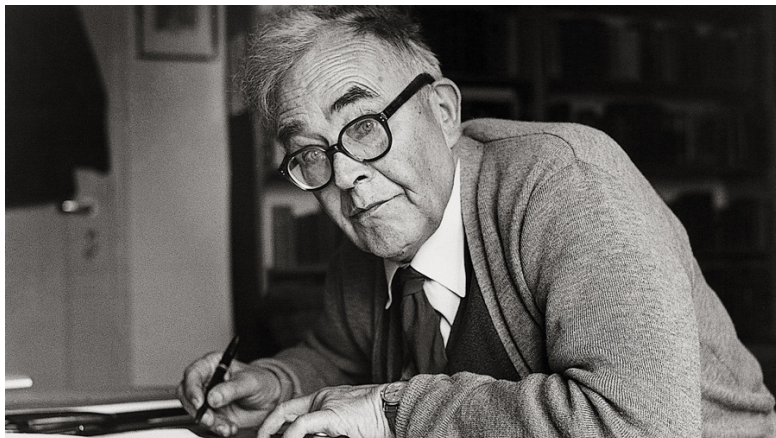
“In Jesus God is known as the unknown God.” -Karl Barth

-He believed that we idolize religion over God. We often times don't want to actually be confronted with a holy God and have to rely on him, so we substitute religion for God. We try to be nicer, we attend church, we talk about theology (but not God himself), we try to be moral, we practice spiritual disciplines, but we do all this as an idol instead of worshipping the one, true God.

-He believed in the importance of being a part of the church, with its warts and all.

“We must not, because we are fully aware of the eternal opposition between the gospel and the church, hold ourselves aloof from the church or break up its solidarity; but rather, participating in its responsibility and sharing the guilt of its inevitable failure, we should accept it and cling to it.” -Karl Barth

-He loved John Calvin and thought that he was an absolutely brilliant theologian. Barth was originally hired as a professor to teach Reformed theology.



Bad things about Barth

-He (along with Dietrich Bonhoeffer – a student who said Barth was his greatest influence) denied the inerrancy of scripture. Barth said that the Bible contained scientific, historical, and even theological (!) errors.

-He believed the Bible itself was not the Word of God. The Bible is a record of human's interaction with God's primary Word (namely Christ), but it "is God's Word in so far as God lets it be his word [as we hear it]." -Barth

-For Barth, the Bible is not the Word of God; rather God's Word is what the Holy Spirit is confronting you with when you read the Bible. This was not the traditional view of scripture.

-The Word of God is not statements or doctrine but an event - the event of Christ.

-Carl Henry, in summarizing Barth's view, said, "The Bible is the Word of God, but only at certain instants...when God lets the Bible speak to us."

-Some scholars think that this critique of Barth is unfair because Barth speaks very highly of scripture elsewhere (he quotes the Bible more than any other figure in church history, about 15,000 times and he sought to rescue the Bible from the liberals). Regardless, this definition (along with his denial of inerrancy) should bother Christians.

-His view of God sometimes borders on God changing. In traditional theology God is immovable, impassable, and simple, but Barth disagrees with those categories. He also thinks that God is not bound by his Word; Barth hates anything that seems to put God in a box (even a box of scripture's own making).

-His view of election is not that God selects individuals to either save or damn before creation, but rather Christ is both the electing God and the categorical elected man. This means that Christ is really the only one who was damned (suffering on the cross) and really the only one who was elected. Since Christ is truly human, all humans are elect in Christ. This leads to...

-Universalism. Barth denied he was a universalist, but it is where his theology necessarily leads. Everyone is saved in Barth's theology because Christ has saved mankind as a whole. If salvation is up to you knowing or putting your faith in Christ then you had to do something to get it, thus making it a work.

-He denied that we can know things about God through nature or philosophy. He believed the Bible was the sole way of knowing God rather than the primary and sufficient way of knowing God.

Why is he important?

-Saved orthodoxy from the devastating effects of liberalism.

-Rescued the Bible from religious relativism.

-Rediscovered the gospel and made it look beautiful.

-Downplayed humanity and exalted God.

-Put Christ back at the center of theology.