

Faith Story -- Karl Barth



If theologians got the same sort of attention and popular acclaim as actors and singers do, Karl Barth would be as familiar to the world as George Clooney or Barbra Streisand. He was the pre-eminent Protestant theologian of the 20th century, of whom it has been said that 'just as there is a pre-Einsteinian science and a post-Einsteinian science, so there is a pre-Barthian and post-Barthian theology, for the contribution of Karl Barth to theology is like that of Albert Einstein to nature science -- so deep and fundamental that it marks one of the great eras of advance in the whole history of the subject.' (*Theopedia* website)

Barth was born in Basel, Switzerland in 1886. His father, Fritz, was a Swiss Reformed minister and professor of New Testament and early church history. After a period of youthful delinquency during which he was the leader of a local street gang that occupied itself with school and neighborhood feuds, Karl Barth headed off to the University of Bern to study theology. He continued his studies at several universities in Germany and was then ordained as a Lutheran pastor, serving first in Geneva and then for ten years at the village church in Safenwil. In 1913, he married Nelly Hoffman, a talented violinist. Together they had one daughter and four sons.

Barth's first published work was a commentary on the book of Romans. It established his position as a notable theologian with a new and arresting message about the sheer Godness of God and the unlimited range of God's grace. As a result of this publication, in 1921 Barth was appointed professor of Reformed theology at the University of Gottingen in Germany. Over the next 9 years, he received professorial chairs at two other German universities.

As Adolph Hitler rose to power in Germany, Barth became deeply involved in the church struggle which developed between the "German Christian Church" which came to function as an institution of the Nazi government and the Confessing Church which strongly opposed the appropriation of Christian religion by the government. In 1934, the Confessing Church published the Barmen Declaration, which is included in our PC(USA) Book of Confessions. Barth was the primary author of this document, which contains six propositions, each quoting from Scripture, stating that Scripture's implication for the present day, and rejecting the false doctrine of the German Christians. The Declaration proclaims the church's freedom in Jesus Christ who is Lord of every area of life.

In that respect, the Barman Declaration is a good expression of Barth's deeply Christocentric theology. His strong conviction of the lordship of Jesus Christ resulted in his refusal to take the required oath of unconditional allegiance to the Fuhrer. Consequently, he was fired from his university position, but was quickly offered the chair of theology in his native Basel. He returned to Switzerland, where he lived for the rest of his life, and continued from there to champion the causes of the Confessing Church, the Jews, and oppressed people everywhere.

Barth was a prolific author. His master work is *Church Dogmatics*, a systematic theology which grew year by year out of his class lectures. Though he was still working on *Dogmatics* and considered it unfinished when he died in 1968 at the age of 82, the twelve parts which make up the published work fill more than 9,300 pages in four volumes. Barth also wrote a number of smaller books over the years, including *The Humanity of God*, *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life*, and commentaries on books of the Bible and on the work of John Calvin.

As a theologian, Barth rejected 19th century views on natural theology -- the idea that humans are capable of a religious self-consciousness which equips us to know God through our human institutions and values. He was concerned to establish that God can be known only in accordance with God's nature as God chooses to reveal that nature to us, which God does supremely in Jesus Christ. Barth wrote: "The gospel is not a truth among other truths. Rather, it sets a question mark against all truths." He believed that the essence of the Christian message is the overwhelming love of the absolutely supreme, transcendent God, who comes to humanity in unconditional freedom and grace.

As you might imagine, there are a great many substantive and complicated ideas in Barth's more than 9,000 pages of theological writing. His influence can be found in the work of every Reformed theologian who has written or taught or preached over the past half-century and more.

Perhaps one of his greatest gifts to us is that this brilliant man, who thought so deeply and wrote so exhaustively, when asked if he could summarize his theology replied:

Jesus loves me, this I know.

For the Bible tells me so.

We may not be able to study the twelve parts of the *Church Dogmatics*. We may not be able to follow Barth's theological ponderings on the nature of God or fully grasp his concepts of the meaning of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. But we can all remember that the essential truth Barth holds and invites us to hold along with him is:

Jesus loves me, this I know.

For the Bible tells me so.

Works Consulted:

- *The Book of Confessions*; Presbyterian Church (USA)
- *131 Christians Everyone Should Know*; published by the editors of *Christian History* magazine
- *Barth for Armchair Theologians*; John R. Franke
- Boston Collaborative Encyclopedia of Western Theology -- website
- Britannica.com -- website
- Got Questions.org -- website
- Princeton Theological Seminary website
- Theopedia -- website