

CHAPTER 1

Karl Barth's Historical and Theological Significance

Christiane Tietz

Karl Barth allowed himself to be moved by the realities that surrounded him. It was the harsh and perplexing reality of the world that led him to ask about God in a new way. It was the poverty he confronted as a young curate in Geneva, not to mention the class divisions he encountered as pastor in Safenwil, that made him search for a hope against hope on the basis of faith (cf. Barth 1971, p. 306; GA 22, p. 730). It was the reality of World War I and the capitulation of many of his theological teachers to German zeal for the war that made him doubt their theological presuppositions and develop his disruptively “dialectical” counterproposals. It was the reality of his teaching post as a professor that made him move away from a merely dialectical critique to developing a full-scale dogmatics. And it was the reality of the Third Reich that made him lift up the relevance not only of the First Commandment as a theological criterion but also of Jesus Christ as the self-revelation of God. Although Barth argued that God and the Christian faith were not merely cultural or historical phenomena, his thinking arose in response to immediate historical circumstances that betrayed, he felt, a certain crisis of modernity (cf. Gestrich 1977, p. 6f).

Barth and the other dialectical theologians were not the only ones who discerned a crisis in modernity. Many intellectuals at that time like Ernst Bloch or Paul Tillich felt similarly. But the distinctive feature of Barth and the other dialectical theologians was their return to the theology of the Reformation (cf. Ebeling 1962, p. 1). For them that meant returning to faith in a God “whose existence radically questioned the world and oneself. Only God himself and his existence were no longer uncertain” (Gogarten 1937, p. 13 rev.).

Some of their contemporaries regarded their approach as a departure from “modernity.” They suspected that here “‘modern man’ after the First World War had become weary of Enlightenment ideals and was now clinging to an idea of God that erupted from dark,

medieval depths” (Gestrich 1977, p. 1).¹ Yet Barth and his friends did not understand their approach as a withdrawal from modernity and its rationality. They claimed that their concept of God as the Wholly Other was “the theme of the Bible and the sum of philosophy in one” (Barth 2010, p. 17; cf. Gestrich 1977, p. 2f.).

Return to the Bible, Focus on “die Sache”

At the center of Barth’s new views lay his return to the biblical text. Of course, the biblical text was always – and also in Barth’s time – a subject of theological study. Yet because Barth regarded the historic-critical approach to the Bible as insufficient, he tried something different in his two commentaries on Paul’s Letter to the Romans. The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer considered Barth’s first commentary to be a milestone in modern hermeneutics, because it made clear that understanding a text means understanding “*die Sache*” or “subject matter” of the text. Here Barth undertook “a ‘critique’ of liberal theology which not so much meant critical history as such but the theological modesty which acknowledged that its results were already an understanding of Holy Scripture. Therefore, despite its refusal of methodological reflection, Barth’s Letter to the Romans was some kind of hermeneutical manifesto” (Gadamer 1972, 481 rev.)

In his preface to the second edition of The Letter to the Romans, it not only became clearer what Barth meant by “*die Sache*” of a text but also what he regarded as the shortcomings of the historical-critical method. Barth replied to the reproach that he was an “enemy of *historical criticism*” and little more than a biblicist (Barth 2010, p. 11). First he acknowledged the full “right and necessity” of historical criticism. Then he went on to register his dissatisfaction that historical criticism ended with an “interpretation of the text which I cannot call an interpretation, but only the first primitive attempt at an interpretation” (Barth 2010, p. 11). His own aim was first to bring out “what stands in the text,” yet then to think about it until “the barrier” between Paul’s time and ours becomes “transparent” so that “Paul *talks* there and we ... *listen* here, until the conversation between document and reader is focused totally on ‘*die Sache*’ (which *cannot* be different here and there)” (Barth 2010, p. 13 rev.). In focusing on one and the same “*Sache*,” text and reader become present to each other. *This* is the critique that was finally necessary when reading a biblical text: relating and comparing all its statements with “*die Sache*” of which it is talking. In this regard Barth penned his famous line: “In my view, the historical critics need to be more critical!” (Barth 2010, p. 14)

Barth’s perspective on the historical-critical method was a response to the dominance of historicism in Protestant theology at that time (cf. Gestrich 1977, p. 2). In standing against it, Barth, Brunner, Bultmann, Gogarten, and Thurneysen were on the same page as Paul Tillich and Emanuel Hirsch (cf. Gestrich 1977, p. 16). All of them judged that historicism had made the revelation of God into an inner-worldly phenomenon. The *extra nos* of the divine Word had been abolished and preaching had

1 Gestrich’s allusion here is to Friedrich Karl Schumann’s *Der Gottesgedanke und der Zerfall der Moderne*, 1929.

thereby become impossible (cf. Gestrich 1977, p. 16f.). Ernst Troeltsch's historical method and its norms of critique, analogy, and correlation (cf. Troeltsch 1913) had dwindled God's reality into a part of history. God's absolute otherness could no longer be encountered (cf. Gestrich 1977, p. 21f.).

With his critique of historicism and his concept of the transhistorical simultaneity of *Sache* and reader (through the text), Barth had rejected a simple linear conception of time. He was convinced that the whole existence of the church depended on its simultaneity with the living Christ. In his mature view, this simultaneity was the essence of Christian celebrations like Christmas and Easter. When celebrating these holidays, Christians presupposed "that prior to our remembrance, the One whom we remember is himself in action to-day, here and now." They presupposed that *as* such events once took place definitively there and then, they *also* in some form (secondary and dependent) "take place to-day, and will take place again tomorrow" (CD IV/2, p. 112 rev.). This "realism" was grounded in Jesus Christ, the living Savior present then and present now. "He overcomes the barrier of his own time and therefore of historical distance He is present and future in his once-for-all act there and then He is among us to-day, and will be among us to-morrow, in his once-for-all act as it took place there and then" (CD IV/2, p. 112 rev.). Through his focus on "*die Sache*" – on the incarnate and present Christ who lived, died, and rose again – Barth was able to develop an understanding of the biblical text which expected that God would speak through it – not in the naïve sense of a fundamentalist biblicism but in reckoning with God's active, in-breaking presence when reading and studying the Bible.

Barth's methodological approach to the biblical text was rejected by distinguished theologians of his time. For example, in 1923 his former teacher Adolf von Harnack accused him of destroying the academic character of theology through his somehow naïve and devotional return to the meaning of the biblical text. In his eyes, Barth had turned the professor's lectern into a pastor's pulpit (cf. GA 35, pp. 55–88).

Barth's rediscovery of the Bible in fact led to a revival of biblical theology and of biblical preaching among his contemporaries. And it led to a new interest in the church, as the Bible has its decisive meaning only in and for the church. The church was the community that lived from reading the Bible and from preaching its texts. Whereas cultural Protestantism emphasized the individual and his or her subjectivity, Barth's theology brought the church back into the picture.

God as the Wholly Other

In contrast to the liberal theological approach of his time that started with the human being, and in particular with religious self-consciousness, Barth emphasized that theology had to begin with God. This emphasis was prompted by the shock of World War I, which showed Barth that all human ethical concepts such as socialism or pacifism or even "Christianity" were part of the world and were not able to overcome the world as it is. In World War I, in Barth's view, all ethics had "gone into the trenches" (GA 48, p. 186). No ethical concept was able to overcome this human catastrophe, be it the concept of the state or of patriotism, not to mention socialism or even pacifism. Not unlike

the sixteenth-century Swiss reformer Huldrych Zwingli, for Barth everything human was “flesh” in its nullity and transitory nature (cf. Gestrich 1977, p. 47). Barth concluded that “world is world” and that all worldly gods have become “battlefield grey” (GA 48, pp. 193, 195). Only God, as he can be recognized in the life and work of Jesus Christ, is the one who brings the New. “He is entirely different from anything else which seems true and right to me” (GA 48, p. 201).

Barth’s famous critique of religion, not least of the Christian religion, arose from his understanding of God as the Wholly Other who disrupts our self-satisfied existence. For religion wants to quell this disruption. It recommends that we “trust in God as a quite attainable and helpful requisite for life Without blushing one talks about ‘Christian’ customs, families, organizations [In religion], the ‘divine’ has taken possession of God, making God into an instrumental value” (GA 48, p. 679 rev.). In religion, God is used as a means to satisfy our self-determined needs.

Barth concluded that there are no human criteria with which we can measure the immeasurable deity of God. The only criterion is this, that “God’s will” conquers us and “puts such a claim on us that we have to recognize and confess: this God is God” (GA 48, p. 202). No detached evaluation of God according to worldly standards is possible.

Therefore, only God can reveal God. And only God can authorize any human word about God (cf. GA 48, pp. 567, 595). Although Barth’s decision to begin theological thinking with God could seem self-referential, it was in fact a consequence of his insight that all other starting points for theological thinking were unable to get beyond the hopeless human situation. “Human beings as human beings cry out for God ... Not again for something human, but for God, ... for God as the redeemer of their *humanity*” (GA 19, p. 153). Theology could start only with God, because God, as the Christian church believed, had in fact revealed himself, by a great miracle, in Jesus Christ – perpendicularly from above.

Barth’s Political Critiques

It was Barth’s insight into the radical difference between God and world that enabled him to critique the politics of his time. He understood not only God’s gospel but also God’s law as different from what reason considered right (cf. Gestrich 1977, p. 49). We encounter both, God’s grace and God’s law, not in history, but finally only in Jesus Christ as God’s self-revelation. As the Barmen declaration stated in 1934: “As Jesus Christ is God’s comforting pronouncement of the forgiveness of all our sins [Gospel], so, with equal seriousness, he is also God’s vigorous announcement of his claim upon our whole life [Law]” (Barmen 2). It is in fact God’s grace that judges human beings, revealing how little they live in accordance with God (cf. Gestrich 1977, p. 50).

Barth understood his own political engagement, especially against National Socialism, as a consequence of the First Commandment, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20: 3). Only an exclusive orientation toward God could lead to an adequate Christian life (cf. GA 49, p. 239). The totalitarianism of National Socialism revealed its true face in its disobedience against the First Commandment. From the necessity of obeying this Commandment, Barth summoned the courage to not swear an

unconditional oath to Adolf Hitler, as it was demanded of him by the Nazis. Along with other factors, not least his outspoken speech on Reformation Day in Berlin in 1933, it was a decision that led to his dismissal as a professor in Bonn in 1935.

In contrast to many theologians of his time, Barth argued that Jesus Christ as the only criterion for theology and church led to a definite conception of the church-community. It was constituted, he insisted, "not through blood and accordingly also not through race [*Volk*], but through the Holy Spirit and through baptism" (GA 49, p. 327). This ecclesiological principle led him to conclude that a possible exclusion of Christians with a Jewish background from the church (as was planned in the so-called Arian paragraph of the Nazi state) would amount to the extinction of the Christian church.

Barth was not the only one who fought against Nazi ideology. But he was one of the most prominent figures of the Confessing Church. When Barth told the rector of the University of Bonn in 1934 that he could swear an oath on Hitler only if he would be allowed to add the phrase "so far as it would be responsible for me as an evangelical Christian," the rector reported Barth's behavior to the cultural minister of state Bernhard Rust, commenting that he "got the impression that Barth is searching for martyrdom, and that Barth's dismissal could perhaps become a desired signal for a new, large-scale rebellion in the Protestant church. This is just a world-famous theologian, the head of an immense number of followers all around the world" (Quoted in Prolingheuer 1977, p. 26).

Long before having become a famous professor in Germany, Barth had been politically active. During his time as a pastor in Safenwil, he had advocated for Religious Socialism. He agreed with Leonhard Ragaz and Hermann Kutter that the kingdom of God concretely breaks into the world and its materiality concretely (cf. GA 22, p. 396). He was convinced that "the movement for social justice in the 19th and 20th century" was the "largest and most insistent Word of God to the present." He saw it as a "very direct continuation of the spiritual power ... that entered into history ... through Jesus Christ" (GA 22, p. 387). Barth urged that the church had to speak out in unmistakable terms. He was convinced that Jesus and capitalism didn't go together (cf. GA 22, p. 402). "There should be no social misery" (GA 22, p. 395). He joined the social democratic (socialist) party.

After his return from Germany to Switzerland in 1935, Barth remained politically critical. In the Sudeten crisis, he encouraged the Czech people to resist Hitler's aggression even with armed force (cf. GA 36, p. 114). During World War II, he fought publicly against the Swiss policy of neutrality, which he regarded as an attempt to curry favor with the Nazis. He was worried that Switzerland could lose its identity as a shelter for refugees and as a place where injustice was called by its proper name (cf. Barth 1940, p. 7). Barth therefore questioned unconditional pacifism, because it would be irresponsible not to resist Hitler's expansionism with violent means. Yes, we need to pray and to work (*ora et labora*), as the order of Benedict tells us; but "to work ... in this case unfortunately means: to shoot" (Barth 1945, p. 141). In response to these public statements, many accused Barth of being a warmonger.

In the aftermath of World War II, Barth rebuked the church for joining in the ideology of western anticommunism. He felt that it cannot be "a task of the

church to repeat with some theological argument, what every citizen can read nodding his head anyway in his daily newspaper” (GA 15, p. 164). He warned against the possible rearmament, and in particular nuclear rearmament, of Germany. He expressed concern about the danger of returning to the old enthusiasm for war, of unnecessarily provoking the communist countries, and not least of sparking another world war. He increasingly opposed installing nuclear weapons in Germany and Switzerland. He called upon all citizens to “explain to their governments and their press by every possible means that they want neither to eradicate nor to be eradicated: not even for the defense of the ‘free world’, not even for the defense of socialism!” (GA 15, p. 392).

Some of Barth’s contemporaries valued his brave and often nonconformist political statements. Yet others felt that his “interference” in politics was not what a Christian ought to do. The old saw was dragged out that Barth was mingling religion and politics. During World War II, Swiss censorship had cut back Barth’s freedom of speech and publication. After the war many felt that Barth used theology only as a framework for promoting his own political convictions.

With an eye toward Calvin, Barth proposed a theological foundation for his political engagement and for the engagement he felt was incumbent upon the church. Everything depended on the reign of Jesus Christ. This foundation militated against any attempt to separate secular issues from the will of God. Because Christ’s reign extended over the whole world, analogies needed to be constructed between the gospel of Jesus Christ and the shape of social structures. It was an analogy between that freedom which Christ brings and a robust political freedom. This analogy supplied Christians with criteria to engage in political action (cf. Barth 1939). As much as possible the state needed to exist as a parable of God’s kingdom. Similarly, in the structure of its common life, the church needed to live an exemplary existence that unfolded what it would mean to live in accord with the gospel (cf. Barth 1960). Over against the critics who wanted to silence him politically, Barth was convinced that the gospel is “political from the very outset” (Barth 1960, p. 184).

A Theology Outdated?

In the aftermath of World War II there was a general consensus that Barth’s theology had proven to be an incomparable bulwark against Nazi ideology. More recently, however, at least in the German-speaking world, a perception has emerged that Barth’s theology is outdated. Many German scholars would say that although his theology was relevant in its original setting, it has outlived its usefulness today. By historicizing Barth along these lines, his theology is relegated to the dustbin of history (cf. Weinrich 2013, p. 17f.). Critics complain that his theology is self-encapsulated without any relation to contemporary life. Tillich’s old reproach that Barth throws revelation down like a stone from heaven has been revived (Tillich 1951, p. 7).

The relation of Barth’s theology to modernity has reemerged. “The question of its place in the history of the modern era has become more and more a question of methodologically fundamental meaning” (Pfleiderer 2005, p. 225). It is interesting that

those who would reject Barth as outdated often return to theologians who represent the nineteenth century like Schleiermacher and Troeltsch (cf. Weinrich 2013, p. 18). These figures arguably stand at a greater distance from our times than Barth, whether temporally or otherwise.

Some scholars have contended that Barth's theology prevented a "constructive debate" of Protestantism with modernity (cf. Wagner 1995, p. 52). They skirmish against the "authoritarian" character of Barth's theology and against those whom they called the "keepers of the Holy Grail" (Wagner 1975, p. 10). They claim that Barth's success depended on a climate in which people were "hungry for authority" (Lauster 2008, p. 20) and that his theology satisfied "a religious and not only a theological yearning for a return to premodernity" (Lauster 2008, p. 18f.). They hanker back to an era when Christianity was culturally dominant and uncritically accepted. Barth's "re-mythologization of the idea of God," argues Lauster, "his persistent insisting on the idea that God speaks, is an almost violent infantilization of the concept of God, which in many cases must have a repulsive effect, as it does not have any connection to modern critical thinking" (Lauster 2008, p. 22).

Other scholars would claim that Barth was fundamentally connected to idealistic philosophy (cf. Pfleiderer 2005, p. 225) or even to Schleiermacher (cf. Duke and Streetman 1988; Leiner and Gockel 2015). Still others, like the Munich theologians Trutz Rendtorff, Falk Wagner, and Friedrich Wilhelm Graf contradict Barth's own self-understanding by contending that his theology was not a departure from but a "continuation of the theoretical formation of neo-Protestantism or 'liberal theology'" (Holtmann 2007, p. 13). His theology was not the explication of God's objective reality but of the "subjectivity [*Subjekthaftigkeit*] of all reality" (Rendtorff 1975, p. 8). Or again, it was really a secret theory of authoritarian self-consciousness that validated an "anti-democratic" mindset (Wagner 1975, p. 14).

Barth's claim to start with God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ was, for these critics, a misunderstanding on his part (cf. Pfleiderer 2005, p. 239, summarizing Wagner). Against his conviction that the Word of God, as attested in Scripture, imposed itself as the beginning of all theological thinking for the church, they contend that it was merely Barth himself who devised God's 'Word' as the "principle of construction" in systematic theology (Wagner 1975, p. 16). They assert that even Barth could speak about God only in the mode of religious consciousness. Or in any case, even if Barth claimed that Christian self-interpretation (*Selbstdeutung*) was constituted by something beyond itself, this interpretation remained just an interpretation (cf. Korsch 1989, p. 208). Despite Barth's criticism of religion as a human, cultural product, his critique was itself little more than a cultural product (cf. Pfleiderer 2005, p. 228). His critics may allow that although Barth was self-contradictory, he adequately summarized his views in terms of God as pure act (cf. Pfleiderer 2005, p. 230). Others see this idea as proof of his failure. In general such critics seek to discredit Barth largely by reframing his theology in unfavorable terms as opposed to actually grappling with his arguments. They seem to place little weight on the first article of the Barmen Declaration, by which for Barth everything stands or falls: "Jesus Christ as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture is the one Word of God whom we have to hear, and whom we have to trust and obey, in life and in death."

Barth's Ongoing Theological Significance

In 1950 Gerhard Ebeling reminded his contemporaries of the unsolved problems with which the theology of the nineteenth century dealt, which the dialectical theology ignored and which the theology of his time should deal with again (cf. Ebeling 1962, p. 9). Nowadays, in a time when the theology of the nineteenth century is being revived, theologians remind us not “to ignore rashly the question, if and how the critique of religion in dialectical theology ... did formulate justifiable warnings which have not received attention in the gunsmoke of the post-dialectical polemics of dissociation” (Laube 2015, p. 453). What are these warnings? Or, put differently, what is the theological significance of Barth for today?

In the center of Barth's theology stands the conviction that God can be known only if he reveals himself. No human path leads to God, no human effort, be it in recognition, be it in feelings, be it in culture, be it in ethics, can build a bridge from human beings to God. God does not stand at human disposal; human beings come “with empty hands” before God (Weinrich 2013, p. 21f.). Because of God's radical otherness, it is only God who can bridge the divide. As a consequence, it is essential for Christian faith and for Christian theology that it does not lose this *extra nos* aspect of God. For Barth, to acknowledge this point goes hand in hand with acknowledging two things: the correspondence between Christian faith and its object and the sinfulness of human beings.

The correspondence between Christian faith and its object means, for Barth, that faith is something incomparable. “Faith is a human activity which cannot be compared with any other in spontaneity and native freedom. But it is in a relationship. It is in relationship to its object, to something which confronts the believer, which is distinct from him, which cannot be exhausted in his faith, which cannot be absorbed by his believing existence, let alone only consist in it and proceed from it and stand or fall with it. The very opposite is true, that faith stands or falls with its object” (CD IV/1, pp. 741–742). Only a God who is absolutely *extra nos* can redeem us from our sinful self-absorption, from being as Luther said human beings turned in upon ourselves (*homo incurvatus in se*). If God were something that we could already find in ourselves – as coinherent for example in our religious self-consciousness – then we would never get beyond ourselves even in faith. On this point Barth agreed with Feuerbach.

Subsequent to Immanuel Kant's critique of theoretical reason, Barth stressed the fundamental difference between the recognition of God and any other human recognition. Our recognition of God was grounded in God's recognition of himself. The truth of God's self-revelation in Christ presupposed the truth of God's own self-knowledge. By the same token, God's self-knowledge was the ground of his self-revelation in Christ. “Only by proceeding downwards from the triune existence of God can we understand how God stands before us, how in his revelation he gives himself to be known and is known by us. The revelation of God, in which our human fulfilment of true knowledge of God takes place, is the disposition of God in which he acts towards us as the same triune God that he is in himself, and in such a way that, although we are human beings and not God, we receive a share in the truth of his knowledge of himself” (CD II/1, p. 51 rev.). Barth did not try to eliminate the circle that ran from God to us and then back

again from us to God. He did not claim to present the primary initiative of God in an unbroken way apart from faith. Instead he tried to honor it (cf. Weinrich 2013, pp. 22–23).

Whereas theologians in the wake of Friedrich Schleiermacher interpreted all human beings as somehow religious, no matter how they understood themselves, Barth was able to accept atheism as a human reality without attempting to explain it away (cf. Tietz 2017, pp. 232–33). “We have a secularism,” he wrote, “which approximates to a pure and absolute form, and which therefore stands furthest from the sphere of the Bible and the church, when a person or several persons stand unwittingly in full isolation from the Gospel in its biblical and churchly form, in which it has never or only very inadequately reached them, and when they are in a frame of mind in which it is to be humanly expected that when it does reach them their reaction to it will be hostile” (CD IV/3, p. 118 rev.). Barth did not try to identify some secret religiosity in even such human beings but affirmed quite soberly: “Human beings deny God ..., human beings are hostile to the Gospel of God” (KD IV/3, p. 133 [my translation]; CD IV/3, p. 119). Despite seeming to promote an “authoritarian” theology in the eyes of some, Barth was able to acknowledge how nonreligious, atheistic people understand themselves. He did not try to co-opt them for religion.

Barth’s conviction that it was nevertheless important to talk with nonreligious people about the Christian God had its peculiarity in this, that it did not begin with analyzing and critiquing the godlessness of nonreligious people but with talking about the Gospel and about the reconciliation of the world through Christ which is true for every human being. As Ingolf U. Dalferth explained: “Nobody has to be religious, and not everybody is religious. But all human beings – and *this* is the decisive theological point – have to do with God. For this, one does not have to prove that every human being is religious, even if he or she claims not to be, but to show vice versa, that *God is* such, that God is present to all human beings, no matter how they understand themselves” (Dalferth 2001, p. 11). “There may very well be a godlessness of human beings,” wrote Barth, “but according to the Word of reconciliation, there is no such thing as a God without human beings, no such thing as a human-less God” [*keine Menschenlosigkeit Gottes*] (KD IV/3, p. 133; CD IV/3, p. 119 rev.).

One of the pressing issues of in contemporary theology is the search for an adequate hermeneutics of biblical scriptures. In his *Church Dogmatics*, Barth unfolded his scriptural hermeneutics through explaining how the sentence “the Bible is the Word of God” should be understood (cf. Tietz 2016, pp. 296–298.). The Bible is a human word, a human testimonial to God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, which means that by the miracle of grace it can become an “address” to persons “in the here and now” (Körtner 1999, p. 121). The church believes that this address can and does happen. It believes “that Holy Scripture has ... priority over all other writings and authorities, even those of the church” and “that Holy Scripture as the original and legitimate witness of divine revelation is itself the Word of God” (CD I/2, p. 502).

This is not a claim about a property ingredient in the Bible but about “a divine disposing, action and decision.” “When we make these statements we have to look back on something that has already taken place and forward to something that has yet to occur again” (CD I/2, p. 502 rev.). The divine inspiration of Scripture by the

Holy Spirit, through the historical transmission of traditions, is a unique, once-for-all event, complete in itself, that continues as a perpetual operation. It is an ongoing miracle in which the Spirit is present and operative to faith as the living Lord of God's self-revelation.

Barth's concept of the Bible as the Word of God is an actualistic concept. The sentence "The Bible is the Word of God" means that "it was" made to be so *definitively* once-for-all, and thus *on that basis* "it will be" made to be so *continually* again and again. The "is" represents a miraculous event, at God's (not human) disposal, stretched out between past and future. The church's memory and hope depend on the "is" of this ongoing occurrence. The church lives by the Spirit's living and continual operation through the biblical text. Its faith depends continually and completely on this operation of grace as it points to the mystery of Christ.

When God's Word in and through the text is understood in this actualistic way, as an event in the power of the Spirit – upholding the centrality, the sufficiency, and the supremacy of Christ – a new hermeneutics becomes possible. Biblical interpretation can be sensitive to historical criticism (and thus avoid any substantial "is" which is no longer possible with a critical awareness), while at the same time granting the Bible a normativity in our time for the church. Ecclesial interpretation is enabled to avoid the mistakes of fundamentalism while reformulating the Reformers' strong affirmation of biblical authority. Barth's understanding of Scripture gives modern Christians courage to read the Bible again (cf. Bergner 2015, p. 307). If Christian theology wants to be faithful to its Christian substance (*die Sache*), it has no choice but to return to the biblical texts again and again. It must grapple with their historical meaning, yet at the same time hope that this witness from the past will become alive for human beings today, because the God of whom the texts give witness is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Historicism reaches its categorial limit, because the subject matter of the Bible is in but not of history.

Barth's attempt to break open the dominance of historicism in modern theology can be seen especially in his understanding of Christ's resurrection as having only "a tiny 'historical' margin" (CD III/2, p. 446). That margin is disclosed in the story of the empty tomb and of the eyewitnesses. The resurrection is affirmed as having happened, in some strong sense, in time and space. Nevertheless, Barth stressed that although it took place in history, it had neither an ordinary historical cause nor an ordinary historical effect. With this complex and mysterious event in view, he emphasized that although theology works with the means of critical historical investigation, it also speaks about a reality that is different from this world, a reality that renews our whole existence, a reality that holds promise for the future of all things. Christ's resurrection is thus the culmination of the basic theological fact that God's reality comes to us only from God. It reveals the God of the promised future who encounters us even now, in the Son and through the Spirit, as the God who makes all things new.²

2 This chapter draws from my book *Karl Barth. Ein Leben im Widerspruch* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2018). For the second on Barth's ongoing significance, see Weinrich 2013, p. 17ff. All translations of German texts are my own.

References

- Barth, K. (1939). *Church and State* (German: Rechtfertigung und Recht, trans. G. Ronald Howe). London: Student Christian Movement Press.
- Barth, K. (1940). *Der Dienst der Kirche an der Heimat*. Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag.
- Barth, K. (1945). Des Christen Wehr und Waffen. In: *Eine Schweizer Stimme 1938–1945*, 123–146. Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag.
- Barth, K. (1960). The Christian community and the civil community. In: *Community, State, and Church: Three Essays*, 149–189. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Barth, K. (1971). Autobiographische Skizze aus dem Fakultätsalbum der Evangelisch-Theologischen Fakultät in Münster. In: *Karl Barth — Rudolf Bultmann, Briefwechsel 1922–1966* (ed. B. Jaspert), 301–310. Zürich: Theologischer Verlag.
- Barth, K. (2010). *Der Römerbrief* (Zweite Fassung) 1922 (eds. C. van der Kooi and K. Tolstaja). Zürich: Theologischer Verlag.
- Bergner, G. (2015). *Um der Sache willen*. Karl Barths Schriftauslegung in der Kirchlichen Dogmatik. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Dalferth, I.U. (2001). Theologie im Kontext der Religionswissenschaft. Selbstverständnis, Methoden und Aufgaben der Theologie und ihr Verhältnis zur Religionswissenschaft. *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 126: 3–20.
- Duke, J.O. and Streetman, R.F. (eds.) (1988). *Barth and Schleiermacher: Beyond the Impasse?* Philadelphia: Fortress.
- Ebeling, G. (1962). Die Bedeutung der historisch-kritischen Methode für die protestantische Theologie und Kirche. In: *Wort und Glaube*, 2e, vol. 1. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Gadamer, H.-G. (1972). *Wahrheit und Methode*. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik, 3e. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Gestrich, C. (1977). *Neuzeitliches Denken und die Spaltung der dialektischen Theologie*. Zur Frage der natürlichen Theologie. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Gogarten, F. (1937). *Der Zerfall des Humanismus und die Gottesfrage*. Vom rechten Ansatz des theologischen Denkens. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.
- Holtmann, S. (2007). *Karl Barth als Theologe der Neuzeit*. Studien zur kritischen Deutung seiner Theologie. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Korsch, D. (1989). Wort Gottes oder Frömmigkeit. Über den Sinn einer theologischen Alternative zwischen Karl Barth und Friedrich Schleiermacher. *Zeitschrift für dialektische Theologie* 5: 195–216.
- Körtner, U.H.J. (1999). Schriftwerdung des Wortes und Wortwerdung der Schrift. Die Schriftlehre Karl Barths im Kontext der Krise des protestantischen Schriftprinzips. *Zeitschrift für dialektische Theologie* 15: 107–130.
- Laube, M. (2015). Die Unterscheidung von Theologie und Religion. Überlegungen zu einer umstrittenen Grundfigur in der protestantischen Theologie des 20. Jahrhunderts. *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 112: 449–467.
- Lauster, J. (2008). *Zwischen Entzauberung und Remythisierung*. Zum Verhältnis von Bibel und Dogma. Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt.
- Leiner, M. and Gockel, M. (2015). *Karl Barth und Friedrich Schleiermacher*. Zur Neubestimmung ihres Verhältnisses. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Pfleiderer, G. (2005). "Inkulturationsdialektik". Ein Rekonstruktionsvorschlag zur Modernität theoretischen Barth interpretation. In: *Karl Barth in Deutschland (1921–1935)*. Aufbruch — Klärung — Widerstand. Beiträge zum Internationalen Symposium vom 1. bis 4. Mai 2003 in der Johannes a Lasco Bibliothek Emden (eds. M. Beintker, C. Link and M. Trowitsch), 223–244. Zürich: Theologischer Verlag.
- Prolingheuer, H. (1977). *Der Fall Karl Barth: 1934–1935*. Chronographie einer

- Vertreibung. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener.
- Rendtorff, T. (1975). Einleitung. In: *Die Realisierung der Freiheit*. Beiträge zur Kritik der Theologie Karl Barths, 7–9. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus.
- Tietz, C. (2016). Das Ringen um das Schriftprinzip in der modernen evangelischen Theologie. In: *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie*, vol. 31: Der Streit um die Schrift, 283–302. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Tietz, C. (2017). Problematisch, fraglich, zudringlich, unverzichtbar — Überlegungen zum Reden von Gott heute. *Kerygma und Dogma* 63: 226–236.
- Tietz, C. (2018). *Karl Barth. Ein Leben im Widerspruch*. Munich: C.H. Beck.
- Tillich, P. (1951). *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Troeltsch, E. (1913). Ueber historische und dogmatische Methode in der Theologie. In: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, 729–753. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Wagner, F. (1975). Theologische Gleichschaltung. Zur Christologie bei Karl Barth. In: *Die Realisierung der Freiheit* (ed. Rendtorff), 10–43.
- Wagner, F. (1995). *Zur gegenwärtige Lage des Protestantismus*. Gütersloh: Kaiser.
- Weinrich, M. (2013). *Die bescheidene Kompromisslosigkeit der Theologie Karl Barths*. Bleibende Impulse zur Erneuerung der Theologie. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.