

KARL BARTH

CHURCH DOGMATICS

A SELECTION WITH INTRODUCTION

**CHINA SOCIAL SCIENCES PUBLISHING HOUSE
CHENGCHENG BOOKS LTD.**

图书在版编目(CIP)数据

教会教义学:英文/(瑞士)巴特著. - 影印本.

- 北京:中国社会科学出版社,1999.12

(西学基本经典·宗教学类/西学基本经典工作委员会 编)

ISBN 7-5004-2645-3

I. 教… II. 巴… III. 新正统神学-英文 IV. B921

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字(1999)第 68469 号

版权总代理:TAO MEDIA INTERNATIONAL

(2790 19th Avenue, Ste. 20, San Francisco, CA 94132 U. S. A)

西学基本经典·宗教学类

西学基本经典工作委员会 编

中国社会科学出版社 出版发行

(北京鼓楼西大街甲 158 号 邮编 100720)

E-mail: 5004@Peoplespace.net

诚成图书有限公司 制作

中国建筑工业出版社密云印刷厂印刷

新华书店经销

1999 年 12 月第 1 版 1999 年 12 月第 1 次印刷

开本 880×1230 1/32 印张 178.5

宗教学类全 11 册 定价:550.00 元

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梁小民

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

Although Karl Barth has an established name in the theological world, and even in wider spheres, the content and significance of his main work, the *Church Dogmatics*, are not so widely known or appreciated as they deserve. The vast nature of the work, and the extended process of composition, are partly responsible. In addition, the isolation of the war years, and the inevitable lag in translation, have proved contributory factors in English-speaking areas.

In the circumstances, it is natural that there should have been various attempts to introduce readers rather more gently to the *Dogmatics*. This is the purpose of Professor Gollwitzer in the present work, in which he has in view both a wider public, yet also students and pastors who feel the need of initial guidance. His method is not merely to select for purposes of information, but also to group under leading themes to serve the purposes of interpretation. He has also contributed a fine introductory essay which admirably helps to an understanding of the mature Barth of the *Dogmatics*.

It should be emphasised that, while the work may lead more general readers to a fruitful acquaintance with Barth, it cannot replace the *Dogmatics* for serious students. If the main themes and extracts are judiciously selected, they are necessarily inadequate to convey the full sweep or content of the work. Many important themes have to be excluded, and the extracts themselves are naturally torn from their more immediate setting. This does not mean that the total effect is misleading. No more competent or sympathetic guide could be desired than Professor Gollwitzer. It means that the work primarily serves its intended purpose of introduction and orientation, as also, it is to be hoped, of stimulation.

The Introduction has been independently translated,

together with the brief theses at the head of the various sections. The extracts from the *Dogmatics*, which have been numbered and indexed for the sake of easier reference, follow the authorised English translation of the relevant volumes (C.D., I, 1—IV, 2), all of which are now available. In an Appendix three passages have been added from IV, 3, which was not yet available, even in German, when the original choice was made.

PASADENA, *Michaelmas*, 1960.

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INTRODUCTION

"The theology of Karl Barth is beautiful. Not merely in the external sense that he writes well. He writes well because he unites two things, namely, passion and objectivity. And his passion is for the object of theology, and his objectivity that which is proper to so stimulating an object. Objectivity means immersion in the theme. And the theme of Barth is God as He has revealed Himself to the world in Jesus Christ according to the witness of Scripture. It is because Barth turns his glance wholly away from the state of faith and directs it to the content of faith . . . that he writes well, and we do not have to fear from him pastoral edification; the matter builds up itself. But it is so captivating and challenging that true objectivity necessarily coincides with a penetrating but in no sense meretricious intensity. This union of passion and objectivity is the basis of the beauty of Barth's theology. Who in the last decades can be compared with him in the exposition of Scripture, not exegetically, nor in a biblicist sense, nor tendentiously, nor with pastoral rhetoric, but with such concentration on the Word that this alone shines out in its fulness and radiance? And who has possessed such unwearying perseverance and vision, and possessed it because the matter itself unfolds and displays itself in all its greatness before him? We have to go right back to Thomas to find a similar freedom from all tension or narrowness, or so complete a mastery of understanding and good temper, a good temper which in Barth often takes the form of humour, but more especially that of a pronounced taste for *tempo giusto*, of a lively rhythm. Barth can make it quite convincing that for him Christianity is something absolutely triumphant. He does not write thus because he has the gift of style but because he bears testimony, wholly objective testimony, to something which has to do with God and which therefore commands the very best style or writing. For Kierkegaard Christianity is otherworldly, ascetic and polemical. For Barth it is the awe-inspiring revelation of God, of the

eternal light shining over all nature and fulfilling every promise, God's eternal Yea and Amen to Himself and His creation." 1

These words, which do honour not only to the one whom they extol but to a writer who did not allow confessional barriers to hinder him from such grateful acknowledgment, apply to a theological work of unusual force which for the last thirty years has deeply influenced the inner development, of the Evangelical church in the German-speaking world, and which the many translations and reactions show to have aroused no less attention, agreement and disagreement in the Christian churches of other lands.

Since the time of the Reformation no Evangelical theologian has received so much notice from Roman Catholic theology as Barth; his work has created a new situation for the Evangelical-Roman Catholic debate. The development of the Ecumenical Movement would have been just as inconceivable without his contribution as would the Christian resistance to German National Socialism, or the richly varied wrestling of Christians and churches with Communism in the Eastern European states. It takes effect in the decisions of the young missionary churches of Asia and Africa in face of nationalistic and syncretistic movements no less than in the countless weekly sermons at which both preachers and listeners are hardly conscious how different the preaching would be if it had not been preceded by this dogmatic work. Both as literature and scholarship it is a product of the desk, yet it has not been restricted to the literary or academic level, but has exerted an influence on the active life of the 20th-century Christian churches and the practical conduct of innumerable individual Christians. If it has not had such strong emotional accompaniments as the so-called awakenings of the 18th and 19th centuries, its ultimate effectiveness will probably be no less powerful.

What are the prospects of Christianity to-day? What has it to say to-day and to-morrow in face and in the midst of the cataclysmic changes in which humanity is engulfed? How can there be renewal in our ossified or quickly ossifying Church organisations? How is Christianity to hold its own in competition with and under the assault of newly arisen political religions and reinvigorated

older religions? How is it to fulfil its mission in the technical world of the future? What is this mission? What is Christianity, the Gospel, Christian faith? In Barth's writing there is no practicable prescription for answering these questions. He is not indeed the only one to face them and to say important things regarding them. But those who tackle them—and which of our contemporaries, Christian or non-Christian, can fail to do so?—are well advised not to overlook Barth's contribution. Hence it is not surprising that from the very outset his way is surrounded and accompanied by the attention not only of theologians but of many who are not theologians or even Christians. Many of them as academic colleagues have immediately perceived the vital significance of this work for the situation of the physician at the sick-bed, the merchant in economic life, the judge and the politician. The particularity of the Christian message, its claim and promise, its difference from all that man can tell himself about life and death, this world and the next, along the ordinary paths of religion and philosophy, have seldom been expressed with such resoluteness, with such power of sustained thinking, or with such confidence in the centre of this message.

Theology is the exposition or expository presentation of the Christian message. This statement has many implications. Barth never wearies of working it out for himself and others. Its first implication is the humility of theology. Theology does not create or fashion its subject. Its subject is presented to it. It is there before it and apart from it. It must take it as it is, as it offers itself. It can only think after it, following its movements—for it is a living theme or subject and not a dead object. It can only obediently and pliantly adapt itself to its particularity, resolutely refusing to attempt to bring it into conformity with the categories, thought-forms, concepts and needs which all human thought always brings with it. This special, unique subject must rule, and everything else must serve and be glad to be able to do so. This is the basis of what seems at first sight to be the provocatively sharp rejection by Barth of what is called "natural theology," i.e., the acknowledgment of a general framework of thought, derived perhaps from a general concept of

science, an established anthropology, a presupposed philosophical system or some other given knowledge of God, reality and man, into the co-ordinated system of which the Christian revelation has to be fitted. Yet it was by this rejection at the end of the twenties, when he stood almost alone and broke with a two-thousand-year-tradition in Christian theology, that Barth established a bulwark against the specific adaptation of the Christian faith to the norms of a supposed Germanic race consciousness (cf. his own exposition of the so-called *Barmen Declaration* as given on pp. 54-65). Revelation is not one species in a genus. It is the *concretissimum* which cannot be fitted into anything else and must be the starting-point of thought. We are well on the way to understanding Barth when we learn with him to reverse the usual movement of thought from the general to the particular and to move instead from the particular—this particular—to the general.

To the humility of theology there also belongs the knowledge that it never controls its subject. The subject of theology for Barth is not just God but God in His revelation, and His revelation is present only in the message which the Church brings to men. This ongoing message is the real theme which theology presupposes as the basis of its own existence and on which it reflects. It is never able to do this fully. It never achieves more than provisional results. It never produces a system of pure doctrine in which the nature of Christianity is conclusively fixed for all time. Theology is a historical work. With the message itself, which always turns anew to new men and ages, it is always on the way, *theologia viatorum*, a pilgrim theology. In Barth's own thinking this is shown in his readiness continually to strike his tents before settling down too comfortably. From the first edition of his *Epistle to the Romans* in 1917 to the latest volume of the *Church Dogmatics* he has been engaged in ceaseless revision with constant surprises no less for himself than for contemporaries working with him, and we have not yet seen the last of these surprises—for he is still young in his seventies. His thinking is of great systematic force and sustained power of concentrated thought. His doctrine of reconciliation in particular is a marvel of architectonic beauty. Yet he is

not the creator of a system deducing from a single principle and therefore knowing everything in advance. It is because his thinking is a humble following that it is so alive, so vital.

If theology is exposition, this means concretely that it is bound to a text, to the text which the Church has recognised and acknowledged as the Canon, i.e., the standard, the normative, basic and exemplary form for the continuing delivery of its message, in other words to the Bible. Apart from Augustine, Luther and Calvin there has hardly been a great Christian thinker who has more clearly displayed the exegetical character of all theology, nor a dogmatic presentation of the Christian faith which has been worked out so clearly in terms of express exegesis of the whole content of the Bible. The small print exegetical passages in the *Church Dogmatics* are usually prepared by Barth before the composition of his own thematic expositions, though they are placed after them in the text. From this we infer that, if the temporal priority of exegesis shows the heteronomy, the dependence of theological thinking, its spatial priority in print shows its autonomy, freedom and individual responsibility, not as slavish repetition, but as the free expression, after humble listening, of its own understanding—the “freedom of those who are bound,” according to the pregnant title selected by his friends, and forbidden by the German censor, for the volume prepared in 1936 in honour of his 50th birthday.²

Because theology is not free speculation but thinking which is referred to a specific place and set under concrete authority, the reader even of this selection must bear in mind that the theme rather than the author is responsible for many of the highly individual trains of thought which he finds. Barth's concern is not just with his own theology as a private view of things, or the programme of a theological school competing with other trends. His concern is always with the content of the Christian message. For Barth every sentence is as it were a proposal for the understanding of this message and it is accompanied by the question whether the message does not impose this understanding. Hence even when we come across very strange lines of thought it is as well not to reject them forthwith

but first to ask whether they have any basis in the message itself.

Barth never strives after originality for its own sake. In many of his theses he has contradicted hoary Christian traditions, but he has never done so lightly, nor in proud and arbitrary opposition to the fathers. In no Evangelical dogmatics since the great works of the older Protestant orthodoxy is there such a mass of historico-theological material, not merely in the form of exposition but of discussion. In none is there more intensive wrestling not merely with the theology of the Reformation but with the fathers and the great thinkers of mediaeval Scholasticism. For this theology, listening to the Bible means also attentive listening to other men. Even in the case of the great opponent Schleiermacher there is a constant concern to know what positive lessons he may have to teach. The sharp blade which Barth uses in polemics is always in fact a very humane instrument, and leaves the final judgment to the One who alone is Judge. As he himself says (IV, 2, p. 570), the word conflict or "falling-out" "has to be used very cautiously and selectively in theology. We cannot wish to fall out with God, with Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit. We can only be glad and thankful that God is on our side. It is also better not to fall out with Holy Scripture or the Church as the communion of saints. And it is better that there should be no falling out in our relationship with our neighbours. But there is every cause . . . to fall out with oneself." This is practised by Barth even in relation to the period which he first opposed so vehemently, namely, the theology of the 19th century, to which he has devoted one of his finest books.³ For him tradition is neither a burdensome yoke nor a divine dictate. It is the voice of the fathers and brethren to be heard both with gratitude and freedom. It does not prevent his venturing into the new and unknown. Yet he always finds satisfaction when he can say that for all the "critical freedom which I have had to exercise . . . I have always found myself content with the broad lines of Christian tradition" (IV, 2, p. xi).

This peace with tradition, so different from the hybris of the revolutionary, is the Catholic element in the *Church Dogmatics* as the critical freedom is the Protestant.

Ecumenical breadth is one of the most important characteristics of this work. In passages where the motifs of Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Pietist theology are explicitly or implicitly taken up and heard, the expert is continually forced to ask himself whether what they try to say is not better brought out here and better and more biblically expressed. There can be no mistaking Barth's Reformed origin. He never conceals his particular gratitude to the much slandered and misunderstood Calvin. But it would be foolish for this reason to describe him as a Reformed or Calvinistic theologian in the narrower sense. Confessional definiteness does not mean confessional constriction. The division of the Church into confessions is abruptly described by him as a scandal for which there is no justification (IV, 1, p. 675). Theology as a serious matter must always be prepared firmly and uncompromisingly to say Yes and No. It must always be prepared to take its place in the conflict of confessions. But it must also recognise that confessional traditions "exist in order that we may go through them (not once but continually), but not in order that we may return to them and take up our abode in them" (III, 4, Preface). Thus Barth as an acknowledged heir of the Reformation has contributed essentially to the rediscovery of the theology of Luther and Calvin which is such a feature of the modern epoch of Protestant theology, and yet, although often chidden for his orthodoxy, he has powerfully opposed every orthodox repristination. Hence it is not surprising that in debate with Roman Catholics his theology is regarded on the one side as the most consistent realisation of the intention of the Reformation (E. Przywara) and on the other as the opening up of "a new possibility of fruitful interconfessional conversation" (R. Grosche), or indeed as both "the strongest development of Protestantism and the closest approximation to Catholicism" (H. U. von Balthasar, J. Küng). Yet it is unmistakeably Protestant in its consciousness of the responsibility of the individual, whom no tradition nor ecclesiastical court can relieve of the duty of publicly stating what he has heard and perceived, and who therefore, in the bold words of the Preface to the first volume, must "in all modesty venture to be such a Church in his own situation and to the best of his ability."

[Theology is impossible without humility because the truth at issue is a person who says: "I am the Truth" (Jn. 14⁶). We cannot possess a person, or rather this person. If He gives Himself, He does not give Himself away. Because its subject is so intractable, theology is an enterprise which cannot guarantee its own success. Hence there are many passages in the *Church Dogmatics* in which the author reminds himself and his readers of the essential reserve laid upon this thinking. It cannot take place without prayer for the fulfilment of the promise by which it is initiated—a fulfilment which it cannot produce nor demand, but for which it can only pray as for free grace. If theology is not pointless chatter, if it is "different from Rabbinic learning or Greek speculation . . . then it is so at every point on the basis of election, and not otherwise" (I, 2, p. 349; cf. II, 1, p. 70 ff.). The appeal must be to no less than the supreme court, and confidence in the supreme help and assistance, if theology is to be a meaningful undertaking. This was the real meaning of the earlier designation "dialectical theology" by which Barth and his friends first came to be spoken of after the first world war. Barth himself has later said rather brusquely that the label was attached to them by spectators, and he himself has become increasingly reluctant to use the ambiguous term "dialectical." He certainly used it freely enough in his earlier period. But he never had in view a Hegelian dialectic, i.e., a method of successfully viewing things together, and therefore a triumph of thought over the contradictions of reality. What he meant was rather a confession of the brokenness of our thinking, to which only contradictory parts are given and which cannot hope to achieve the synthesis reserved for God alone. In his development reflection on this brokenness belongs to his earlier period, whereas later he has given greater emphasis to the promise given to human thinking as it may enter the service of the message. This has meant a yielding of the influence of the paradoxical thinking of Kierkegaard before the attempt to understand the unity of the divine action in the incomprehensibilities of the divine decisions.

For theology should seek in all humility to understand. If it is exposition, this implies that it has a subject. Hence

there can be no question of a "blind and formless and inarticulate and irrational stirring" to which there corresponds on our side only a "blind and formless incitement or even pacification." Revelation is rather an event by which man becomes "one who sees and understands and knows," and can give "a logical answer corresponding to the logical attitude of God" (IV, 2, p. 313). Christian faith is as remote from irrationalistic mysticism as it is from a rationalism which posits the axioms of human reason as a measure of the possibility and actuality of God. It is essentially *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith seeking after understanding.⁴ Revelation neither lulls the understanding nor eliminates it. It mobilises it, both humbling and yet also encouraging it. In the volumes of the doctrine of reconciliation especially Barth applies all the energy of his thinking to banish any suggestion of caprice or whimsicality from the understanding of divine grace. Rejecting modern irrationalism, against which we are warned by its dreadful fruits in the Third Reich, he honours man as a rational being (III, 2, pp. 419 ff.), and he particularly values revelation as that which is not in any sense a-logical but genuinely rational. In God there is no conflict between mystery and rationality. For this reason theology does not violate but recognises the mystery of God in its attempt to trace the wisdom of God in His acts.

Barth once wrote in 1922 that he had got over the childish ailment of being ashamed of theology,⁵ and already in the Preface to the second edition of his *Epistle to the Romans* he points out that what awaits the reader is full-blooded theology. "If in spite of this warning non-theologians take up the book—and I know some who will understand its contents better than many theologians—I shall be very pleased; for I firmly believe that its subject concerns everyone because its question is the question of everyone. Yet even with this audience in view I could not make it any easier. If I am not mistaken . . . we theologians best serve the interests of the laity if we do not expressly or purposefully address ourselves to them but keep to our calling like all honest workmen." His aim is not to be a prophet or renovator or reformer or revolutionary, but simply an honest workman, one who is charged by the Church to expound the Christian message in the

service of this message and with a view to its better transmission. Convinced of the incomparable importance of this message for every man and age, and not least for our own age and its problems, he is sure that a life is not wasted if all its time and energy are devoted to the service of theology, and that this service is not incidental, and should not be rendered in a dilettante, rhetorical or sentimental manner, but must be undertaken only as sober work, with pitiless self-criticism, in the full strictness of the concept, without fearing the reproach of intellectualism, with the most highly intellectual eloquence and objective self-absorption. "Politics is the most manly of occupations next to theology," he could once write in relation to some political memoirs, thus showing how highly he esteemed his own task.

The theological work of Barth, therefore, is for a Christianity supremely threatened by arbitrariness and *allotria* an unmistakeable summons back to its true theme and task. Even the non-theological and especially the non-Christian reader, or the reader who does not regard himself as a Christian, finds himself invited to participate in objective thinking, though he must admit that no particular concession is made to him. If he reads impartially and with sufficient seriousness, he will hopefully note how often his own questions are treated. But they are not treated with express reference to him, nor with any anxious concern for particularly original or modern language. Barth has never dealt specifically with the demand so often put to the Church that it should more fully speak the language of the age, nor with the question so often discussed in Church circles how the Gospel should be preached to the modern man. But he has always thought that the question of content should take precedence of that of manner, that the correct recognition of what the Church has to say will also produce the right way of saying it, that if only it is correctly perceived the matter will speak for itself and create for itself an appropriate language. The fact that Barth rejects the attempt of "natural theology" frees him from any fear that there might be an age when it could be proclaimed either with triumph or sorrow that God is dead—an age, therefore, which might discard all earlier religious traditions and