

Zeitschrift: Theologische Zeitschrift
Herausgeber: Theologische Fakultät der Universität Basel
Band: 71 (2015)
Heft: 2

Artikel: Karl Barth's Contribution to Constructive Theology Today
Autor: McCormack, Bruce L.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-877698>

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Karl Barth's Contribution to Constructive Theology Today¹

«The Word of God is above dogma as the
heavens are above the earth»²

Introduction

The title of my contribution might seem to critics of Barth's theology especially – but also to a fair number of his advocates – to hold little promise. Karl Barth was the author of a multi-volume dogmatics of and for the Christian Churches. Surely dogmatic theology in service of the Church has precious little to do with truly constructive thinking – which by most definitions must be «free» of externally imposed authorities to be what it is. How can a theology which is «normed» by ecclesial decisions be truly constructive? The answer Barth himself gave is that the dogmatic theologian has a dialectical relation to ecclesial norms; a relation characterized by respect, yes, but also by a critical engagement that will inevitably be constructive in nature. Thus, for Barth, ecclesial norms have a dual status in dogmatics. They are relatively-binding guides with whose help the theologian seeks to «hear» the Word of God attested in Holy Scripture; and they are the «raw material» needing to be tested in light of such «hearing» with regard to their meaningfulness and truth. Dogmatic theology on this showing is a never-ending, thoroughly human activity; one which is carried out in service to the churches in the present moment of their existence, yes, but one which requires imagination and (I would say) a critical understanding of the «situation.»

Most of those who know Barth's theology well will already know this. And yet it is surprising just how many even amongst those who lift Barth up as a model to be emulated do not adopt this dialectic relation in their own work and refuse to see it as basic to Barth's theology. In a book which I published twenty years ago this year, I made the observation that «neo-orthodoxy» is a quintessentially American movement in theology, one which emerged in the aftermath

1 A lecture given on the occasion of the Opening of the Karl Barth Institute for Reformed Theology, May 22 2015.

2 K. Barth: Church Dogmatics I/1 [CD], Edinburgh 1936ff., p.266; Kirchliche Dogmatik I/1 [KD], Zürich 1932ff., p.282.

of stormy and divisive debates over the nature and authority of Scripture and which attained dominance in a fair number of theological schools in the 1950s and early 1960s.³ For many, «neo-orthodoxy» gave promise of a «high view» of the Bible without equating the Bible directly with the Word of God. In support of this effort, regular appeal was made to the name of Karl Barth. But the «Barth» that was adduced in support of this theological program was a «Barth» who had been subjected to a process of cultural translation and adaptation in order to make him assimilable to American theological sensibilities; a «Barth» whose alleged «turn from dialectic to analogy» had caused him to leave behind the radical criticism of Christian theology registered in his *Romans* in order to become instead a faithful interpreter of the Church's dogmas. A wholly domesticated «Barth», in other words.⁴

The theological situation has changed dramatically since the late 1960s. Consistent with the changes that have taken place (above all, the decline in membership in the Protestant churches), «neo-orthodoxy» no longer presents itself as the champion of a «mild repristination» of older Protestant thought forms but as an aggressive defender of ancient orthodoxy itself, as a version of «evangelical Catholicism.»⁵ And once again, it is the name of Karl Barth to which appeal is being made to justify this new enterprise.⁶ Links are now

3 B.L. McCormack: *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, Oxford 1995, p.24.

4 The identification of Barth as «neo-orthodox» was paradigmatic for theological education in America during my student years. See W.E. Hordern: *A Layman's Guide to Protestant Theology*, revised and expanded edition, New York 1968, p.111-169. This work was in its seventh printing by 1973 when I purchased it.

5 I have described elsewhere the early stages of American «neo-orthodoxy» re-inventing itself in a changed situation by means of a critical engagement with George Lindbeck's theory of the nature of doctrine in B.L. McCormack: *Beyond Nonfoundational and Post-modern Readings of Barth: Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, in: idem: *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, Grand Rapids 2008, p.134-37.

6 Though the following have not employed the term «neo-orthodoxy» to describe themselves or their work, it seems to me that it is a wholly apt term to describe the content, style and aims of their work. See G. Hunsinger: *Reading Barth with Charity: A Hermeneutical Proposal*, Grand Rapids 2015; idem: *Evangelical, Catholic, and Reformed: Doctrinal Essays on Barth and Related Themes*, Grand Rapids 2015; D.S. Long: *Saving Karl Barth: Hans Urs von Balthasar's Preoccupation*, Minneapolis 2014; P.D. Molnar: *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Trinity: In dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology*, Edinburgh/New York 2002; idem: *Faith, Freedom, and the Spirit: the Economic Trinity in Barth, Torrance and Contemporary Theology*, Downers Grove, IL 2015.

sought between Barth and the early Church Fathers in an effort to promote an assimilationist approach to the ecumenical problem which fails to respect significant theological differences.

But here I will not dwell on such challenges directly but will turn to a more positive presentation of my theme. To do so will also help to see why the establishment of a center for study and the promotion of Reformed theology «*in the spirit of Karl Barth*» is what is needed in the present moment – and a very good reason indeed for celebration.

I. Dogmatic Theology is Constructive

The dogmatic task, as described by Karl Barth, consists in a «critical question about dogma» – i.e. a critical question about the agreement of «Church proclamation» with «the Word of God attested in Holy Scripture.»⁷ Now that might sound utterly uninteresting to some; a wholly positive and relatively simple exercise consisting in the comparison of one set of propositions with another. But that would be to misunderstand what Barth has in mind. The Word of God which is the criterion of dogmatics, the standard by which dogmatics does its testing, is not a set of propositions given over into human hands. Indeed, it is not a «given» at all. That is why Barth can speak of the Word of God as an «absent criterion»⁸ – not just in the sense of one which had been lost to view or forgotten in his time but one whose presence is itself dialectical in nature; a presence in absence, a givenness in non-givenness, an unveiling only in and through a creaturely veil with which the Word of God is never directly identical. What lies in back of this dialectical description is what I would call a «dis-possessive» account of the divine Self-revelation. God, according to Barth, reveals Himself in concealment. He is never directly given to human control or management. The criterion of Christian dogmatics is a living Person, not a set of propositions; a Person who must step forth from concealment if the dogmatic task is to be successful but whose stepping forth is incalculable, uncontrollable.

The dogmatic task so described is, humanly speaking, an impossibility. The criterion by means of which the theologian's work is ultimately to be judged is unavailable to her, though she remains at every moment available to it. She can-

7 Barth: CD I/1, p.248 (Leitsatz to §7); KD I/1, p.261.

8 Ibid., p.251; *ibid.*, p.264.

not simply bring it into play at her discretion; she cannot «use» it as she would use ordinary criteria for forming judgments. *What she can do* is to ask about the relation of «church proclamation» to the witness of Scripture, to the Bible as the concrete (secondary) form of the Word. But the theologian's judgment in this matter is itself a witness to that judgment which is God's alone to bring; a judgment which falls upon her act of judgment – and even, upon all ecclesiastically approved judgments.

It is precisely because the agreement between the Word of God and church proclamation can never be complete in this world, that the questioning activity of the dogmatic theologian is never ending, provisional, fragmentary.

Thus the real results of dogmatics, even though they have the form of the most positive statements, can themselves only be new questions, questions to and fro between what the Church seems to proclaim and the Bible seems to want proclaimed, questions which can only be put with the greatest modesty and a sense of supreme vulnerability if they are perhaps serious and significant questions. If questioning ceased, if dogma itself came on the scene instead of dogmas and dogmatic propositions, if the agreement of specific Church proclamation with the Word of God ... could be demonstrated, then dogmatics would be at an end along with the *ecclesia militans*, and the Kingdom of God would have dawned.⁹

For Barth, «dogma», as a full and complete agreement between the Word of God and church teaching is an «eschatological concept.»¹⁰ What the church has at its disposal here and now is not *the* dogma but at most its own humanly-constructed (relatively binding) dogmas. In relation to the latter, Barth remarks «... dogmas are not *veritates a Deo formaliter revelatae*. In dogmas, it is the Church of the past that speaks. This is venerable. It deserves respect. It is normative. It speaks *non sine Deo*, as is fitting. Yet it is still the Church. In dogmas, the Church defines, i.e. limits revealed truth, the Word of God. The Word of God becomes thereby the word of human beings. It is not an insignificant word. Indeed, it is a supremely significant word. Yet it is still the word of human beings. The Word of God is above dogma as the heavens are above the earth.»¹¹ Dogmas are not revealed truths! They are, precisely in their humanness, *inherently reformable*. And that is why dogmatics exists. Not to repeat *or even only to unpack*

9 Ibid., p.269; *ibid.*, p.284.

10 CD I/1, p.269, cf. CD I/2, p.865; KD I/1, p.284, cf. KD I/2, p.967.

11 CD I/1, p.266; KD I/1, p.281-282.

allegedly hidden meanings held in reserve in Church dogmas but to engage them critically, to test the relation between the Word of God and ecclesiastical judgments as two things which stand over against each other.

Now talk of divine activity as playing a constitutive role in theological method may well seem whimsical in a cynical age like our own – and inappropriate for a scientific discipline taught in a University. But just look for a moment at what Barth is able to accomplish with it, how this basic conviction conditioned and relativized even Barth's own work, taken as a whole! I have often told my students that the whole of Barth's theology – encompassing thirteen part volumes and over 9,000 pages – stands within brackets outside of which there stands a question mark. And a question mark, mind you, which Barth himself placed there again and again in order to remind himself of the divine judgement which falls on all things human. A person who does dogmatics in this way can never be wed to a single method or a single set of doctrinal formulations. Barth's advice to always «begin again at the beginning» is anything but whimsical. It is a piece of wisdom which arises from that modesty and vulnerability of which he spoke in the passage I just cited. For the one who takes it seriously, dogmatics will itself become «constructive.» It will become a creative and imaginative exercise. And so it was with Barth's own dogmatic efforts.

In the early volumes of the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth conceived of the method appropriate to the living subject-matter of dogmatics in terms of a drawing of lines from the circumference of a circle which must itself remain empty until filled by the Word of God¹² – much as the space in the center of a wagon wheel must remain empty until filled by an axle.¹³ For this reason, he favored the *loci communes* approach to dogmatics employed by Melancthon and Calvin.¹⁴ Dogmatics, he said, can never rise to the level of a true «system» – which would require a presupposed view of things, a principle, from which the contents of dogmatics might be deduced.¹⁵ And so: «... it is quite evident that there can be no dogmatic system.»¹⁶

12 Barth, CD I/2, p.869; KD I/2, p.972.

13 Ibid., p.867; *ibid.*, p.969.

14 Ibid., p.870; *ibid.*, p.973.

15 Ibid., p.861; *ibid.*, p.963.

16 Ibid., p.868; *ibid.*, p.970.

It might well seem that Barth had violated his own protest against «system» building in these early volumes when later, in volume IV, he abandoned the *loci communes* approach and developed a structure unique to that volume; an architecture which was decisively «centered» in the narrated history of Jesus of Nazareth as attested in Holy Scripture. Whether he did, in fact, violate his own early strictures against «system» or not is to be decided finally *not* by the question of whether he now began to employ a «material principle» in dogmatics (I think myself that he did); it is to be decided rather by whether the «principle» in question is elaborated *in advance* of consideration of that narrated history rather than arising out of it and constituting a provisional, fragmentary description of it. I would say myself that even in the doctrine of reconciliation – on the basis of which Barth has been accused of «Christomonism»¹⁷ – he was doing nothing other than what he had advocated long before in his 1919 Tambach Lecture, viz. seeking to «paint the bird in flight.»¹⁸ That is to say: he was seeking to follow after the movement of God in Christ – and to bear witness to that movement rather than advance a «fixed idea.» Even Christology can never become a «principle» in the latter sense.

That being the case, we really should not be surprised that Barth, having thoroughly «actualized» the doctrine of the incarnation in *Church Dogmatics* IV/2,¹⁹ should describe his construction as a «departure» from classical treatments of the «hypostatic union» of two natures in Christ or that he should conclude with respect to it «We cannot expect to be praised for our «orthodoxy» from any quarter!»²⁰ The description of a divine movement (of the Word of God attesting itself in the form of a humanly attesting narrative) is itself an event in the «present» moment of the dogmatic theologian's existence. Such present activity precludes an all too somber preoccupation with the past. «... the slogan «back to orthodoxy» and even the slogan «back to the Reformers»

17 The roots of this charge are to be found in H.U. von Balthasar: *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation*, transl. by E.T. Oakes, San Francisco 1992, p.241-243; idem: *Karl Barth: Darstellung und Deutung seiner Theologie*, Einsiedeln 1978, p.253-255.

18 K. Barth: «The Christian in Society», in: idem: *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, Gloucester, MA 1978, p.283; *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie*, München 1924, p.40.

19 Barth, CD IV/2, p.105; KD IV/2, p.116.

20 Ibid., p.106; *ibid.*, p.117. [It should be noted that I have restored Barth's exclamation point to give this statement its proper emphasis; it had somehow been lost in the Bromiley translation.]

cannot promise us the help we need today. «Back to ...» is never a good slogan.»²¹

II. Constructive Theology in Relation to the Dogmatic Task

In 1984, George Lindbeck published a book which was much discussed during the years of my graduate studies and continues even today to impact lines of development in American theology (either in favor or in opposition). The book was entitled *The Nature of Doctrine*. In it, Lindbeck set forth a typology of three theories of religion and of the understandings of truth, doctrine and theological method he thought each to require. The three theories of religion Lindbeck identified were named by him the «cognitive», the «experiential-expressive» and the «cultural-linguistic.»²² The first remained relatively underdeveloped and was quickly dismissed from further consideration. It was the second (which Lindbeck was concerned to oppose) and the third (which he wished to defend) which stood at the center of his thinking.

To say only this much is to say something important about this book: notwithstanding its largely irenic tone, it had a polemical edge. Indeed, Lindbeck seemed to believe that representatives of the «experiential-expressive» model (which he associated with Schleiermacher) and adherents of the «cultural-linguistic» model (which he associated with Barth) were caught up, at that time, in something of a life and death struggle for the future of theology and for the well-being of the churches. To be sure, Lindbeck's central concern was with ecumenical progress in Protestant-Roman Catholic dialogue especially but the dramatic quality of his work was provided by the battle taking place in the immediate background.

The details of Lindbeck's proposal need not concern us here. Suffice it to say that his «cultural-linguistic» model likened religion to language insofar as the latter is able to provide a «system» of symbols which function as «communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude and action.»²³ To become socialized into a religious community was, on this showing, to become a «skilled» user of its symbolic system, to acquire expertise in the «performance» of its

21 Barth, CD IV/1, p.372; KD IV/1, p.411.

22 G. Lindbeck: *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, Philadelphia 1984, p.16-18.

23 Ibid., p.18.

language. Moreover, an understanding of the nature of doctrine was already contained in this description of religion. Lindbeck favored what he called a «regulative» or «rule» theory of church doctrines.²⁴

Now there is more than a grain of truth contained in what Lindbeck wrote about doctrine. Doctrines do function in the ways he describes much of the time. The real source of worry lay in what he was opposing and rejecting. To say that doctrines are «authoritative rules of discourse», etc. was to say a firm no, first, to the view that doctrines are «truth claims about objective realities»²⁵ and, second, to the view that doctrines are «noninformative and nondiscursive symbols of inner feelings, attitudes or existential orientations.»²⁶ The last named view is, it has to be said, a rather drastic caricature of Schleiermacher's understanding of doctrine. But the crucial point to be made here is that to exclude the role played by religious experience in the construction of doctrines was as wrong-headed as was the attempt to downplay the importance of «objective realities» in giving direction to constructive efforts. The truth is that elements of all three of Lindbeck's types have a role to play in Barth's thinking about the nature of doctrine. To commandeer him for the «cultural-linguistic» account of religion and the «regulative» or «rule» theory of doctrine was, once again, to domesticate his thought, to render it a useful tool in an all-too American quarrel.

Fortunately, a book has now appeared which gives promise of supplanting Lindbeck's where current discussion of the nature of doctrine is concerned. Christine Helmer is a specialist in the writings of both Luther and Schleiermacher. She is also a graduate of Yale Divinity School, having studied under Lindbeck during his final years there. She writes as one who is grateful to Lindbeck (and to Yale more generally) but also as a critic. The title of her book plays on an equivocal term: *Theology and the End of Doctrine*. Does she mean «end» in the sense of «demise» or in the sense of «telos» or «goal»? In truth, she means it to be taken in both senses. She writes, «The irony ... is that Lindbeck's irenic effort to clarify the social and cultural meanings of doctrine led to the decoupling of doctrine from its role as witness to a transcendent reality. This is precisely what I mean by *the end of doctrine*. Doctrine reaches its terminus when

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., p.16.

26 Ibid.

its own status as a social construction is no longer acknowledged and when it takes the place of the transcendent reality to which it is meant to refer.»²⁷ The best way to prevent demise, she believes, lies in a recovery of the proper «end» of doctrine, its twofold purpose of bringing to expression an encounter with or experience of divine reality as a witness to it.

Drawing upon *both* Schleiermacher and Barth, Helmer sets forth an understanding of doctrine which is constructive «all the way down»²⁸ but which is, at the same time, given a direction or determination from without by a transcendent «object» which cannot be captured or controlled by those constructive efforts. Theology, we might say, constructs *towards* its «object.» The «object» has, of course, been variously defined – by Schleiermacher, for example, in terms of the redemptive relation of the believer to Christ and by Barth in terms of the event of the Word of God. The former laid emphasis on religious experience, though not to the neglect of the cognitive content resident in that experience. The latter laid emphasis on the cognitive character of the event of the Word, though not to the neglect of an experience of it.

Helmer's reading of Barth is generous and elastic. It allows her to find important convergences with Schleiermacher, making each the ally of the other with respect to an issue decisive for our time: a recovery of the true nature of doctrine, its deliverance from domestication for the purposes of securing institutionalized power on the part of an intellectual and/or an ecclesial elite. And she is certainly right that Barth has a place for religious experience, albeit a closely circumscribed one. In his treatment of the Word of God in *CD* I/1, Barth devotes nearly thirty pages to sustained reflection on the theme «The Word of God and Experience.» There we read: «If knowledge of God's Word is possible, this must mean that an experience of God's Word is possible.»²⁹ The rubric under which he organizes his thoughts on the shape of this experience is the word «acknowledgment.» Barth prefers this term to Schleiermacher's «dependence» because he understands the human being in the experience of the Word as «self-determining» rather than simply receptive or passive.³⁰ What happens in the experience of the Word, Barth contends, is that

27 Ch. Helmer: *Theology and the End of Doctrine*, Louisville 2014, p.150.

28 *Ibid.*, p.151.

29 Barth, *CD* I/1, p.198; *KD* I/1, p.206.

30 *Ibid.*, p.200; *ibid.*, p.209.

the self-determining human is given a new direction for her self-determining activity. «If God's Word is not spoken to animals, plants or stones but to men and women, and if determination by God's Word is really a determination of human existence, in what, then, will it consist if not in the fact that the self-determination in which man is man finds its absolute superior in determination by God, that as self-determination, and without in the least being encroached upon or destroyed altogether as such, it receives a direction, is set under a judgment and has impressed upon it a character. In short, it is determined in the way that a self-determining being is by a word and that man is by the Word of God.»³¹ And yet, there is no reason to prefer the intellect as the putative locus of an encounter with the Word to, let us say «feeling» or «will» any more than there is to prefer «feeling» or «will» to the intellect. Any or all of these alleged «anthropological locations»³² can be engaged by the Word in the experience of it in any given case.

«Acknowledgment» entails – among other things – «letting oneself be continually led, always making a step, always being in a movement from the experience felt at one time or the thought grasped at one time to the opposite experience and thought, because hearing God's Word always consists also in hearing the one in the other and the other in the one. In this movement which cannot be arrested by any synthesis a person acknowledges the mystery of the Word of God and she has Christian experience.»³³ Here again, Barth is testifying to his belief that the Word of God always comes to us in a «secular form» and in «concealment.»³⁴ The «object» towards which we construct will always elude our grasp. And yet, precisely in doing so, the Word constitutes a transcendent element which limits the reach of our constructive activities, which orders those activities to itself and gives to them a direction.

Taking a step back: what dogmatics in the style of Barth can contribute to constructive theology is a forceful reminder that constructive efforts are always and at every point de-limited, circumscribed and determined by an «object» which is *never* brought under epistemic control. Thus, the constructive theologian who undertakes to speak of her experience of God does so *responsibly*

31 Ibid., p.201; *ibid.*, p.210.

32 Ibid., p.203; *ibid.*, p.212.

33 Ibid., p.207; *ibid.*, p.216-17.

34 Ibid., p.207; *ibid.*, p.216.

where she resists the collapse of divine «otherness» into her experience, where she recognizes that God is only ever indirectly given in revelation (the unveiling in a veil which remains a veil!) and never directly, where she uses her musings on her own experience to point beyond herself. Where this occurs, there should be no reason in principle why students of Barth should not rejoice in her efforts; why they should not be encouraging and supportive.

Conclusion

The creation of a «Karl Barth Center for Reformed Theology» is an occasion for celebration. Located in a modern university in which multiple strategies for the study of theology and of religion and the religions co-exist side by side, the new Center provides an opportunity to show that dogmatic and constructive theologians can work together constructively, side by side, rather than as opponents. In giving flesh to this vision, it will also be providing much needed guidance to students of Barth in other countries. The future of Barth studies will be a promising one where the study of his life and work are carried out in the spirit of Karl Barth, i.e. with evident joy, wonder, gratitude and humility. What is needed today, more than anything else, is a breaking down of walls of division within academic and ecclesial communities. This cannot happen where the study of Barth is characterized chiefly by polemical discourse, where joy is replaced by a deadly earnestness. In confidence that the God who graciously rules over all will take care of results and outcomes, let us open the door wide to conversations with any who can take an interest in the kind of theology Barth did and can find in him a resource for their thinking: with interested liberationists and feminists, with revisionists, with Jewish and Muslim theologians, with agnostics and atheists. If we do not do this, we will be consigning ourselves to a parochial conversation of little interest to the wider Christian world.

Abstract

Der Autor stellt Barths Verständnis von «Dogmatik» in die Polarität von dogmatischer und konstruktiver Methode, wie sie vor allem in der englischsprachigen Theologie gebräuchlich ist. «Constructive theology» nimmt für sich eine grössere Freiheit gegenüber der kirchlichen Tradition in Anspruch. Gegen die Vereinnahmung für eine theologische Orthodoxie zeigt der Verfasser, dass Barth die kirchliche Tradition keineswegs als kritiklos vorauszusetzenden normativen Bezugsrahmen für seine theologische Reflexion ansieht, sondern diese als offenen, immer wieder neu am biblischen Zeugnis von der unverfügbaren Selbstmitteilung Gottes auszurichtenden Prozess verstanden und betrieben habe. Insofern sei er auch konstruktiver Theologe gewesen und biete wichtige Anregungen für heutige konstruktive Theologie.

The author shows that Barth's understanding of «dogmatics» cannot be regarded as dogmatic theology as opposed to constructive theology. He does not simply consider the dogmatic tradition of the church as an indisputable normative frame of reference of theological reflection but also approaches it in a critical way. The normative point of reference for his theologizing is the biblical testimony of God's self-revelation which is beyond the grasp of the theologian. Therefore theological reflection has to be understood and practiced as an ongoing process in which the theologian has to listen to the living Word of God over and over again. Interpreted in that way, Barth's dogmatics can be considered as contributing to constructive theology today.

Bruce L. McCormack, Princeton