

5-2017

Karl Barth's Early Life: A Journey to Rediscover a Lost Christianity

Rachael Eaton
Whitworth University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.whitworth.edu/th314h>

 Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), [History of Christianity Commons](#), and the [History of Religions of Western Origin Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Eaton, Rachael, "Karl Barth's Early Life: A Journey to Rediscover a Lost Christianity" Whitworth University (2017). *History of Christianity II: TH 314*. Paper 14.
<https://digitalcommons.whitworth.edu/th314h/14>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors Program at Whitworth University. It has been accepted for inclusion in History of Christianity II: TH 314 by an authorized administrator of Whitworth University.

A Look at Karl Barth's Early Life: A Journey to Rediscover a Lost Christianity

Rachael Eaton

Keith Beebe

TH History of Christianity II

27 April 2017



*Karl Barth, 1956. From the German
Federal Archives* 

Karl Barth, a prominent theologian of the twentieth century, entered into the theological scene during a time of history characterized by fear, change, and war. At the start of this century, World War I had just commenced, and liberal theology, a relatively new and controversial theological movement, was gaining popularity all throughout Europe. During his time as both a well-educated theological student and an experienced pastor, Barth noticed that there was something missing from the core of Christianity, and he set out to discover what had been lost. From the influences within Barth's childhood, his university education, and his career as a pastor, the foundation of Barth theology was formed as a response to World War I and liberal theology, which would greatly impact Christianity.

Karl Barth was born in Basel, Switzerland in 1886 to Fritz Barth and Anna Sartorius Barth.¹ Fritz Barth, his father, “was a devout man and a dedicated seminary professor”² who specialized in both New Testament and early church history from a Calvinist tradition.³ At a young age, Barth was introduced to the world of theology from his father from whom he learned about the latest theological discussions, contemporary discourses, and even Christian Socialism.⁴ His father’s influence, “by the quiet seriousness with which he applied himself to Christian things as a scholar and a teacher,”⁵ would leave a lasting impact on Barth’s life as a theologian. However, growing up, Barth lacked interest in school because he simply “did not have the ambition nor the inclination in some subjects.”⁶ The time that Barth did not spend cultivating his education he spent as a street fighter and as a leader of a gang.⁷ Yet, Barth also managed to develop an interest in both history and writing at this time. At the age of ten, he wrote his first play titled *Prince Eugen* and would later write others, due to the social advances and popularity that he would gain from his writings.⁸ It was later in life when Barth was taking confirmation classes from Robert Aeschbacher that he decided to pursue a career as a theologian.⁹ Barth went on to study theology at universities in Bern, Berlin, Tübingen, and Marburg.¹⁰

During his time attending these universities, Barth deviated from his conservative upbringing in the Reformed tradition and, with this newfound freedom, began to study the great theologians and philosophers associated with the theological movement of the time: liberal

1. Kurt A. Richardson, *Reading Karl Barth: New Directions for North American Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 26.

2. *Ibid*, 26.

3. John Webster, *Barth* (London: Continuum, 2000), 3.

4. Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*. Translated by John Bowden. (Philadelphia, PA: London and Fortress Press, 1976), 14.

5. John Webster, *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 2.

6. Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, 12.

7. Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, 14 NOTES

8. *Ibid*, 27.

9. *Ibid*, 30.

10. John Webster, *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, 2.

theology. Liberal theology was rooted in the early 19th century German Enlightenment and was “interested in human [...] religion within the framework of the modern outlook on the world.”¹¹

The goal of the liberal theologians was “to defend religion from its cultured despisers by explaining very clearly which aspects of traditional Christianity they did not take literally.”¹²

Therefore, these theologians had to defend Christianity from a secular starting point and forming their arguments rationally and empirically. Barth studied many of the theologians and philosophers behind liberal theology, including figures such as Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Adolf von Harnack, Wilhelm Hermann, Walter Rauschenbush, Shailer Mathews, and Henry Nelson Wieman.”¹³ At the end of his college years, Barth had dedicated himself to liberal theology.

Unfortunately, Barth quickly found that liberal theology did not fully meet his theological hunger as he attempted to apply and live out what he had learned in the university system in a non-academic setting. In 1911, Barth accepted a pastoral position in the small town of Safenwil in the Aargau in Switzerland.¹⁴ During his time as a pastor, Barth became aware of the conflicts and hardships that the people of his congregation faced daily as he tried to address them through the Gospel message.



Church Safenwil, Switzerland. Photo by Badener. 

Unfortunately, his theological liberalism did not prepare him to relate Scripture to the average person and provide Biblical support to sympathize with the difficult challenges that his congregants faced daily. At this point in his career as a

11. Thomas F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology, 1910-1931* (London: SCM Press LTD, 1962), 33.

12. Gary Dorrien. *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology: Theology Without Weapons* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 11.

13. Gregory Baum, *The Twentieth Century: A Theological Overview* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 7.

14. John Webster, *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, 3.

pastor, Barth realized that liberal theology looked different in an academic setting than in a church setting, which allowed him to see the large gap present in liberal theology. Barth's skepticism continued to increase due with "his exposure to the Swiss social democratic movement" as well as his participation in social and political disputes at that time.¹⁵ Liberal theology "did not provide the real resource that his people needed."¹⁶ Barth's immersion into the everyday lives of his congregants prompted a deep questioning of the validity of the theological liberalism that he studied and supported during his university years.

However, what caused Barth to "abandon his theological liberalism" and adopt "a quite different set of commitments" was the commencement of World War I.¹⁷ At the start of World War I (1914-1918), the liberal theologians that Barth had studied, such as Hermann and Harnack, announced that they sided and "identified themselves with the war policies of Kaiser Wilhelm II."¹⁸ As Barth described, "it was like the twilight of the gods."¹⁹ In aligning themselves with the war, Barth realized that the theologians had "become merely servants of public opinion."²⁰ With this declaration, Barth's "whole world of exegesis, ethics, dogmatics and preaching, which [he] had held to be essentially trustworthy, was shaken to the foundations."²¹ By taking a side on the political issues, the liberal theologians revealed to the public that they no longer trusted in God but rather put their trust into prominent leaders or their country. In addition, Barth saw that these liberal theologians neglected the main commandment in the Bible: to love God and to love one's neighbor. In supporting the war, these liberal theologians were also supporting the bloodshed of millions of people. As a result of the war, Barth was disillusioned and confused by the

15. Ibid, 3.

16. James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Vatican II* (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1971), 325.

17. John Webster, *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, 3.

18. Gregory Baum, *The Twentieth Century: A Theological Overview*, 9.

19. Ibid, 9.

20. Thomas F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology, 1910-1931*, 34.

21. Gregory Baum, *The Twentieth Century: A Theological Overview*, 9.

discrepancies that he witnessed between the actions of the liberal theologians in regards to World War I and the truth that he found in Scripture.

From this apparent tension between Scripture, theology, and culture, Barth ventured to make sense of the current theological situation. He concluded that Christianity and culture had become one in the same and that the leading voices of society at the time, whether philosophers or theologians, had become the spokesmen for Christianity. In reality, Christianity “was indistinguishable in its manifestation from the mind or life of the world around it – it was all an expression of the same thing.”²² Specifically from World War I, Barth found that there had to be something “fundamentally wrong with a theology that was incapable of standing against the popular cultural tide.”²³ In addition, Barth discovered that liberal theology disregarded the supremacy and righteousness of God. When liberal theologians discussed God, they were actually just talking “about God by talking about human beings in a loud voice.”²⁴ This intermixing of religion and culture managed to diminish the gap between God and humanity.²⁵ From Barth’s perspective, God, Scripture, and even the meaning behind the word “Christian” had all been watered down and displaced of their sacredness due to the impact of modern philosophical and theological thought.

With all the different discourses and opinions surrounding Christianity, Barth recognized the urgent need to restore the core of Christianity. To begin, Barth stopped listening to all the ideologies and modern theological voices of the time and simply looked solely at Scripture.

Barth, together with his good friend Eduard Thurneysen, “faced the fierce critical and indeed

22. Thomas F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology, 1910-1931*, 34.

23. K. W. Hector, *Dialectical or Crisis Theology*, The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization, 2011.

24. Ibid.

25. Thomas F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology, 1910-1931*, 39.

atheistic questions of modern man and sought for their answers in the Word of God.”²⁶ While on this quest, Barth found “a strange new world within the Bible,”²⁷ which allowed him to form his own theological conclusions based off of the truth he found in Scripture. The journey resulted in the formation of Dialectic Theology, also known as the Theology of Crisis, which would serve as the basis of Barth’s theological convictions. Dialectic Theology is defined as “a form of neo-orthodox theology emphasizing the infinite tensions, paradoxes, and basic ambiguities inherent in Christian existence, and holding, against rationalism, that God is unknowable to humans except through divine grace and revelation.”²⁸ Within this theological movement, there is an emphasis on the paradoxical relationship between God and humanity that focuses on the righteousness of God and the Word of God revealed through revelation.

In response to the confusion surrounding the nature and character of God due to liberal theology, Barth first reiterates the righteousness of God and places God as the object of faith within his theology. First of all, Barth argues that it is important to “begin at the beginning and recognize that God is God.”²⁹ Barth acknowledges that the academic world prevents this from happening because students and scholars “persist in [their] questions about the definition of God rather than making [their] decision for God.”³⁰ Barth finds it necessary to remember and define exactly who God is since modern liberal theology seems to think that to talk about God is to talk about a human being. Barth states the following about God:

“God, the pure and absolute boundary and beginning of all that we are and have and do; God who is distinguished qualitatively from men and from everything human, and must never be identified with anything which we name, or experience, or conceive, or worship, as God ... God, the Lord, the Creator, the Redeemer: this is the Living God ... Above

26. Gary Dorrien. *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology: Theology Without Weapons*, 17.

27. James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Vatican II*, 32.

28. *Dictionary.com*.

29. George Hunsinger, *For the Sake of the World: Karl Barth and the Future of Ecclesial Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 21.

30. *Ibid*, 21.

and beyond the apparently infinite series of possibilities and visibilities in this world there breaks forth, like a flash of lightning, impossibility, and suffering.”³¹

God is the Supreme Being who rules over every living thing.

Another key component to Barth’s theology is that God is the object of faith. By this, Barth means that God is “the object of the universally present and active longing, the object of man’s homesickness and man’s hope for a unity, a basis, a meaning to his existence, and the meaning of the world.”³² Barth makes this distinction about God because he longs to separate God from the “concepts and ideas which usually constitute religious thought in general about God.”³³ By defining God as the object of faith, Barth removes God from the realm of mankind and places him back to where he belongs: where he is elevated above mankind, and his creation is once again dependent upon Him. In summary, Barth is trying to separate God from man and differentiate between the description of the God that culture has created and the true God that is found within Scripture.

In differentiating God from mankind, Barth, however, is not arguing that God is removed and uninvolved in the world, but rather quite the opposite. Instead, Barth reveals that, in allowing God to be God, God can do what he desires and, more importantly, is out of the control of the human beings.³⁴ Once again, Barth is reaffirming that there is a large gap that separates mankind and God in which, no matter how hard they try, human beings cannot contain God in their small, worldly box. Therefore, human beings can never come to fully know or understand God on their own power. Instead, God chooses to reveal and continuously pursue his creation by the means of his Word.

31. John Webster, *Barth*, 25.

32. Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1959), 35.

33. *Ibid*, 36.

34. Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, 37.

As mentioned above, during Barth's theological journey to discover the truths of Christianity for himself, he looked to the Word of God for guidance. Barth did not simply look for answers that supported his argument against liberal theology but rather let the Word of God speak for itself. In approaching the Bible in this way, Barth was able to find an entirely new world within the Bible that he had missed throughout his years as a student and even partially as a pastor. During his time exploring the Bible, specifically Paul's *Epistle to the Romans*, Barth realized that the Word of God was God's own revelation to humanity through both Scripture and Jesus Christ.

In order to comprehend Barth's theology, it is crucial to understand his view of revelation, which is the means that God uses to disclose himself to mankind. For Barth, Revelation is counted as a miracle.³⁵ Human beings on their own power have no way of understanding or comprehending the vastness and mysteriousness of God because "God's holy majesty is something [their] sinful and darkened minds are incapable and unworthy of contemplating".³⁶ Theology, as a whole, "is only possible at all because God has first spoken and given himself to be known" to his creation.³⁷ Barth argues that revelation is a form of reversing the effects of the Fall because, by revealing Himself to His creation once again, God offers humankind a second opportunity to know Him and be in a relationship with Him. For Barth, revelation will continue until eternity because God does not belong to the world and cannot be explained or known by human experience.³⁸

One way that God chooses to reveal himself to his creation is through Scripture. Since the Bible reveals parts of who God is, Barth concludes that the Bible must be the means by which

35. John Webster, *Barth*, 21.

36. *Ibid*, 41.

37. *Ibid*, 41.

38. *Ibid*, 42.

God connects and reveals himself to his creation. This action does not at all diminish God's righteousness or sovereignty. In reality, God "does not transform himself into something creaturely in order to reveal himself, but reveals himself through creaturely media while remaining absolutely distinct from those media."³⁹ In approaching the Word of God, Barth argues that one must come to the Bible in faith. Faith, for Barth, is "a form of spiritual daring" and "an expression of divine grace that scripture contains."⁴⁰ In addition, faith is not something human beings can contrive from their own power, but it is a gift from God. It is an invitation directly from God to learn more about who He is, all that He has done, and all that he is still continuing to do in the world. When humans accept the gift of faith from God, their faith then carries them into another world and "drives [them] up out beyond [themselves] and invites [him or her], without regard to [their] worthiness or unworthiness, to reach for the highest answer."⁴¹ Barth warns against coming to the Bible with questions or expectations just to find answers because they will not find the answers they were searching for. Instead, they will find a story about God, his interaction with mankind, and his sovereignty. Therefore, the Bible, Barth concludes, is not the way that one finds God, but it is rather, and has always been, the means that "God has sought and found the way to us."⁴² With this approach to Scripture, Barth believes that God will reveal Himself to the reader, His will, and His sovereignty since the reader, in faith, is actively seeking to know more about God. God, in turn, is more than willing to respond to this act of faith.

The second and most important medium that God uses to reveal himself to his creation is the living Word of God: Jesus Christ. Barth sees Jesus Christ as the mediator who fills the gap

39. Adam Neder, *Participation in Christ: An Entry into Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 3-4.

40. Gary Dorrien, *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology: Theology Without Weapons*, 48.

41. *Ibid*, 48.

42. *Ibid*, 49.

between God and man.⁴³ In Christ, God actually reveals himself in human form and speaks to his creation.⁴⁴ As a result, Jesus Christ is the hidden God. This fact changes everything because in Jesus now lies the knowledge of God which can be attained through faith in Christ. Once again, this faith is not a human creation but something that is given by God to his creation at a specific time to reveal himself to them in his due time. Through the revelation of the Word of God as Jesus Christ, God can be known through faith.

Barth's theology emerged as response to the cultural events that were taking place during the twentieth century and were greatly influenced by both his childhood, university career, and his time as a pastor. What Barth saw amidst the chaos of World War I and the liberal theology movement was a need to separate God from culture and remind the modern theologians that, no matter how hard they may try, they would never be able to fully solve or understand God. God is mysterious, wholly other, and incomprehensible in human terms. Overall, Barth's theological perspective removes God out of the box that the theologians of his time were trying to fit Him into and gives God back his sovereign position in the world, which results in a humbling of both the theologians and followers of God to wait for God to make the first move.

43. James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Vatican II*, 329.

44. *Ibid*, 329.

Bibliography

- Barth, Karl. *Dogmatics in Outline*. New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1959.
- Baum, Gregory. *The Twentieth Century: A Theological Overview*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999.
- Busch, Eberhard. *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*. Translated by John Bowden. (Philadelphia, PA: London and Fortress Press, 1976).
- Dorrien, Gary. *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology: Theology Without Weapons*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000.
- Hector, K. W. *Dialectical or Crisis Theology*. The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization, 2011.
- Hunsinger, George. *For the Sake of the World: Karl Barth and the Future of Ecclesial Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004.
- Livingston, James C. *Modern Christian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Vatican II*. New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1971.
- Neder, Adam. *Participation in Christ: An Entry into Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.
- Richardson, Kurt A. *Reading Karl Barth: New Directions for North American Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004.
- Torrance, Thomas F. *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology, 1910-1931*. London: SCM Press LTD, 1962.
- Webster, John. *Barth*. London: Continuum, 2000.
- . *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000.