# An Overview of Karl Barth’s Theology: Focused on The Doctrines of God, Jesus Christ, and The Holy Spirit

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**ABSTRACT**

Karl Barth, the founder of neo-orthodox, is one of the most influential theologians in modern Christian world. He has turned the direction of the stream of Protestant theology in the twentieth century. The purpose of this study is to have an overview of the theology of Karl Barth. This study is of worthy in order to have an accurate grasp of the trend of modern Chriatian theology. After a brief survey of his life and works, this study provides an overview of Barth’s theology focusing on three major areas of his theology: the doctrines of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Barth’s emphasis upon the transcendence of God, the centrality of Jesus Christ in Christian theology, and the importance of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity should not be ignored for better understanding of the modern Christian theology. In a word, Barth’s theology has continuity of, and, at the same time, discontinuity from liberal theology.

**Keywords**: Karl Barth, morder Christian theology, transcendence of God, centraliy of Jesus Christ, importance of the Holy Spirit, neo-orthodoxy

**INTRODUCTION**

Karl Barth (1886-1968) has generally been considered as one of the most outstanding Protestant theological thinkers of the twentieth century. (Peerman & Marty, 1965). He could be called as a modern “church father,” who would be remembered with those great names, such as Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin. In this sense, David Mueller says, “Barth dominated much of the theology of the twentieth century and is the father of neoreformation [neo-orthodox] theology.” (Torrance, 1962) Thus, it can be said that Barth, the founder of neo-orthodox, was one of the most influential theologians in modern Christian theology. He has turned the direction of the stream of Protestant theology in the twentieth century.

Therefore, it is necessary to have an overview of Barth's theology in order to have an accurate grasp of the trend of modern Christian theology. In other words, to have an overview of Barth's theology, though not necessarily exhaustive, would help many students of theology not to have a poor grip of the development of the contemporary Christian theology.

This study is unable to cover all aspects or areas of Barth's theology. This study, however, deals with three major areas of his theology: the doctrine of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

**BARTH’S LIFE AND WORKS**

The purpose of this study is to have an overview of Barth's theology. In order to have an accurate overview of his theology, it is necessary, as a background, to search and understand Barth's personal life and his major theological works.

**Barth’s Life**

Karl Barth was born in Basel, Switzerland, on May 1886. (Barth, 1976). His father, theologian Fritz Barth, was a professor of theology at a Reformed seminary, and moved to the University of Berne in 1889 as Professor of Church History and New Testament Exegesis (Barth, 1966). This shows that Barth was grown up under the influence of the Reformed Church and its theological environment.

At the age of sixteen, Barth decided to become a theologian, and in 1904, at the age of eighteen, he began his study at the University of Berne, initially taking instruction from his father. He had studied at some of Germany’s finest institutions, Berlin, Tübingen, Marburg, as well as Berne. In 1906, while at Berlin, Barth came into contact with Adolf von Harnack, whose advocating of “the Liberal Theology” had an enormous impact on Barth’s thinking. In addition, he was much influenced by Wilhelm Herrmann.

After completing his study in 1909, Barth became a minister of the Reformed Church, first in Geneva in 1909, and then in the small town of Safenwil on Switzerland’s border with Germany in 1911 (Barth, 1966). Since then, he spent about ten years of his ministering and preaching life accordance with liberal Protestantism, especially in harmony with von Harnack’s teachings, rather than his father's.

According to his later memories, however, Barth came to reject the liberal Protestantism, finding them unsuited to the problems of his parish and to his own personal journey. Especially, when he saw his theological mentors, such as von Harnack and other German theologians, who supported the Kaiser's war policy in 1914 (Godsey, 1966) he became disillusioned with the theology of liberal Protestantism. His maiden work, *Der Römerbrief* (Epistle to the Romans) published in 1919 was full of testaments to his changing views (Hoskyns, 1968).

In 1913, while Barth was ministering in the village of Safenwil, he married Nelly Hoffmann, a talented violinist. They had four sons and a daughter. Barth served as a church pastor until 1921, when he started his professor career.

In 1921, Barth became a professor of Reformed theology at the University of Göttingen (1921–1925). Afterward, he taught at the Universities of Münster (1925–1930) and Bonn (1930–1935) in Germany. While teaching at Bonn, he began writing a complete system of systematic theology based on God’s Word with the title *Kirchliche Dogmatik* (“Church Dogmatics”), a thirteen part-book, which he continued to develop throughout his later life, but which remained incomplete at his death on 10 December 1968.

In 1935, Barth was forced to leave Germany because of his outspokenness against the Nazi party in 1934. He returned to Basel (in 1935), where he taught theology until his retirement in 1962. After his retirement in 1962, Barth visited the U.S. and lectured at Princeton Theological Seminary, University of Chicago, Union Theological Seminary, and San Francisco Theological Seminary. Furthermore, he was invited as a guest at the Second Vatican Council. Also in 1962, Barth was featured on the cover of the April 20 issue of *Times*, showing that his influence reached out of academic and ecclesiastical circles and into mainstream American religious culture.

**Barth’s Works**

Barth’s theology is central to the history of modern western Christian thought and remains as a major voice in contemporary Christian theology. His writings have often been the subject of intensive scrutiny and re-evaluation. The study of Barth’s though and theology is a significant enterprise. Literatures on him and conferences devoted to his works are abound. In a word, Barth’s works are significant resources for the understanding of modern contemporary Christian theology.

Barth’s works, which are of significance in modern contemporary Christian theology, include as follows:

1. *Epistle to the Romans* (1919);

2. *Die Christliche Dogmatik in Entwurf* (1927);

3. *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (1928);

4. *Church Dogmatics* (1932);

5. *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God According to the Reformation* (1938);

6. ‘No!’ in *Natural Theology* (1946);

7. *Dogmatics in Outline* (1949);

8. *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum [Anselm’s Proof of the Existence of God in the Context of His Theological Scheme]* (1960);

9. *The Humanity of God* (1961); and

10. *Evangelical Theology* (1963)

Among these works and other books, papers, and articles, two notable and influential ones should be mentioned in detail.

The first one is *Der Römerbrief* (“*The Epistle to the Romans*”), first written in 1919, and later thoroughly modified in 1922. This work is significant as Barth’s first major work, defined by his reaction against German Protestant Liberalism. Many theologians and religious historians consider this work to be the most important theological treatise of the twentieth century. In this theological commentary, Barth argued that the God who is revealed in the cross of Jesus challenges and overthrows any attempt to ally God with human cultures, achievements, or possessions. This work, like many of his others, emphasizes God’s saving grace and the insufficiency of human understanding to define Him.

The second one is his most famous work, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* (“*Church Dogmatics*”). This thirteen part-book work has been widely regarded as one of the most important theological works of the twentieth century. Barth published the first part-book of *Church Dogmatics* in 1932 and continued working on it until his death in 1968. It represents the pinnacle of Barth’s achievement as a theologian. Barth’s theology found its most sustained and compelling expression through this Thirteen-part magnum opus.

The Kirchliche Dogmatik is divided into four main volumes: (1) the Doctrine of the Word of God; (2) the Doctrine of God; (3) the Doctrine of Creation; (4) and the Doctrine of Reconciliation. Barth had initially also intended to complete his Church Dogmatics addressing the Doctrine of Redemption (eschatology), but has not completed the project until his death (Brown, 1978).

**AN OVERVIEW OF KARL BARTH’S THEOLOGY**

The purpose of this study is to have an overview of Barth’s theology (Busch, 2004). However, it is impossible to deal with all areas of his theology. Thus, this study tries to cover, though not exhaustively, only three major areas of his theology: the doctrines of God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

**Doctrine of God**

This section discusses Barth’s doctrine of God dividing into three parts: (1) the transcendent God; (2) the unknown God; and (3) the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

1. The transcendent God

One of the cardinal points of Barth’s doctrine of God is that he understood and emphasized the transcendence of God. According to Barth, God is “above us, above space and time, and above concepts and opinions and all potentialities.” (Barth, 1939). In his first work, the Epistle to the Romans, Barth describes his understanding of the transcendence of God as follows:

God, the pure limit and pure beginning of all that we are, have, and do, standing over in infinite qualitative difference to man and all that is human, nowhere and never identical with that which we call God, experience, surmise, and pray to as God, the unconditioned Halt as opposed to all human rest, the yes in our no and the no in our yes, the first and last and as such unknown, but nowhere and never a magnitude amongst others in the medium know to us, God the Lord, the Creator and Redeemer . . . that is the living God (Barth, 1919).

According to Barth, therefore, man cannot find God by the study of the soul of man. The qualitative distinction between God and man is so deep and wide that man cannot approach to God by him/herself. God is in the highest where human beings cannot reach unless He reveals Himself to human beings.

The transcendence of God in Barth’s theology is in rejecting the acknowledgement of natural theology, and in opposing to the teaching of liberalism (or liberal theology). All modern idea of the immanence of God is explicitly rejected by Barth’s emphasis on the transcendence of God.

1. The Unknown God

Barth makes it explicit from the beginning of his famous work, Church Dogmatics, that God is the unknowable and indescribable God (Barth, 1936). For Barth, in a word, God is the incomprehensible Reality. As he refers to the personality of God, Barth says, “God is personal, but personal in an incomprehensive way, in so for as the conception of his personality surpassed all our views of personality.” (Barth, 1955). In his comment on Romans 1:19-20, Barth once again emphasizes the incomprehensiveness of God as follows:

We know that God is He whom we do not know, and that our ignorance is precisely the problem and the source of our knowledge. The Epistle to the Romans is a revelation of the unknown God; God chooses to come to man, not man to God, for he [God] is ever the unknown God. In manifesting himself [God, Himself] to man he [God] is farther away than before (Barth, 1919).

Therefore, Barth’s assertion that God is unknowable is clear. He states, “We must be clear that whatever we say of God in such human concepts can never be more that an indication of Him; no such concept can really conceive the nature of God. God is inconceivable.”(Barth, 1949)

1. The Revelation of God in Jesus Christ

As noticed in his two previous concepts of God, Barth must have believed that there is no way from man to God to find the transcendent and unknown God. However, according to Barth, there is a way from God to man through Jesus Christ that man could find and know God (John 14:9, NASB).

According to Barth, Jesus Christ is the Revelation of God. He asserts that Jesus Christ is “the authentic Revealer of God as God Himself. Again, He is the effective proof of the power of God as God Himself. Yet again, He is the fulfiller of the covenant as Himself God. He is nothing less or other than God Himself, but God as man.” (Barth, 1956). Thus, for Barth, human beings are not able to know God apart from the revelation through Jesus Christ (Barth).

Therefore, in Jesus Christ, the problems raised by the transcendence of God and the incomprehensiveness of God can find their satisfactory and solution. In other words, it is only through Jesus Christ that the impossibilities are combined and the irreconcilables are reconciled (Barth, 1928).

**Doctrine of Christ**

The theology of Barth is “Christo-centric.” (Kantzer, 1958). It means, for Barth, that the topics of theology are not limited to a study of the person and work of Jesus Christ, but rather that all theology should find its focal center in Jesus Christ and that all knowledge of God is obtainable only through Jesus Christ (Barth). In a word, Jesus Christ, who is the Revelation of God, is the foundation of Christian theology and knowledge of God.

Regarding the relationship between the person and the work of Jesus Christ, Barth insists that the person of Jesus Christ cannot be considered separately from the work of Jesus Christ. In this sense, Barth follows the early church tradition (Erickson, 1998). In other words, the study of the person of Jesus Christ must be done in the context of the study of the work of Jesus Christ (Ibid). In the same way, he insists that the redemptive work of Jesus Christ was and is possible only because of who Jesus Christ is.

It is clear, in Barth’s Christology, that the true divinity of Jesus Christ is affirmed explicitly. Barth strongly believed that Jesus Christ is “very God of very God,” and possessed all the divine attributes even in His earthly life, even as a baby of Bethlehem, and even in His death on the cross (Barth). At the same time, he firmly believed the reality of the human nature of Jesus Christ. For him, the clear gospel record of the full humanity of Jesus Christ is enough to believe. In a word, Barth fully accepted the Nicene Creed and the later Chalcedonian formula setting forth two natures united in the one person of Jesus Christ.

However, Barth’s understanding of the sinlessness of Jesus Christ is somewhat ambiguous. In his first work, he says that Jesus Christ is a “sinner among sinners.” (Barth) His assertion that Jesus Christ took a sinful human nature is sharpened, but more ambiguous, in his Church Dogmatics. He asserts, “He [Jesus Christ] was not a sinful man. But inwardly and outwardly His situation was that of a sinful man.… He lived life in the form it must take on the basis and assumption of Adam’s act. He bore innocently what Adam and all of us in Adam have been guilty of.” (Barth) Once again, Barth insists as follows:

The nature God assumed in Christ is identical with our nature as we see it in the light of the Fall. If it were otherwise, how could Christ be really like us? ... God's son not only assumed our nature but He entered the concrete form of our nature, under which we stand before God as damned and lost. He did not produce and establish this form differently from all of us; though innocent, He became guilty; though without sin, He was made to be sin. But these things must not cause us to detract from His complete solidarity with us and in that way to remove Him to a distance from us (Ibid).

It is necessary to mention Barth’s view on the relationship of Jesus Christ, the living Word, to the Bible, the written word, and to the church, the proclaimed word. Because Barth sees that God’s revelation to man through His word is communicated through three major mediums: Jesus Christ, the Bible, and the proclamation of the Church (Hart, 1999). on this relationship between the three, Barth is clear that Jesus Christ is the Lord of the Bible and the church. Jesus Christ is only the Lord; the Bible is not, neither the church. The Bible could be said as having the authority in the church only in the sense that it is the primary witness to Jesus Christ. The church is the context in which the Bible is expounded and Jesus Christ is proclaimed. For Barth, all of these three are divine revelation, but each of them centers upon Jesus Christ.

**Doctrine of the Holy Spirit**

Barth strongly believes in the deity of the Holy Spirit (Barth, 1958). He fully accepts the Nicene-Constantinople Creed, which, in the relation to the Holy Spirit, says, “1. We believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord; 2. We believe in the Holy Ghost, the giver of life; 3. We believe in the Holy Ghost, who proceedeth from the Father and the Son; [and] 4. We believe in the Holy Ghost ‘who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified.’”(Barth)

Barth also believes in the Holy Spirit as the (1) Creator, (2) Reconciler, and (3) Redeemer (Barth, 1929). According to his Church Dogmatics, Barth sees that the Holy Spirit was and is with God the Father and the Son. He states, “The Holy Spirit is with the Father and the Son the true, eternal God in so far as, like begetting Father and the begotten Son.”(Barth) Even Barth equalizes the Holy Spirit with God Himself:

In both the Old Testament and the New Testament the spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, is very generally God Himself to the degree that in an incomprehensibly real way, without on this account being and the less God, He can be present to the creature, and in virtue of this presence of His effect the relation of the creature to Himself, and in virtue of this relation to Himself grant the creature life. The creature needs the Creator to be able to live. It thus needs the relation to Him. But it cannot create this relation. God creates it by His own presence in the creature and therefore as a relation of Himself to Himself. The Spirit of God is God in His freedom to be present to the creature, and therefore to create this relation, and therefore to be the life of the creature (Barth).

Barth sees the Holy Spirit not only makes the union between God and humanity in Christ possible, but also gathers the believers as a community (Barth, 1958), as well as binds believers together in Christ (Barth, 1958). In relation to the event which is called revelation, Barth adds three dimensions of the work of the Holy Spirit. First, “the Spirit guarantees man what he cannot guarantee himself, his personal participation in revelation.” (Barth) Second, “the Spirit gives man instruction and guidance he cannot give himself.” (Ibid) Third, “the Spirit is the great and only possibility in virtue of which men can speak of Christ in such a way that what they say is witness and that God's revelation in Christ thus achieves new actuality through it.” (Ibid)

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

As mentioned in the introduction, Karl Barth is generally considered as one of the most outstanding Protestant theological thinkers of the twentieth century. As the founder of neo-orthodoxy, he is one of the most influential theologians in contemporary Christian theology. Thus, it is of worthy to have an overview of Barth’s theology in order to have an accurate grasp of the trend of modern Christian theology.

In the first section, as a necessary background for understanding his theology, this study surveyed Barth’s life and his major works. He was born under the circumstance of the conservative Reformed Church tradition, but educated under the influence of liberal theologians, such as Adolf von Harnack and Wilhelm Herrmann. However, through experiences of ministering for the local church, Barth found out the importance and priority of the Bible in the theology and practice of the Christianity. His two prominent works include (1) The Epistle to the Romans, his first publication, and Church Dogmatics, his most famous work.

In the second section, this study discussed Barth’s theology trying to cover, not necessarily exhaustively, three major areas of his theology: The Doctrine of God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

First, Barth understood God as the transcendent God and the unknown God. He also emphasized the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. For Barth, God is not the same God as understood by liberal theologians and the proponents of natural theology. Rather, God is the incomprehensible and unapproachable God by man itself. In this sense, Barth’s theology differs from liberal theology.

Second, Barth’s theology is Christ-centered. For Barth, all theology should find its focal center in Jesus Christ, as well as all knowledge of God is obtainable only through Jesus Christ. In other words, Jesus Christ, who is the Revelation of God, is the foundation of theology and knowledge of God. In basic, Barth’s Christology is built upon the tradition of the Nicene-Constantinople Creed, and following in the Chalcedonian formula setting forth two natures united in the one person of Jesus Christ. However, Barth’s understanding of the sinlessness of Jesus Christ is somewhat ambiguous. Regarding the relationship of Jesus Christ, the living Word, to the Bible, the written word, and to the church, the proclaimed word, Barth is clear that Jesus Christ is the Lord of the Bible and the church. All other elements of the divine revelation and even of the theology should be centered upon Jesus Christ.

Third, Barth not only strongly believes in the deity of the Holy Spirit, according to the Nicene-Constantinople Creed, but also gives emphasis upon the Holy Spirit as the (1) Creator, (2) Reconciler, and (3) Redeemer. Barth’s understanding of the importance of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity as well as his explanation of the work of the Holy Spirit for the believers is of significance. He sees the Holy Spirit as gathering the believers as a community and binding believers together in Christ. In relation to the event which is called revelation, Barth adds three dimensions of the work of the Holy Spirit: The Holy Spirit (1) guarantees man what he cannot guarantee himself, his personal participation in revelation; (2) gives man instruction and guidance he cannot give himself; and (3) helps man to experience God’s revelation in Jesus Christ.

In conclusion, Barth’s theology has made a turning point in modern Christian theology. His theology was a kind of reaction against liberal theology, but, at the same time, his theology has not been freed from the influence of liberal theology. In other words, Barth’s theology has continuity of, and, at the same time, discontinuity from liberal theology. Barth’s emphasis upon the transcendence of God and the centrality of Jesus Christ in Christian theology should not be ignored for better understanding of the modern Christian theology

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