Karl Barth and
American Evangelicalism

*Friends or Foes?*

*Edited by*

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Introduction

Clifford B. Anderson

With one exception, the essays contained in this volume first saw life as papers presented at the second annual conference on Karl Barth’s theology co-sponsored by the Center for Barth Studies at Princeton Theological Seminary and the Karl Barth Society of North America, which took place in Princeton on June 22-24, 2007. The theme of the conference was “Karl Barth and American Evangelicalism: Friends or Foes?” Our purpose in creating this conference was threefold: (1) to re-examine the critique of Barth’s theology advanced in the mid-twentieth century by one of his most vocal opponents, Cornelius Van Til; (2) to lay some foundations for what we hope will be a new phase in evangelical engagement with Barth through reflection on “hot topics” like the relation between philosophy and theology, Christology and covenant theology, the nature of the church, and the limits of salvation in Christ; and (3) to examine how Barth’s theology might help evangelicals in their efforts to come to grips with contemporary theological movements.

The results of our conference far exceeded our expectations. The papers sparkled with understanding and wisdom. The insights they offered had much to teach us about the current situation in theology and, even more important, they provided a basis for moving evangelical engagement with Barth to a new stage in its history. We are now placing them before a wider public in the belief that they will generate broader evangelical reappraisal of Karl Barth.

*  *  *

1
The essays in this volume are divided into three parts. The essays in Part I address the historical context of Cornelius Van Til’s critique of Karl Barth. Who was Cornelius Van Til, and what theological and historical factors contributed to his animosity toward Karl Barth? The essays in Part II address contemporary theological topics. As far as possible, we sought in this section to pair representatives of Barth’s theology with evangelical theologians. We had hoped to stimulate discussion by juxtaposing opposing points of view. A surprise of the conference, however, was how difficult it is to find “Barthians” who do not consider themselves evangelicals and to identify contemporary evangelicals who have not been inspired by Barth! The essays in Part III deal with four movements of current interest (radical orthodoxy, postliberal theology, the political ethics of Stanley Hauerwas, and the emerging church movement). The goal of this section was to point beyond the consonances and conflicts between Barth and evangelicalism to show how contemporary “Barthians” and evangelical theologians might find common cause in their response to several prominent theological movements of the present day.

*   *   *

The first two essays in this volume deal directly with the legacy of Cornelius Van Til (1895-1987). Van Til was a Dutch-born theologian, an American mediator of a polemical form of Dutch Neo-Calvinism, and a man whose notoriety outside of conservative Presbyterian circles is due largely to the many critiques of Karl Barth’s theology he published over the course of his life.\(^1\) Van Til, a member of the Christian Reformed Church, received his graduate education from Princeton Theological Seminary and Princeton University in the late 1920s. He taught apologetics at Princeton Seminary during the academic year 1928-29, but declined to accept the conditions of his renewed appointment in the wake of the Seminary’s controversial reorganization in 1929. Van Til subsequently became a professor at the newly founded Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Van Til’s greatest influence,

no doubt, was felt during the years before interest waned among evangelicals in confessional (denominational) theologies, before the “church growth” movement, before doctrinal theology became a tool adapted to the requirements of political activism and therapeutic approaches to pastoral care. In those days, his writings on apologetics were widely read and discussed. But even with all these changes, Van Til continues to exercise an influence on a significant segment of evangelicalism, largely through the graduates of the various campuses of Westminster Seminary where his works (including those on Barth) are still required reading.

George Harinck, Professor of the History of Neo-Calvinism at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, uncovers the early Dutch reception of Barth and its impact on Van Til, focusing especially on the influence of Klaas Schilder. The great Dutch Neo-Calvinists in the generation after Herman Bavinck and Abraham Kuyper — Schilder, Herman Dooyeweerd, and D. H. T. Vollenhoven — advanced their arguments with an eye not simply to countering Barth’s influence, but to addressing the situation of Christians in postwar Europe more generally. Harinck contends that Karl Barth and Klaas Schilder were shaped by a similar concern — the position of Christendom after the catastrophe of the First World War — even amid their sharp disagreements. He notes that both were constructive theologians who recognized the need to reformulate classic Reformed doctrines in light of the upheavals in modern society. Van Til, by contrast, articulated his apologetics from the relatively tranquil precincts of Philadelphia, where he sought through philosophical means to defend the theological traditions of Old Princeton and Old Amsterdam. Harinck laments that a secondary consequence of Van Til’s apologetics has been the impedance of a fruitful encounter between Neo-Calvinism and Dialectical Theology to the present day.

D. G. Hart, well known in this country for his biography of J. Gresham Machen and a history of the evangelical movement in the twentieth century, looks at Van Til’s critique in its American context in an effort to explain why leading lights in the evangelical movement in the 1950s charted a different course in engaging Barth than did conservative Presbyterians like Van Til. Hart contrasts the reception of Barth among Neo-Evangelicals writing for Christianity Today with conservative Presbyterians publishing in the Presbyterian Guardian. Whereas Neo-Evangelicals were cautiously optimistic about Barth’s orthodoxy, conservative Presbyterians tended to regard him as a threat. Hart contends that the difference in opinion had much to do with the differences in social setting between Neo-Evangelicals and conservative Presbyterians. The latter group had inextricably linked the rise of
“Barthianism” with the fundamentalist-modernist divide in the Presbyterian Church and, in particular, the controversies at Princeton Seminary that led to the formation of Westminster Seminary and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Reading Van Til in the light of such Presbyterian controversies helps to explain his motivation for erecting a philosophical barricade against the intrusion of “Barthianism” among confessional Presbyterians.

* * *

Analysis of the historical context for Van Til’s animus toward the theology of Karl Barth should not be considered an end in itself, but a prelude toward renewed theological engagement. The polemical context obstructed critical evaluation of the substance of Van Til’s theological critique of Karl Barth. His criticisms have not yet received the scrutiny which would allow them to be judged independently according to their merits rather than as a “take it or leave it” whole.² It is our view, however, that the time has come to take a more measured, dispassionate approach. Van Til did not get everything wrong. Many of his observations have something to them and contemporary evangelicals may discover that he anticipated certain of their concerns about Barth’s theology. Evangelicals may likewise have questions about Barth’s actualistic ontology, his “historicized” Christology, his understanding of the Church as event, and his tilt toward universalism (as a consequence of his doctrine of election). So a theological re-examination of Van Til is a timely exercise, well suited to promote not only greater understanding of Barth but also greater self-understanding on the part of evangelicals generally.

We did not ask the contributors to Part II of this volume to respond to Van Til directly, but to take up historical areas of disagreement between Barth and evangelicals and advance the state of the discussion. The first two essays broadly examine the philosophical underpinnings of Van Til’s critique, namely, his depiction of the impact of Immanuel Kant on modern theology generally as a way of connecting Barth’s “new modernism” to the old modernisms of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Albrecht Ritschl.

John E. Hare, Noah Porter Professor of Philosophical Theology at Yale Divinity School, asks whether the depiction of the harmful impact of Kant on modern theology (held in differing degrees by both Van Til and Barth!) is

² See, however, Bruce L. McCormack’s “Afterword” for just such a critical theological analysis of the most prominent of Van Til’s criticisms of Barth’s theology.
correct and what it would mean for Van Til’s critique of Barth if it were not. He notes that interpretation of Kant’s philosophical theology has undergone significant shifts since Cornelius Van Til, Gordon Clark, and Carl Henry expressed their critique of the role of God in his system. Fascinatingly, Hare points out that Barth shared some of the same misconceptions about Kant’s intentions. By contrast, Hare contends that the new interpretation of Kant’s philosophy of religion, which places greater weight on what he terms the “vertical dimension” of Kant’s thought, opens up an avenue to a modern, rationalist apologetic for faith in God.

Clifford B. Anderson, Curator of Special Collections at Princeton Theological Seminary, explores the philosophical context of Barth’s rejection of “religious experience” as a source of theological knowledge. He traces the roots of this rejection back to a thought form Barth learned in his student days from Hermann Cohen and Paul Natorp, exponents of the so-called “Marburg Neo-Kantianism.” Anderson demonstrates how Barth learned a modified form of the transcendental argument from them, which effectively stood Kant’s transcendental argument on its head. Whereas Kant argued that the categories of understanding constitute the conditions of possibility for experience in general, Barth argued that Christian experience forms a condition of possibility for Christian preaching. Obviously, Barth’s adaptation of the transcendental argument denudes it of its anti-skeptical purpose — at least for those outside the Christian community. But the thought form helped him to reconstruct the idea of “Christian experience” without making concessions to natural theology or “lived religious experience.” Intriguingly, Van Til likewise adapted a form of the transcendental argument while jettisoning Kant’s critical philosophy. The presence of a version of the transcendental argument in both Karl Barth and Van Til suggests the topic of a future study analyzing how each adapted and made use of that form of argument.

The next set of chapters goes to the heart of the matter. Does Barth’s reconstruction of central Christian doctrines constitute a simple “rejection” of “historic Christianity” (as Van Til frequently asserted)? Or does it represent a faithful re-articulation of the biblical testimony upon which “historic Christianity” also rested? Neither of our essayists sides completely with Barth or Van Til on this issue.

Clifford B. Anderson

Michael S. Horton, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics at Westminster Seminary, California, evaluates Karl Barth’s Christology from the standpoint of Reformed Orthodoxy. Horton’s essay will likely provoke debate on both sides of the aisle. On the one hand, Horton approaches Barth appreciatively — as a bona fide theologian, not as a philosopher outfitted with speculations in religious garb. On the other, he articulates a series of criticisms which still stand as roadblocks to the full reception of Barth among defenders of contemporary Reformed Orthodoxy. Horton finds that Barth’s Christology generates problems for the doctrine of the Trinity and the treatment of covenantal history. He argues that by tending to absorb and synthesize all doctrines into Christology, Barth’s theology winds up subverting his avowed Christocentric standpoint. Horton’s contribution to the conference and the book is especially welcome because of his clear and careful articulation of a number of longstanding evangelical criticisms of Barth. Readers of his essay will find him drawing together lines of argument from appreciative critics like Hans Urs von Balthasar, G. C. Berkouwer, and Emil Brunner to present a formidable critique of Barth’s fundamental theological moves. His critique also meshes nicely with Suzanne McDonald’s analysis of the relationship between Barth’s universalism and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Adam Neder, Associate Professor of Theology at Whitworth University, defends Barth’s Christology against several points raised by Horton. He sets out a close examination of Barth’s Christology in Church Dogmatics IV/1 and IV/2. Neder shows just how radically Barth reconstructed the doctrine of the hypostatic union by moving away from substantial categories to concepts like “event” and “history” in his description of the two natures of Christ. Barth’s moves foster a new perspective on the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century debates between the Lutherans and the Reformed about the communication of attributes. However, Neder raises critical questions about Barth’s reinterpretation. While Barth’s reinterpretation of the Chalcedonian categories is “innovative,” he sees “major and minor conceptual problems” in Barth’s Christology. He calls on evangelical theologians to think with Barth beyond Barth in order to overcome these perceived inconsistencies in his Christology.

In the end, Van Til was right to see that Barth was not just setting out the church’s classical theology. Barth was aiming higher — to reinterpret classical Christological categories without recourse to outworn metaphysical assumptions and with greater emphasis on the biblical narrative about Jesus Christ. But was Van Til right to warn us away from Barth for that reason? Horton and
Neder both suggest that contemporary evangelicals will benefit from grappling with Barth’s interpretation of traditional Christological formulations, no matter where they ultimately come down on the issues at stake.

The third set of chapters in Part II turn our attention away from Van Til to contemporary issues in ecclesiology. In recent years, many evangelicals have come to regard their doctrine of the church as historically insufficient and doctrinally “thin.” Does Barth’s doctrine of the church have anything to offer?

In “The Church in Karl Barth and Evangelicalism: Conversations across the Aisle,” Kimlyn J. Bender, Associate Professor of Theology and Philosophy at the University of Sioux Falls, explores why evangelicals have not developed a satisfactory ecclesiology. Conflicting dynamics within evangelicalism have led to “general neglect of ecclesiology as a theological topic.” Bender suggests that though evangelicals have traditionally been wary of Barth, Barth’s theology can serve both as a corrective and a guide to the development of a stronger evangelical doctrine of the church. Evangelicals may be surprised to discover, for instance, that Barth shared many of their central intuitions about the church, including the primacy of mission.

Keith L. Johnson, Assistant Professor of Theology at Wheaton College, defends Barth against a line of criticism that has become increasingly popular among younger evangelicals, namely, that Barth’s doctrine of the church is abstract and does not provide a robust enough connection between divine and human action. Does participation in the church make any difference? Johnson contends that Barth’s understanding of the concursus Dei, or the mysterious relationship between divine and human action, preserves the natural distinction between God and humanity while still providing for a gracious continuity of action. For Barth, mere participation in church practices does not guarantee continuity with divine action; continuity comes from participation in the being of the church, namely, “witness and proclamation.” The contributions of Bender and Johnson both thus highlight Barth’s commitment to evangelism. Barth may in fact provide encouragement to contemporary evangelicals who have become disheartened for sociological or theological reasons with evangelicalism’s historic concentration on mission.

The final set of chapters in Part II treats the question of universalism. Evangelicals have regularly charged that Barth’s doctrine of election leads ineluctably to universalism, despite his protestations. Evangelicals typically reject universalism as unbiblical and as an impediment to mission.

In “So That He May Be Merciful to All: Karl Barth and the Problem of...
Universalism,” Bruce L. McCormack, Charles Hodge Professor of Systematic Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, takes on the charge that universalism lacks any biblical warrant. He notes that Barth’s leaning toward universal salvation is a “deal breaker for evangelicals,” but asks whether “the possibility of a universal salvation [is] really so unthinkable in light of the [New Testament] witness?” McCormack argues that a tension between limited atonement and universalism pervades the New Testament. He contends that the church lacks the biblical warrant resolutely to decide in favor of one view or the other. As a theologian of the church, Barth grappled with that tension throughout his career, finally endorsing a view that implies universal salvation. But as a biblical theologian, he refused to endorse apokatastasis since, as McCormack remarks, “even the best theology can only be a witness to the truth, not the thing itself.” Barth humbly recognized that only Jesus in his Second Coming can resolve the tension between limited atonement and universal salvation in the New Testament.

Suzanne McDonald, Assistant Professor of Religion at Calvin College, takes a different tack in “Evangelical Questioning of Election in Barth: A Pneumatological Perspective from the Reformed Heritage.” She argues that the debate over the purportedly universalistic horizon of Barth’s doctrine of election tacitly presupposes a more fundamental pneumatological consideration, namely, “how are we found to be ‘in Christ’”? How does the Spirit unite believers to Christ? Is Barth’s pneumatology consistent with his doctrine of election? McDonald raises fresh questions about Barth’s doctrine of election, which may channel the debate over his “universalism” into more fruitful theological territory.

* * *

The theological world has not stood still since Van Til penned his criticisms of Karl Barth, of course. While the majority of the conference papers dealt with concerns raised by Neo-Evangelicals such as Carl Henry and conservative Presbyterians like Cornelius Van Til, we also commissioned four papers to address new theological movements that have elicited significant comment in evangelical circles. In Part III of this volume, four scholars explore Barth’s relevance to these contemporary theological movements.

In “But Did It Really Happen?” Jason A. Springs, Assistant Professor of Religion, Ethics and Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame’s Kroc Institute of International Peace Studies, re-examines the Carl Henry-Hans Frei debate on biblical authority. According to Springs’s reading, Barth may
serve to mediate that debate, warding off as he did naïve biblical realism by emphasizing the dialectic between revelation and history, on the one hand, and guarding against all too sophisticated religious idealisms with his doctrine of analogy, on the other. Springs contends that Barth left a more enduring influence on Frei than many have presupposed and that Frei's reading of Barth helped (in part) to preserve him from adopting a purely idealistic (or antirealist) interpretation of biblical narrative.

The “emerging church” movement has generated much discussion among evangelicals during the past few years. John R. Franke, Clemens Professor of Missional Theology at Biblical Theological Seminary, contends that Barth helped to inspire the movement by exposing putative theological knowledge to an unceasing dialectic of negation and affirmation, by maintaining the irreducible plurality of the biblical witness, and by stressing the provisional and open-ended nature of doctrinal formulations. Barth's dialectical theology thus helped to open the theological space required for the emerging church conversation to begin. While many in the emerging church movement would resist being labeled “Barthian,” Franke argues that “the open-ended plurality of its ecclesiological intuitions is consonant with the implications of Barth's open-ended dogmatics.” He suggests that the health of the movement depends on its ability to become more self-critical about pluralism — or, dare we say, more “dialectical” in its approach to doctrinal diversity?

In “Ontological Violence and the Covenant of Grace,” Kevin W. Hector, Assistant Professor of Theology and of the Philosophy of Religions at the University of Chicago, puts Karl Barth into dialogue with John Milbank and the “Radical Orthodoxy” movement. Hector contends that Barth provides a superior basis for “ontological peace” in his covenant of grace. Whereas representatives of Radical Orthodoxy connect their notion of ontological peace with a hierarchical doctrine of the church, Barth refuses to make the church into the visible mediator between God and humanity. In Barth's view, non-Christians may be unwitting witnesses to Jesus Christ whatever their relation to the church. In a way, Hector's essay underscores the central themes of Bender's and Johnson's contributions and exhibits the convergence of evangelical concerns with significant strands in Barth's doctrine of the church.

The relationship between the church and the secular world comes to the fore again in the final essay in this section. Todd V. Cioffi, Assistant Professor of Congregational and Ministry Studies at Calvin College contends that while many evangelicals have developed renewed appreciation for the centrality of the church from Stanley Hauerwas, his writings have also fostered a
kind of “us-them” relationship toward the state and the secular world more generally. Moreover, Hauerwas’s influential interpretation of Karl Barth in *With the Grain of the Universe* gives the impression that his views on the church and the secular stand in close continuity with Barth’s. Cioffi argues that Barth actually offers a compelling alternative to Hauerwas by upholding the integrity of the church while avoiding any dualism between the church and the secular world. Again, the key is the lordship of Christ over the church — Christ is “Lord” even over church practices.

* * *

An “Afterword” by Bruce L. McCormack rounds off the essays, providing a critical but friendly assessment of the central elements in Van Til’s critique of Barth.

We hope that readers of this volume will experience the same recognition of spiritual friendship in Christ we discovered during the conference. The convergence between “Barthian” and evangelical theology has made it increasingly difficult to draw a clean line of demarcation. Clearly, contemporary evangelicals and “Barthians” have become more “friends” than “foes.” While still admitting large swathes of disagreement, we expect our sense of common cause to continue to grow as we face together the challenge of doing theology in a society increasingly forgetful of God.

We would be remiss if we did not thank in conclusion the many people who made the conference and this publication possible. We would like particularly to thank Sharon Kozlowski and Amy Ehlin for their assistance with the organizational details of the event. We would also like to thank Travis McMaken for his help with the planning and orchestration of events. Sarah Seraphin likewise deserves our thanks for assisting with registration (and designing an excellent tote bag). This volume has benefited greatly from the careful and diligent editorial work of Keith L. Johnson and especially David Congdon. The editors are deeply grateful to David for assisting with the final production of the volume, including the composition of the index.
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