Barthian Hermeneutics

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In much of the discussion on theological hermeneutics in the past decades, commonly underestimated is Karl Barth’s hermeneutical thought as a resource for contemporary theological interpretation. Edgar V. McKnight refers to Rudolf Bultmann overwhelmingly more than he does to Barth, in his post-modern use of the Bible. Grant R. Osborne also gives balanced, but relatively scant attention to Barth. Perhaps the reason is that Barth’s principle of “discontinuity” between humankind and God’s Word that can only be bridged by the work of the Spirit in interpretation undermines hermeneutics as a valid theological task, as Anthony C. Thiselton argues. However, in their hermeneutical works, Thiselton and Kevin J. Vanhoozer grant a considerable hearing to Barth more than they do to Bultmann.

This essay is an attempt to capture Barth’s hermeneutical reflections, drawn largely from his mature theology elucidated in Church Dogmatics, for the reason that his approach primarily concerns theological hermeneutics. To overlook him is to miss out on the contribution of what is considered by many as the most profound, significant, and influential theologian and weightiest dogmatician of the twentieth century. I will first present the context and content of Barth’s hermeneutics, including his theological journey, which gives light to the development of his hermeneutics. I will then examine his hermeneutical axioms with critical eyes.

**Context of Barthian Hermeneutics**

Karl Barth was born in Basel, Switzerland in May 10, 1886, into a Reformed theological family. His father was an NT scholar, taking an orthodox position against the growing liberalism of the day. Barth studied at Marburg and Berlin, under the liberal influence of Adolf von Harnack and Wilhelm Herrmann; and became pastor of Safenwil in the Aargau from 1911-21.

Over the years in pastoral ministry, he discovered the inadequacy of liberal theology in addressing the need to understand the Bible and the demands of the pastorate. This disenchantment with historical criticism intensified by the outbreak of war in 1914, when he saw 93 leading German intellectuals, including his theological mentors, giving support to Kaiser Wilhelm II. He recognized that the crisis was primarily theological. Influenced by Fyodor Dostoevsky and Soren Kierkegaard and significantly, the great Reformers, and above all, the Bible itself, he developed his early dialectical theology and later dogmatic theology no longer through the lens of liberal reinterpretation.

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1 John Webster, “Barth, Karl,” *DTIB*, 82.
6 John B. Webster, “Barth, Karl,” *NDT*, 76.
7 Webster, “Barth,” *NDT*, 76.
The end result was *The Epistle to the Romans* (*Der Romerbrief*), first published in 1918, which posited a direct rejection of the prevailing liberalism. From 1921–30, he shifted from pastor to professor of Systematic Theology at Gottingen, teaching later on at Munster and Bonn, while leading the dialectical theology movement, in collaboration with Emil Brunner, Bultmann and Friedrich Gogarten. Having been reoriented to Heinrich Heppe’s *Reformed Dogmatics*, he published his *Christian Dogmatics in Outline* in 1927. Meanwhile, he gained more insights from his study of Anselm, paving the way for an eventual development of dogmatics from the dialectical theology of his earlier years. He published his book on Anselm, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (*Fides Quaerens Intellectum*) in 1931, which led the way towards his first half of Vol. 1 of *Church Dogmatics* in 1932.

**Content of Barthian Hermeneutics**

The primary axiom of Barth’s hermeneutics is that theology is rooted in Scripture and is thus a servant of it. Barth asserts, “We are tied to these texts. And we can only ask about revelation when we surrender to the recollection attested in these texts.” Earlier, he explains, “Theology can have no more urgent concern than always remaining true to itself . . . as scriptural theology. Scripture should thus be and remain the master in theology’s house.” For Barth, “God’s revelation in the human word of Holy Scripture not only wants but can make itself said and heard.” Revelation is not given apart from Scripture. Scripture is a form of this revelation. Christ is the content of this same revelation. Theology is to be scriptural, biblical theology. Thus, theology is always subject to the Bible.

To be true to the text, Barth aims to draw out the subject matter of the text. This is where he thinks that the historical-critical exegetes are not critical enough. His concern is not so much in the verification of the historical authenticity as in the demands of the subject matter of the text. According to Barth, the definite theme of the text is as follows: “God is in heaven and you on earth. This God’s relationship to this man, this man’s relationship to this God is for me the theme of the Bible and the sum of philosophy at once.” In this statement, he answers his

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11 Webster, “Barth,” *NDT*, 77.
hermeneutical-theological question, “What is the Word of God and who am I in relation to God’s Word?” The hermeneutical question for Barth is how to use human words to talk of the Word.\textsuperscript{21}

With this definitive theme of the text, Barth recognizes God’s revelation in history as a description of a relational God. Barth identifies God as “He who gives Himself to humanity as Trinity.”\textsuperscript{22} The quality of God is this willing, self-giving act of sovereign love.\textsuperscript{23} For Barth, God’s Word is never disconnected with God’s act. He affirms, “God’s word is itself God’s act.” God’s Word is His self-giving, loving, holy presence. In this “I, You” encounter, God transforms the reader through the biblical text. Barth says that God’s Word acts as “a promise . . . a judgment, a claim on man by which God binds man to Himself.”\textsuperscript{24} Very much ahead of the modern speech act theory, Barth “sees the word of God as performing acts of promise, election, call, disclosure, and bestowal of life.”\textsuperscript{25}

Thus, God is never the object of our methods of interpretation. Rather, God is always the subject who interprets us.\textsuperscript{26} The reader is not to be critical of the biblical text, therefore, for the text is in fact critical of the reader. For the attentive reader, the text causes a crisis of encounter.\textsuperscript{27} This dialectic theology or “theology of crisis” sets sinful humanity before an absolutely transcendent God, and the utter incapability of humankind to know God unless God reveals His Word in the text.\textsuperscript{28} It is an “I, You” encounter with God, not an “I, It” relationship.\textsuperscript{29}

Our task, then, is not to impose our philosophies on the Word of God, but to correspond to it in humble submission.\textsuperscript{30} Because it is God who is the subject and humankind is the object, therefore, Barth rejects enforcing human hermeneutical principles on God’s revelation. Any human philosophical method of interpreting the Bible cannot sufficiently grasp that revelation. For Barth, the interpreter should first listen to the human words of Scripture, for God’s Word can or may reveal itself. Even in listening, Barth cautions against hearing one’s own speaking. He wrote, “Our supposed listening is in fact a strange mixture of hearing and our own speaking, and, in accordance with the usual rule, it is most likely that our own speaking will be the really decisive event.”\textsuperscript{31} The reader, then, must discipline one’s self to let God’s Word speak, “to read what it intends, and to stop confusing it with one’s own speaking.”\textsuperscript{32} Barth recognizes that all interpretive work is never presuppositionless.\textsuperscript{33} Yet it must be an open, self-assessing, text-critical, yet non-ideological effort of getting the sense of the text.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{22} Barth, \textit{Dogmatics}, Vol. 1, 489.
\textsuperscript{23} Anthony C. Thiselton, \textit{Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 42.
\textsuperscript{24} Barth, \textit{Dogmatics}, Vol. 1, 147.
\textsuperscript{25} Barth, \textit{Dogmatics}, Vol. 1, 150.
\textsuperscript{26} Thiselton, \textit{Interpreting God}, 63.
\textsuperscript{27} Barth, \textit{Dogmatics}, Vol. 1, 295.
\textsuperscript{28} Jeanrond, “Hermeneutics,” \textit{Reckoning}, 89.
\textsuperscript{30} Bruce K. Waltke, \textit{An Old Testament Theology} (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 75.
\textsuperscript{31} For Barth, “Theology that uses philosophy is always on the defensive and more anxious to accommodate the Christian faith to others than to pay attention to what the Bible really says.” Michaud, “Karl,” \textit{BCEWT}.
\textsuperscript{32} Barth, \textit{Dogmatics}, Vol. 1, 470.
\textsuperscript{33} Thomas F. Torrance, \textit{Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology, 1910-1931} (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), 22.
\textsuperscript{34} Barth, \textit{Dogmatics}, Vol. 1, 470.
Barth then recommends three practical ways of approaching the biblical text, which Werner G. Jeanrond aptly outlines. (1) Observation—studying the literary and historical structure and sense of the text. (2) Reflection—thinking along with the text. One’s philosophies, emotions, or axioms should not determine our reading of the text. (3) Appropriation—or usus scripturae. Here, one takes the biblical witness as his/her own responsibility. Instead of using Scripture for our own purposes, we allow Scripture to take over us for God’s purposes.

A second principle in Barth’s hermeneutics is Scripture as the faithful witness to divine revelation. Barth never shows the reliability of Scripture; he assumes it. He explained, “We will not ask: why the Bible? [sic] and look for external or internal grounds and reasons. We will leave it to the Bible itself . . . to vindicate itself by what takes place [in it].”

Brevard S. Childs noted that Barth “worked from a theological context, namely, the Christian canon.” The Scripture is not a part but the whole witness to the church of the Word of God. Barth interpreted Scripture by Scripture throughout his <i>Dogmatics</i>, which indicates his approach to the question of what constitutes canon. The context of any verse is the entire Scripture.

Yet Barth distinguishes between revelation and canon. It is important to distinguish his definition of the “Word of God” in three senses: (1) God in the flesh, Jesus Christ; (2) the witness of Scripture; and (3) the preaching of the gospel. The Bible, then, is a mere “witness of God’s revelation” and “not itself revelation.” As the witness of Christ, it is for Barth a form of the Word of God. He distinguishes “between the flow of words, on the one hand, and that which lies ‘back behind’ them and seeks to become visible,” as Gerhard Maier puts it. The Word of God is “behind” the text. Thus, God’s Word is not revealed in the text as text. It is revealed in the witness of the text. The biblical text merely “contains” God’s Word or revelation. Barth does not believe in Scripture as the Word of God, but only as the written witness to the Word of God, which God can and may reveal when one is reading Scripture. He does not believe in the immediate (direct) witness of the biblical text, but only to its mediate (indirect) testimony. For only God can speak for God.

Revelation then is the event when God speaks. Yet the speech of God is not in human words which are fallible and errant (the Bible), but his personal presence. The form of this speech is Jesus Christ, which is the presence of God. Bernard Ramm explains, “When God addresses me by Jesus Christ and I respond, then revelation occurs. Revelation is thus both God speaking to me of grace and forgiveness in Jesus Christ and my response of faith to this personal address.”

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36 Barth, <i>Dogmatics</i>, Vol. 1, 722.
38 Wallace, <i>The World of the Text</i>, 3.
39 Barth, <i>Dogmatics</i>, Vol. 1, 506.
41 Childs, <i>Biblical Theology</i>, 241.
43 Barth, <i>Dogmatics</i>, Vol. 1, 3-45, 47-124.
44 Barth, <i>Dogmatics</i>, Vol. 1, 512.
46 Michaud, “Karl,” <i>BCEWT</i>.
When Scripture then becomes to us the Word of God, the only right response is to accept it by faith and obedience. The Bible is not infallible, but full of errors. For it is a human book, yet a book that witnesses to God’s Word. The presence of God’s Word transforms this book, though this is not yet revelation. Revelation is but God’s free activity and not that of Scripture. Since the Word of God is God’s free act of revelation as a sovereign subject, then it cannot be bound or identified with the Bible. To do so is to rob God of His freedom to speak or not speak in Scripture.\(^{48}\) This event of God’s revelation is brought about only by the witness of the Spirit. Barth posits, “The witness of Holy Scripture is therefore the witness of the Holy Spirit.”\(^{49}\)

Hence, the basic principle of biblical interpretation is subordination or obedience. Barth talks of “the freely performed act of subordinating all human concepts (Vorstellungen), ideas and convictions to the witness of revelation supplied to us in Scripture.”\(^{50}\) Since no method of interpretation could ever reveal God’s Word, the interpreter must therefore let the Bible interpret himself/herself, obediently, and let the Spirit speak the Word of God through the text.\(^{51}\)

What is the reason for this basic rule of interpreting the text? The answer lies in the third axiom in Barth’s hermeneutics—the Christological content and concentration of Scripture. The rule of subordination or obedience is necessary because of the content of Scripture, which is Jesus Christ. Barth elevated Christology in hermeneutics. He says, “The Bible says all sorts of things . . . but it says in truth only one thing: the name of Jesus Christ.”\(^{52}\) While the Bible talks about many things in many ways, it centers on Christ Himself and the reconciliation achieved in Him. He asserts, “The content of the Bible, and the object of its witness, is Jesus Christ as the name of the God who deals graciously with man the sinner.”\(^{53}\) In the name of Christ, the Bible “proclaims God in his richness and mercy, and man in his need and helplessness.”\(^{54}\) For Barth, Ramm wrote, “Jesus Christ is the clarity of Scripture and the clarity of every doctrine of Scripture.”\(^{55}\) Thus, every text of Scripture stands to bear witness to Christ. If the theme of the text is God’s revelation of history, the content of the text is Christ as the revelation of God.

Here, Barth moves away from his earlier dialectic, from an emphasis of setting humans apart from God, to a movement of God in gracious relationship with humankind.\(^{56}\) “In biblical interpretation,” Thomas F. Torrance clarifies, “that takes the form of theological exegesis, the whole intention of which is to let the Word be heard in and through the words.”\(^{57}\) [emphasis added] To this end, the key is an impartial investigation of the text. It will not seek the historical facts behind the texts, but rather what the text says. It will not fit the text into a preconceived picture of history. It will not say in advance what the text can or cannot say or ask questions that the text does not ask, as David E. Demson points out. Rather, it will ask what the text asks and be

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\(^{49}\) Barth, *Dogmatics*, Vol. 1, 538.

\(^{50}\) Barth, *Dogmatics*, Vol. 1, 715.


\(^{52}\) Barth, *Dogmatics*, Vol. 1, 720.


\(^{54}\) Barth, *Dogmatics*, Vol. 1, 720.


\(^{56}\) Michaud, “Karl,” *BCEWT*.

\(^{57}\) “In dogmatic activity it is the questioning which seeks to penetrate into the deep inner forms which the Word of God takes in his communication, and our assimilation, of divine revelation.” Torrance, *Barth*, 89.
open to the answers it gives. For the Christocentric content of the Word of God makes itself heard in the text. 58

A fourth hermeneutical rule of Barth is that the subject matter of the text must guide one’s interpretation. 59 He states, “The universal rule of interpretation is that a text can be read and understood and expounded only with reference to and in light of its theme.” 60

Barth saw how the historical-critical scholars of his day abandoned this principle. The historical-critical movement then, morphed from discovering the historical background of the text to an ideology that denied the theological theme of the text its rightful place. Barth accepted the validity of historical criticism, yet questioned its intent to stress the historical situation at the expense of the theological interpretation of Scripture. 61 The historical critical approach studied the text scientifically, without attempting to understand the text in a way that the author wanted it to be understood. 62 Barth did not reject historical criticism, but went beyond it “to press on to the real hermeneutical task, ‘the task of understanding.” 63 We should read the Gospels as “testimony and not as ‘historical sources.” 64 It testifies to the Word of God which is a free and dynamic act of God. Because this act of revelation depends on God as the sovereign subject who interprets us, it cannot be grasped by any human historical or philosophical investigation. The sensus literalis of the text testifies to the Word of God, which is the presence of Christ. The exegete, then, must aim at the meaning of the text. 65

Finally, faith is the hermeneutical principle sine qua non for the Church. Hermeneutics itself is a search for understanding. Faith moves Barth to seek knowledge and understanding in the biblical text. Barth affirms, “It is my very faith itself that summons me to knowledge.” 66 He would say with Anselm, “I believe in order that I might understand. For this too I believe: that unless I believe, I shall not understand.” 67

Faith in the witness of Scripture is the key to knowing the revelation of God. In order to know that God can and does reveal His Word, while reading the witness of Scripture, one must believe “that Holy Scripture as the original and legitimate witness of divine revelation is itself the Word of God.” 68 Believing this is foundational to exegesis of Scripture.

**Criticism of Barthian Hermeneutics**

Barth’s view of God, as the sovereign subject who interprets us in His revelation in history is thought-provoking and humbling. It reforms the reader’s attitude in the hermeneutical task, which largely depends on his/her intention in theological study. If the aim is merely the

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62 “Barth saw in historical criticism great value on its own level, but it often led Christians to lessen the significance of the testimony of the apostolic community to Jesus as being based on faith and not on history.” Michaud, “Karl,” *BCEWT*.
67 A. N. S. Lane, “Anselm,” *NDT*, 27.
ideological investigation of the text, and no more, then it may become an end in itself, leading to a knowledge that makes the self proud among readers who forget that they are receivers of divine intent. Yet if the object of all interpretative work is the God who speaks in the text, then the higher end of all acquisition of knowledge are the listening, knowing, and obeying of the divine will. If Barth is right, then the goal of every hermeneutical work is basically the understanding of the text in a spirit of humble obedience to the divine intent.

The text-bound quality of Barthian hermeneutics as the basis of hermeneutical inquiry makes possible a theological hermeneutics that seeks to be true to the biblical text. In this framework, theology will continue to be exegetical theology, as Barth’s *Dogmatics* shows it, allowing for a sustained investigation into the “biblical world.” The requirement of faith in the self-revealing nature of Scripture rejects attempts of doing theology on the basis of anti-supernatural philosophical systems.69

Barth’s stance on God’s Word as speech acts of promise is empowering and liberating to the postmodern self. Thiselton argues that through these acts, God’s Word gives the reader “an identity and significance as the recipient of loving and transforming address.”70 The postmodern mind thinks that “everything we perceive, express, and interpret is influenced by our gender, class, and culture; knowledge is partial and situated, and no one interpretation is superior to another.”71 In this paradigm, authenticity and meaning are tentative and subjective. Reality is partly the result of manipulation and self-interest. However, Barth has planted the provocative thought that God is God, not because of some external influence or selfish motive, but because he willingly gives himself in selfless, unrestrained love. This divine act of giving oneself while expecting nothing in return already constitutes a rejection of manipulative power.72 From a historic evangelical standpoint, God’s Word is not a copy of human interpretation, but an original copy of divine intent. Behind the human writer of the text is the divine author who inspired that writer to express its purpose, and gives it meaning. The value judgments of Scripture are never based on the worldview of the social elite that wrote history in its pages. Rather, they are the decisions and virtues of the divine author.

Perhaps a key deficiency in Barth’s hermeneutics is that there is no room for the reader to enter the hermeneutical process of understanding the text, as Jeanrond suggests. Barth begins with a “macro” view of the event of God’s revelation to the reader in a crisis encounter. Yet how can we determine this revelation unless we do “acts of interpretation” first? To understand the text, we must first believe what it tells us, Barth says. Yet what the text tells the reader is found only in the text. There is thus the need to engage in interpreting the text.73

At a time of intense seeking of sources behind the text by historical critics, Barth’s emphasis on understanding and subjecting one’s self to the theological subject matter of the text was indeed counterrevolutionary. His stress on fusing the horizons of history and the present in understanding the text set that trend in modern theological hermeneutics today.74 However, he did not elucidate how we can read the text or how we can discover the message of the text. Barth would say that God is God. Only God can reveal God through the Holy Spirit. The theme of the text will reveal itself. Thus, we cannot impose any human method in interpreting the text. Yet as

74 Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, 322.
Jeanrond asks, why should the work of the Spirit not include adequate methods of studying the biblical texts? Of course, we could grant that no methodology can guarantee the event of the revelation of God’s word. The methodological preparation can help the reader “act more responsibly in the process of interpretation.”

There is also the subjective dimension of reader-experienced revelation. At what point do we determine if the self-revealing, life-changing effect of the text to the reader really an experience of God’s Word? What if there will be a myriad of transforming yet contradicting experiences? How do we prevent a scenario of readers seeing things in the text which are good to their own eyes, but at the expense of the truth of the text? Barth did say that if the reader sees only “‘an empty spot’ instead of that to which the author points, ‘that indicates something about either the extraordinary nature of the content of what they say or the state of the reader.’” Yet Barth does not appear to engage the problems of human misreadings and distortions. His hermeneutics is described as a hermeneutics of revelation, not of “signification.” Still, the question remains as to the functions of language and its significance and implications.

Barth’s Christological motif in Scripture prevents an extreme preoccupation of looking at the historical sources of the text. However, as Osborne warns, there is the risk of allegorizing or spiritualizing the OT texts to promote presupposed types of Christ in every symbol. In this paradigm for example, the redemptive historical record of God’s dealing with Israel is lost to speculative attempts, reducing it to prophetic activities. Although the Christologic interpretation highlights the redemptive-history of Scripture, this hermeneutical tendency however may supplant the rich and diverse emphases of Scripture in multiple genres.

Barth’s dogmatics is grounded on Christ as the content of Scripture, but not on the whole Bible, which he regarded as errant and fallible. He accepts the Bible’s absolute authority. It is a witness to revelation. It is unique. However, Geoffrey W. Bromiley notes that Barth promotes “propositions which are poorly supported in Scripture and which open the door wide to liberal approaches.” Examples of these would be his view of on the instrumental inspiration of Scripture and an errant Bible. The notion of an errant text leads to a false dichotomy unsupported by Scripture, wherein God is inerrant, but the biblical writers were not. “His handling of Scripture,” Bromiley adds, “is in many ways the weakest and most disappointing part of the whole Dogmatics, and his safeguards against subjectivism here are very flimsy.”

Barth’s view on Scripture destroys the inspiration of Scripture, as Maier avers, especially at that point where Scripture takes form as the intended word of the Spirit. It disconnects the biblical word in concrete form and “ultimately binds us to a nonconcrete, timeless ‘back behind.’” It also rejects the position of the Reformers, who believed that the Bible is the actual will of God. However, the Bible only and the Bible completely, is the Word of God written.

If the revelation of God’s Word is found in the human encounter with God in the preaching of Christ, then the authority of the Bible is now located in the believer’s experience of that revelation, and not in Scripture’s self-authenticating inspiration of that revelation. However,

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75 Jeanrond, “Hermeneutics,” Reckoning, 92.
76 Vanhoozer, Meaning, 439.
78 Osborne, Spiral, 368.
79 Bromiley, Creative Minds, 52.
80 Bromiley, Creative Minds, 52.
81 Maier, Hermeneutics, 123.
God’s Word is God’s Word whether we recognize or accept it or not.\textsuperscript{83}

The inner witness of the Spirit now replaces the historic view of verbal, entire inspiration.\textsuperscript{84} Instead of the Spirit breathing the Word in the text (entire inspiration), the Spirit now testifies to the Word in the obedient believer (instrumental inspiration). In effect, it ultimately develops an inner canon within the outer canon of Scripture, or what Bruce K. Waltke calls, “a canon-within-a-canonical theology, which ultimately places authority in the audience [or reader].”\textsuperscript{85} If Barth is right, we may be dealing with another of a different kind of “canon” from hereon—ironically, the non-text-based one.

\textsuperscript{83} Waltke, \textit{Old Testament}, 75.

\textsuperscript{84} Osborne, \textit{Spiral}, 436.

\textsuperscript{85} Waltke, \textit{Old Testament}, 76.
Bibliography


