

THE THEOLOGY OF KARL BARTH
TPHL 636 001
Fall 2013

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THEME AND CONTENT

The focus of this course is on Barth's doctrine of revelation as a doctrine of the Word of God. In terms of systematic theology, or Christian doctrine, the central question is how we can know what we know about God (if we can know anything about God). Barth's answer to this question caused a revolution in modern theology early in the 20th century. In short, Barth came to the conclusion that we cannot know anything about God, except as—or “only” as—*from God*: as God gives Herself to be known. And according to Barth, God gives Herself to be known in the miraculous free action of reconciliation in Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit, as witnessed to in scripture; that is, in God's Word-in-act. Therefore, the God revealed to us and so known by us in this free divine action is already—and only—our reconciler and redeemer: “God for us, sinners.”

This affirmation by Barth of (his ‘yes’ to) this unequivocal divine YES to the human being as the answer to how we can know God (which also determines, or is determined by, *what* we know of God) required, he felt, an equally unequivocal rejection (a ‘no’) of many modern, but also many traditional, theological assumptions and positions: all of which fall under the category of “natural theology” (as Barth understood it). Consequently, Barth's answer to the question of how we know God in his doctrine of revelation was both “old” and “new”, seemingly “traditional” or “orthodox” yet radically innovative. It is no surprise, then, that what Barth had to say on this issue had something to offend almost everyone – conservatives and liberals alike. And so the case is today, as well.

The main work of this course will be to come to an understanding of (1) what, why and how Barth said what he felt is necessary to say; (2) what, why and how what Barth said offended both those on the “left” and on the “right” in his own context and that of today; and (3) come to our own understanding of what, why and how we ought to be offended by Barth and/or find him an albeit complicated theological resource in and for our own contexts.

Why is Barth's witness to the unequivocal goodness of the news (about God for us in Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit) such bad news for contemporary—and much traditional—theology?

GOALS AND OUTCOMES

In short, students will gain a workable grasp of why, how and in what ways Barth's theology was and is an offence and challenge to both liberals/progressives and conservatives, and be able to engage him knowledgeably, complexly and fruitfully as either friend or foe—or, hopefully, both—depending on their own contexts and positions

More particularly, students will be able to:

- Describe Barth's view of natural theology, explain why he felt it was dangerous theologically and ethically, and recognize its various forms in both historical and contemporary contexts

- Explain how Barth understood his rejection of natural theology's "point of contact" or continuity between God and the human to be in the service of a positive affirmation (the good news) of the union and fellowship of God and the human in Jesus Christ/Spirit

- Correspondingly, identify and describe the particular theological characteristics of God and God's relation to the human being that this positive affirmation by Barth, and its corresponding rejection of natural theology, requires

- Articulate Barth's three-fold form of the Word of God, especially in terms of the nature and authority of scripture, and explain its challenge to both conservative and liberal/progressive positions

- Explain the *a posteriori* nature of Barth's view of how we know God in God's Word, and explain its implications

- Identify and describe the various ways and themes in which Barth's theology "cuts both ways" in challenging both the liberal/progressives on the "left" and the conservatives on the "right," both in his context in and our own

- Correspondingly, identify and describe various ways and themes in which Barth can be seen as a problem and threat to Christian theology and ethics, particularly in our contemporary context; and give some sense of how Barth might respond, or how he could nevertheless be seen as a complex resource

- Assess Barth as a resource—both positive and negative—for churches today, with regard to theology, preaching, ethics and mission

COURSE STRUCTURE

Barth's 'NO' - What Barth Was Worried About or Against:

We will begin at the beginning, with Barth's infamous break with liberalism, the context and forces which brought it about.

Barth's 'YES' - What Barth Was For (*God's* 'YES' and 'NO'):

We will then move to the beginning of his mature theology, focusing on his doctrine of revelation in the Church Dogmatics, in order to see how the negative movement of his "break" with liberalism turned to – and was in fact in the service of – a positive affirmation of the goodness of the news of God for and with us in Jesus Christ in the Spirit.

What Worries *Us* about Barth:

We will end by considering those ways in which Barth is particularly problematic for contemporary theology, particularly at a place like DTS.

EXPECTATIONS/GRADING

Attendance and informed participation is a fundamental requirement for all participants in the course. More than one absence will affect your grade (urgent and dire emergencies will of course be taken into account). *Informed* questions and participation in discussion (reflecting familiarity with the assigned readings and previous class discussion) are required as a vital part of our learning together, with the proviso that the instructor is free to hold court at length and ad infinitum if and when the spirit so moves. (It is *not* assumed that it will necessarily be the *Holy* Spirit that is moving on such occasions).

It is expected that all paper assignments will be the final result of several drafts (*plan you time to enable you to proofread and revise!*), the logic and argument carefully outlined and developed, the prose checked and re-checked for spelling, grammar and clarity of articulation. Content, of course, must be sound, pertinent, well-informed and well argued, but writing clarity and style will also figure prominently in the evaluation process.

MA/MDivs will take a take-home midterm, and have the choice of a final exam or writing a final paper (10-12 pgs).

PhDs will write two short papers (3-5) and write a major final paper (15-18 pgs). We will also meet several times outside of class to discuss extra reading.

MA/MDiv.	Take –home mid-term exam	40%
	Final paper or exam	60%
PhD.	Short papers	20% each
	Final paper	60%

AN ETHICS OF DISCUSSION

The teaching of this class will be grounded in the assumption that we learn through respectful encounters with others, whether those others be students, teachers or texts. Therefore, all participants in the class must share a commitment to creating a classroom environment and class dynamic respectful of the diversity of students' backgrounds and experience, and of differences of perspective and opinion. This is especially important – and especially difficult – in a learning community of real diversity such as we are privileged to be a part of here at Drew. In such a community, the voice of every student, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation or religious affiliation, is invited as a valuable and necessary contribution to the common table of study and discussion. These guidelines hold for instructor as well as students, and students are expected to let the

instructor know (appropriately, in one on one conversation) if, when and how their behavior in the classroom appears to be at odds with these guidelines.

SEMESTER SCHEDULE

1. 9/4 Meet and Greet/Introduction

THE CONTEXT: BARTH'S 'NO' (AND 'YES')

2. 9/11 Context I: Barth's Break with Liberalism and Natural Theology

Readings: *Humanity of God*, "Evangelical Theology of 19th Cent"
Theologian of Freedom, "Introduction"
God in Action, "Introduction"
 "No! Response to Brunner"

3. 9/18 Context II: The Corrective Turn: Revelation, Word, Bible

Readings: *Word God/Man*, "Strange New Word/Bible"
God in Action, "Revelation"
God in Action, "The Christian as Witness"

4. 9/25 Context III: Revelation and the Predicament of Preaching: God's Word and Human Words – Two Alternatives

Readings: *Humanity of God*, "Humanity of God"
Word of God/Man, "Word of God/Task of Ministry"
God Here/Now, "Sov of Word of God/Decision of Faith"
 pp. 13-25

"THE NEWS IS GOOD!" BARTH'S 'YES' (AND 'NO'): THE WORD OF GOD, REVELATION, INCARNATION, RECONCILIATION, ADDRESS/SUMMONS – GOD'S 'YES' (AND 'NO')

5. 10/2 Church Proclamation

Readings: *CD I/1*, section 3

PhD MEETING: on *CD I/1*, sections 1 and 2; "No!/Brunner"

6. 10/9 Three-fold Form of the Word of God

Readings: *CD I/1*, section 4

HAND OUT MID-TERM (TAKE-HOME)

10/16 - READING WEEK

7. 10/23 Nature of the Word: Speech, Act, Mystery

Readings: *CD I/1*, section 5

8. 10/30 Knowability of the Word: Revelation and Experience

Readings: *CD I/1*, section 6, pp. 187-227

MID-TERM DUE

PhD SHORT PAPER DUE

9. 11/6 Knowability of the Word: Revelation and Faith

Readings: *CD I/1*, section 6, pp. 227-247

God Here/Now, "Sov of Word of God/Decision of Faith," pp. 25-33

God in Action, "Christian as Witness," Appendix

PhD MEETING: *CD II/1* TBA

THE CHALLENGES OF BARTH IN OUR CONTEXT TODAY: *OUR* 'NO' AND/OR 'YES'?

10. 11/13 Universalism and Religious Pluralism

Readings: Boesel, "Better News Hath No Evangelical than This," in *Karl Barth and the Future of Evangelical Theology*

God Here/Now, "Proc of God's Free Grace"

---, "Humanism," pp. 128-132

11. 11/20 Ethics and Theological Anthropology

Readings: *Humanity of God*, "The Gift of Freedom"

God Here/Now, "Christian Ethics"

---, "Proclamation Here/Now"

---, "Humanism" (recommended)

Barmen Declaration

"Jesus and the Movement for Social Justice"

PhD SHORT PAPER DUE

11/27 – THANKSGIVING BREAK

12. 12/4 Barth and Feminist Theology
Readings: S. Jones, "This God which Is Not One," in *Transformations: Theology and the French Feminists*
J. Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*, pp. 209-222
K. Sonderegger, "Barth and Feminism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*

PhD MEETING: CD II/2 TBA

FINAL EXAM DUE – TBA

ALL FINAL PAPERS DUE – TBA