

The Significance of Karl Barth

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Church Issues | *Sword & Trowel*
December 2009

We are often asked about the theological standing of the Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968). In December 1968, Dr Lloyd-Jones asked me to print the following obituary in *Evangelical Times*, which I had founded the previous year. [Editor]

THE PASSING of Dr Karl Barth at the age of 82 is an event that calls for comment.

As a man, there is only one adjective to apply to him and that is 'great'. Everything about him was big. He clearly had a first-class intellect. Nothing else could account for his acute criticism of various theological outlooks and his own massive Church Dogmatics. He was said by those who knew him to be a 'great character'. But his greatness was seen supremely in his heroic stand against Hitler and Nazism as expressed in the Barmen Declarations which led to his expulsion from Germany.

There is no question also but that he stood out above all others as a theological giant in this century. No name has been quoted more freely not only in Protestant circles but also among Roman Catholics.

He first became known in the early twenties and in this country in 1927 with the publication of a translation of one of his books under the title of *The Word of God and the Word of Man*. This was followed in a few years by the English translation of the second edition of his commentary on the Epistle to the Romans. Others followed in rapid succession such as *Credo* and then his great work on dogmatics in many volumes.

The great question is – What has all this meant from the evangelical standpoint? The answer is quite simple – practically nothing! At first many evangelicals of reformed persuasion felt that Barth was a great new ally. His attacks on Liberalism and Modernism were devastating, and he appeared to be reasserting the old Calvinistic position. But alas, it was only a matter of appearance.

To start with he accepted a radical criticism of the Bible, particularly the Old Testament. His view of revelation was clearly not that of the Reformers. He denied propositional revelation, and his view of the historicity of the foundational facts of the Christian faith expressed itself in his strange division of history into 'holy' and 'secular'.

'By their fruits ye shall know them' and when this canon of judgement is applied to Barth and his works it is clear that the result has been entirely negative from the evangelical standpoint.

Though his works and influence have been in existence for 50 years, he has brought no revival to the church. This is not surprising as his approach, in spite of his denials, is essentially philosophical. His style was involved and difficult and while for a time he produced a crop of intellectual preachers, who were always preaching about 'the Word', it soon became clear that they were not preaching the Word itself.

By now his influence from the continent has been eclipsed by that of more radical thinkers.

Barth never had much influence in England, his whole approach being alien to the English type of thinking. In Scotland he had a much greater following and succeeded in turning into Barthians a number of younger men who had been prominent in evangelical circles.

His keenest students at the present time seem to be Roman Catholic theologians, especially those of the liberal school that is accepting more and more the Higher Critical view of the Bible, and is at the same time anxious to interpret the pronouncements of the Council of Trent in a Protestant direction.

It may well be that his greatest achievement will be to provide a bridge between a modified (but not truly reformed) Roman Catholicism and a degenerate Protestantism, which often does not know what it believes.

As a negative critic of the old Modernism he was superb, but because he tried to bend the Scriptures and their message to his philosophical system and failed to become 'a fool for Christ's sake' in the Pauline sense, and to submit himself to that 'simplicity which is in Christ Jesus', his positive contribution to the cause of the Gospel was virtually nil. It is because of this that his name should never be coupled with those of Luther and Calvin. What a difference there is between causing a stir, or even a flutter, in the theological dovecotes, and being used of God to produce a reformation and a re-awakening!

All honour to a great man . . . but!