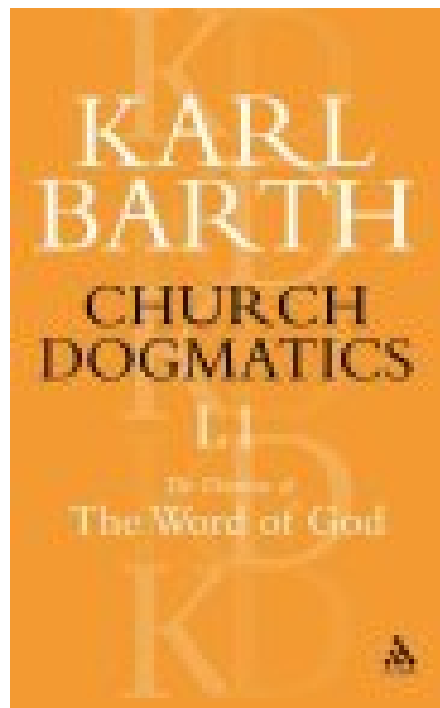




Church Dogmatics 1.1: The Doctrine of the Word of God

Karl Barth , Thomas F. Torrance (Editor) , Geoffrey William Bromiley (Editor)

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s/t: Introduction, The Word of God as the Criterion of Dogmatics, The Revelation of God

Described by Pope Pius XII as the most important theologian since Thomas Aquinas, the Swiss pastor & theologian, Karl Barth, continues to be a major influence on students, scholars & preachers today. Barth's theology found its expression mainly thru his closely reasoned 14-part magnum opus, Die Kirchliche Dogmatik. Having taken over 30 years to write, the Church Dogmatics is regarded as one of the most important theological works of all time, representing the pinnacle of his achievement as a theologian.

Church Dogmatics 1.1: The Doctrine of the Word of God Details

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From Reader Review Church Dogmatics 1.1: The Doctrine of the Word of God for online ebook

Jacob Aitken says

Karl Barth's goal in this volume is to recover the proclamation of the Word of God as the place where God's message of salvation meets sinful man. Contrary to the shrill reactions from the Reformed crowd, Barth did not deny the truth of the Gospel. However, Barth's message did rework what we mean by "the Bible," "The Word of God" and "Revelation." Some of these re-structurings will cause problems to conservative Calvinists. Be that as it may, the reasons why Barth did these things are very instructive and for the present reader, offered a way through many impasses in reading the Bible.

Similar to the hysteria surrounding the academic career of N. T. Wright, Karl Barth also wrote in response to liberalism and modernism—something both his and Wright's critics failed to grasp. Barth denied that God was the "sum total of human experience" (ala Schliermacher) or the "evolution of religious consciousness" (ala Tillich). Rather, God was "wholly other" who meets man through his Revelation. What does Barth mean by "Revelation?" For Barth, Revelation is "the Word become Flesh" (119). The "Word of God" is our meeting said Revelation in the proclamation of the Church (137).

Barth's reading will cause problems for many conservatives, and we should seriously consider these problems. If Barth is correct, then "inerrancy" simply becomes a non-issue. One can still maintain inerrancy, but there is no longer a need to fight that (admittedly difficult) battle. Seeing God's revelation as "the Incarnate Word" is helpful. This is precisely how the apostle John spoke about Jesus and the Word of God. Such a reading brings an urgently personal dimension to issues like Christ and the Bible. This does not mean that our understanding of who Jesus is is now relative and up for grabs. The Bible still remains the criterion for the Church in its proclamation. While no longer seen as literally the "breath of God continually breathing in our quiet time," and no longer seen as direct, propositional revelation from God, it is still holy men's witness to God's revelation. It is still the script of the Church. The Bible, though, must now be read and interpreted in the Church. Academic theology is officially finished.

Throughout the volume Barth repeatedly (and helpfully) summarizes his argument. We meet "the Word of God" (which is "speech from God," cf. 157) in three forms: proclamation, Scripture, and revelation. We can know the Word of God because God's word is "speech." It is speech to us and speech implies, assuming God isn't insane, a rational speaker. The point, then, of a rationally speaking God is that he speaks to (at least some) men who can (at least some times) rationally receive his message (187, 214).

The structure of Barth's introductory volume will seem peculiar to some. He spends the first half of the volume dealing with problems of revelation and Scripture and then moves into the Trinity. However, there have been hints within Barth's narrative that he planned this all along. Keep in mind that for Barth "revelation" does not equal "propositional speech from/about God," but rather, revelation is God, or more specifically, The Word of God Incarnate. If that is so, then in discussing revelation we must discuss God, and in discussing God, we must discuss the Trinity.

Barth on Analogy

Barth was notorious for denying the concept of man's analogous reasoning towards God, even calling the doctrine of analogia entis the "artifact of Antichrist." Critics have since accused Barth of denying all forms of analogy and thus reducing Barth's position to absurdity, for analogous reasoning is inevitable (e.g., when we call God "father" we obviously have at least some human point of reference). But Barth did not deny all forms of analogy. Interestingly, neither do the Eastern Trinitarians. What is being denied is an analogy

between God's being and creaturely being. The reason both groups deny this analogy is because the content of the creaturely being (which is what we know) begins to define (and thus limit) our understanding of the divine being. There is no problem, within reason, however, of drawing analogies between God's operations or the divine persons, which Barth does.

Revelation as Trinity

Barth's second half of this volume is a discussion of God as Trinity. This necessarily follows, per his gloss, from his discussion of Prolegomena, because God reveals himself as Trinity. Keep in mind that for Barth God's revelation is not "The Bible" but God himself. It is here that Barth introduces his (in)famous description of God as "three modes of being" (359). By this Barth simply wants to describe God's life in a way that doesn't suffer from the usual definitions of "person." Men have criticized Barth for using the term "mode" and from that drew the conclusion that Barth is a modalist. I don't think Barth is a modalist, though. Instead, Barth is drawing upon the Cappadocian notion of *tropos hyparchos*, or mode (way) of being. By this he means that the one God is God in the mode of Father, in the mode of Son, and in the mode of Holy Spirit (359-360).

Mode for Barth is simply his attempt to say what the Church has always meant by "person." Of course, what the Church has "always meant by person" is a challenge, as Barth gives an excellent survey over the theological etymology of the word "person" (355-358).

The Holy Spirit

Barth makes an interesting suggestion that what we commonly know as the "ordo salutis" should be read, not in a temporal or logical form, as is the case in Reformed textbooks, but in an eschatological manner (464). This foreshadows a lot of the interesting suggestions made by Reformed theologians in the late 20th century.

Barth ends his discussion with a lengthy defense of the Filioque. I wonder how many modern defenders of the Filioque will find it worthwhile. Part of Barth's defense rests upon his "mode of being" constructed. While I don't believe this is necessarily modalistic, most people do and will likely look askance at it. Secondly, he follows what has since become known as "Rahner's Rule:" the immanent trinity is the eschatological trinity (479).

Barth's criticisms of the Eastern view are: it interprets verses in isolation (480); it separates the Spirit from the revelation of the Son (480); and "of" necessarily means "ontologically originating," since the Spirit is the Spirit of the Son (481).

With regard to the first point, this is no different than the Fundamentalist saying, "Yes, it appears that verse teaches what you believe, but if you read the rest of the Bible you will see that I am correct." In other words, if you beg the question to my favor ahead of time, you will agree with me. The second objection is asking the question how is the Spirit and Son related to one another. To be fair, I don't think Barth could have been familiar with the Eastern literature on this subject. Most of the Orthodox world when Barth was writing was enslaved to either the Muslims or the Soviets. Barth probably could have consulted Vladimir Lossky, but he didn't. To answer the objection, Gregory II of Cyprus said that the Son eternally manifests the Spirit by his energies. Thus, there is a real connection between the two persons, but not an ontological subordination. Of course, Barth held to absolute divine simplicity (483), so he could not affirm the energies anyway.

His last objection is the weakest. Aside from a reference to Rahner's Rule, he offers no argument that "of = from." If we take his argument, though, we must also affirm that the Spirit, being God himself, is also seen as the spirit of God, which means that the Spirit must eternally proceed from himself! Even worse, he is also the Spirit of truth, which means he must hypostatically proceed from the attribute of truth. Even worse than that, the Son came into the world by the work of the Holy Spirit. And since, per Barth's gloss, there is a 1:1

correlation between ontology and economy, the Son must necessarily proceed from the Spirit!

Should we even accept Rahner's Rule? If one reads the theological literature, one will rarely come across an actual argument for it. It is simply posited and that is that. Barth has to maintain it because Barth holds to absolute divine simplicity (483). At the back of this discussion is a certain category of being that applies in the West but not in the East.

Another problem is that advocates of Rahner's rule need to demonstrate that procession is identical with sending, but if it were the Son would proceed from the Father, rather than be begotten.

Barth has some other interesting and problematic comments on the Spirit. He calls the Spirit the "mediating position" between Father and Son (482). If the Spirit is the mediating position between Father and Son, how is perichoresis even possible? Interestingly, Barth does not read the Eastern compromise of *dia tou hieu* (through the Son) as teaching the Filioque. Make of it what you will.

Conclusions and criticisms

Whenever a theologian sets out to write 9,000+ pages (Church Dogmatics, you will recall, is a largely unfinished work), there will be sections where the reader disagrees. That is to be expected. My disagreements and criticisms of Barth in no way detract from the sheer awe that is due to the man.

Was Barth consistent?

We agree with Barth that revelation equals the Incarnate Word. We further agree that the Bible cannot simply be defined as "the word of God." Barth elsewhere notes that God's revelation is God himself, and as such claims Lordship over man. God is both the means and content of revelation (295). Accordingly, Barth is worried about any attempt of man, (for example, the Church) to be in a hermeneutical position vis-a-vis the Scriptures. He notes that if man stands in authority over the Scriptures, the Bible can no longer exercise that free and existential lordship over the Church. As such, he is "self-interpreting" (311).

Unfortunately for us, self-interpreting claims are always ambiguous. It begs the obvious (and unanswerable) question, "Self-interpreting to whom?" While the Word of God can "grasp" the individual believer and meet him with the claims of Lordship, at the end of the day someone has to interpret the Scriptures. Further, if Barth is correct and the location of dogmatics is done in the Church (112), then that someone's interpretation will in some way be binding on said believer's life. (The alternative, of course, is the free church model where "everyone did what was right in his own eyes.") At one point Barth appears aware of this problem when he says, "We must bear in mind that the word of God is mediated here, first through the human persons of the prophets and the apostles who receive it and pass it on, and then through the human persons of the expositors and preachers, so that the Holy Scripture and proclamation must always become God's words in order to be it" (304).

This problem is even more pointed earlier in the narrative when Barth (unwittingly) sets Scripture against the Church (97). It is not merely that Barth objects to the idea of an apostolically-ordained bishop (which he doesn't specifically challenge that historicity of such), but also the idea of a teaching office of the Church. Of course, Barth's background is the papal claims of Vatican I, and almost all of his rhetoric is directed against such. The question, though, one can ask Barth is, "How do you know your canon of Scripture is correct?" He doesn't answer the question. He assumes a normative Protestant canon. He does not deal with (at least in this volume of CD) the issue of how the canon came to be. It would be embarrassing for his argument if he did. Keep in mind his claim elsewhere (311) that God's revelation (and by extension, Scripture) is "self-interpreting." If it is self-interpreting, it is necessarily the highest authority. If that is the case, and I think Barth would agree, then the highest authority must establish itself. This authority, though, does not say anything about the content or goal of a canon. The canon must be established elsewhere.

The problem isn't over, yet. If one establishes the canon elsewhere, one must also do so in light of the fact that for Barth (and most of the Protestant tradition), "Scripture interprets Scripture." Aside from other hermeneutical problems with that statement, this means that the horizon of Scripture is not determined by Scripture (remember, Scripture says nothing about a fully intact canon). The Church, however, through the holy fathers, says quite a bit about such a horizon. At this point in history when Barth was writing, aside from a few Catholics, nobody raised the question.

Final Thoughts

The book is rightly seen as the beginning of a masterpiece. Even if everything Barth said is all wrong, one cannot deny that he was a master thinker and writer. The book is written with a superior style. The alternating text of large print/small print is an aide to the reader. If one has some history in post-Reformation theology and continental philosophy, the book is actually quite easy to read. Finally, one will get a thorough overview of post-Reformation dogmatics and will be able to speak of these thinkers with confidence.

S.D. Morrison says

Incredible!

Kyle says

I don't have the time or space to write a full review on this incredibly influential piece of work. Let me quickly state three things:

- 1) The three-fold Word of God (Jesus Christ, Scripture, and Preaching) developed by Barth is nothing short of brilliant.
 - 2) It really picks up half-way through when Barth develops the doctrine of the Trinity. It is significant that Barth places the trinity in the prolegamma as the trinitarian ground of God's own being serves as the basis of God's self-revelation. The God who reveals Himself is Trinity in Unity and Unity in Trinity.
 - 3) In speaking of the Trinity, Barth uses the term "modes of being" to describe the persons of the trinity. Naturally Barth gets accused of being a modalist. I was quite surprised that upon reading I found Barth much closer to Augustine than I ever imagined. I found Barth emphasizing the unity of the Godhead much more than the plurality of the Godhead that modalists tend to emphasize.
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Matthew says

In a word: magisterial. In fact, I have been so moved by Barth's theology, at one point I decided to

summarize every subsection in the first volume. Here are the fruits of that labor, in case it will help you, dear reader:

- 1.1 §1 "The Task of Dogmatics" pp. 1-24
- 002:** 1.1 §2 "The Task of Prolegomena to Dogmatics" pp. 25-44
- 003:** 1.1 §3.1 "Talk About God and Church Proclamation" pp. 47-71
- 004:** 1.1 §3.2-4.1 "The Word of God In Its Threefold Form" pp. 71-99
- 005:** 1.1 §4.2-4.4 "The Word of God In Its Threefold Form" pp. 99-124
- 006:** 1.1 §5.1-5.3 "The Nature of the Word of God" pp. 125-162
- 007:** 1.1 §5.4-6.2 "The Nature of the Word of God" pp. 162-198
- 009:** 1.1 §6.3 "The Word of God and Experience" pp. 198-227
- 010:** 1.1 §6.4 "The Word of God and Faith" pp. 227-247
- 011:** 1.1 §7.1 "The Word of God, Dogma, and Dogmatics" pp. 248-275
- 012:** 1.1 §7.2-7.3 "The Word of God, Dogma, and Dogmatics" pp. 275-292
- 013:** 1.1 §8.1-8.2 "The Revelation of God" pp. 295-333
- 014:** 1.1 §8.3 "Vestigium Trinitatis" pp. 333-347
- 015:** 1.1 §9.1 "Unity in Trinity" pp. 348-353
- 016:** 1.1 §9.2 "Trinity in Unity" pp. 353-368
- 017:** 1.1 §9.3 "Triunity" pp. 368-375
- 018:** 1.1 §9.4 "The Meaning of the Doctrine of the Trinity" pp. 375-383
- 019:** 1.1 §10.1 "God as Creator" pp. 384-390
- 020:** 1.1 §10.2 "The Eternal Father" pp. 390-398
- 021:** 1.1 §11.1 "God as Reconciler" pp. 399-414
- 022:** 1.1 §11.2 "The Eternal Son" pp. 414-447
- 023:** 1.1 §12.1 "God as Redeemer" pp. 448-466
- 024:** 1.1 §12.2 "The Eternal Spirit" pp. 466-489

James Stacey says

Difficult. Worked me hard, but that in itself was rewarding. Barth's main theme is the 'apartness' of God and man. He refuses to allow natural theology any space. Revelation - a very Barthian word - is an absolute miracle of grace. Does he overstate this? Has his reformed stance been pushed to an unscriptural overbalance? Many would say so, though I have to say Barth puts up a strong case for it. But it wasn't this main thrust, but some of the side discussions I most enjoyed - in particular Barth's seminal and fascinating discussions on the Trinity (which he sees as the fountainhead of all Christian theology, because it is the essence of the revealed God). Stimulating reading.

Toby says

It's a bit rough getting started, but if you get through the first hundred pages or so, Barth bursts out into some great stuff. Barth's Church Dogmatics is the first systematic theology that made me really love Jesus as I read his descriptions of the doctrine of the Word. Truly doxological. I would read portions of CD 1.1 as a devotional. And of course, I don't agree with everything he says, even though I think he's frequently misunderstood.

William says

An excellent and inspiring exploration of the doctrine of the Word of God as it relates primarily to the nature of revelation and as revelation relates to the Holy Trinity. Barth's focus on the sovereignty of God, among so many other things is masterful. A broad knowledge of Patristics, Scholasticism, the Protestant Reformers, and 19th Century liberal and existentialist theologians is extremely helpful as Barth assumes his reader is familiar with historical theology. The ability to read Greek and Latin is a must as well, since this edition of Church Dogmatics does not provide translations and the Greek and Latin texts are important to Barth's writing.

James Prothero says

Interesting, but like sanding a piece of wood . . . for 4000 hours straight

John Coatney says

I've worked my way through this first volume of Barth's Church Dogmatics by reading five pages a day. At this rate, I'll finish the Dogmatics in about 10 years.

I thoroughly enjoyed the first volume, which can be divided into two sections: the first on "The Word of God as the Criterion of Dogmatics," and the second on the revelation of God in terms of his triunity. His discussion of the threefold form of the Word of God (preached, written, and revealed) was insightful, as was his approach regarding the Trinity as the key of God's revelation.

Naturally, a dogmatics as Reformed as Barth's will differ significantly in some places from my own, having adopted an Orthodox Christian approach toward the revelation of God. I still think, though, that there is much to learn and benefit from in Barth's work, and I look forward to my exploration of the rest of his magnum opus.

Edward McNulty says

Have read sections. Deep.

Ben De Bono says

The first two volumes in Church Dogmatics deal with the doctrine of the Word of God. Among evangelicals, this is one of the more controversial areas of his theology, due to Barth's rejection of traditional evangelical teachings on inerrancy.

Given that I still have one more volume to go on Barth's doctrine of the Word of God, I'll hold off for now commenting on the controversial elements of his theology. I will say that the material present in this first volume is profound and phenomenal. Barth's writing on proclamation of the Word was especially impactful for me. It gave words to ideas I've been thinking about for a while now and is in stark contrast to the low view of preaching that exists in much of evangelicalism. If Barth is right in what he says about proclamation (and after a first reading I'm very much inclined to agree with him) then we ought to not only have a higher view of preaching but also a higher overall ecclesiology. I'll definitely be revisiting what he says about proclamation and anyone who does any sort of preaching owes it to themselves and their congregation to read through what Barth has to say on the topic.

I also loved how Barth establishes the Trinity as the absolute foundation of his theology. Seeing the Trinity as the means by which we understand the Word of God broadens our view of the Word in a way that I found quite healthy and impactful. His writing on the Trinity and explanation of the trinitarian relationships were wonderful and very thought provoking. Again, this is material that I'll need to revisit to fully grasp what Barth has to say.

Jim says

Wow, I did it. I got through one volume of Barth. This is like jumping into the Pacific Ocean and naming all the creatures in the sea with God at your side. The vision of Scripture preached as God speaking in Word in Spirit is powerful and the outline of the Trinity as One God dancing in community is awe inspiring. The Latin can be gotten through with a dictionary if you find it necessary. I did read some on occasion but mainly I skipped it and just tried to take in as much of this giant's thoughts as I could. I found him to be a man who spoke before his time to our very day.

Robert Beveridge says

Karl Barth, **The Doctrine of the Word of God** (Scribner, 1936)

Depending on your point of view, Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics is either the greatest religious treatise, or the greatest piece of intellectual masturbation, of the twentieth century. Either way, you have to admit it's an enormously impressive achievement. Spanning just shy of nine thousand pages over the course of fourteen volumes, Church Dogmatics is *the* go-to reference when it comes to Protestant theology; no matter how obscure the point you want insight on, Barth has probably analyzed it straight into the ground and back out the other side. (I should note here that, for the first time, to mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of the current edition, T&T Clark are—finally!—releasing a paperback edition of Church Dogmatics. The page count will be smaller by two thousand, but the volume count is more than doubled. Riddle me *that*, Batman.)

Despite my not being a Christian—despite, in fact, my decided antipathy toward the Church—I have long wanted to read the Church Dogmatics, simply because Barth actually found nine thousand pages' worth of material to address as regards the Church. (Also because Barth is, when it comes down to it, a very good writer; his essay on Mozart is sure to be enjoyed by Christian and secular readers alike.) After a decade and a half of waffling on the idea, I decided to bite the bullet and sit down with volume one this year, and continue on through the series at the rate of one book a year (while noting the irony that if I'd started in 1993, I'd be done now). And, thus, we come to *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, the first volume (the preface, really) of Church Dogmatics, and why a heathen like me is sitting here getting ready to review it. I say “getting ready” despite that fact that I've already written three hundred odd words because, obviously, I haven't actually addressed the content of the book yet.

It's pretty obvious that over the course of nine thousand pages, Barth has all the room he could possibly need to delve as deeply into whatever subject he's got his teeth into at any given moment as he needs to. In this case (and I should mention that these five hundred seventy-five pages comprise Chapter One and the first half of Chapter Two), Barth is still getting warmed up. The first book is about how to approach dogmatics (which is, of course, the study of dogma), not dogmatics itself. The definition of dogmatics as it relates to the Church (the Lutheran Church in particular, naturally), how the definition of dogmatics in the Protestant Church differs from the definition of dogmatics in the Catholic Church, and what all this means with regards to how Barth will approach the subject for the nest eight thousand four hundred pages.

For those of you who feel the need to skim, Barth's translator, (the no doubt long-suffering) T. F. Torrance, notes that it's possible to simply read the bits that are printed in regular font and ignore the stuff printed in small font (since Barth will often go off on tangents running two of three pages, it seemed more confusing than it was worth, I guess, to try and make footnotes out of these passages). I, on the other hand, am here to tell you that if you don't read the fine print, you're going to miss out on all the fun this book has to offer. Yes, I did say, and mean, “fun”. For all that this project has an air of the dry and scholarly about it, when Barth hits his stride, he can be just as catty as Paris Hilton with a Swiss accent; back in the days before the Internet, printed exchanges of heated debate were not uncommon (there's a great example in Pick's book of criticism on Gerard Manley Hopkins' “The Windhover”); Barth, while writing the updated 1934 edition of the Dogmatics, was obviously embroiled in quite a few of these, and he often used these “diversion passages” (it's misleading to call them footnotes) to express his frustration that a particular critic didn't get what he was on about, expound on how another dogmatist had missed the mark entirely on a particular point, or what have you. It's great stuff. We all know there are few things more fun to watch (though less fun to participate in) than a heated religious debate; I grant you, we're only getting one side here, but that doesn't make the *schadenfreude* any less delightful.

All that said, it is hard going; I ended up taking an extended break once I'd gotten about halfway through the book and coming back to it five months later, when I felt that I was ready to handle Barth's (or Torrance's, though having read any number of bad translations from Germanic languages—and one or two literal word-for-word translations of Barth—I have to say that Torrance did a damned fine job of making this book as readable as he could) long-winded, digressive style once again. This is not a book you'll be keeping by the window bench for light reading while you're gazing out at the tulip beds. Barth's goal was to create as definitive a religious reference as possible, and the style reflects that. So I can't really say that this is the kind

of thing you're going to find yourself reading for pleasure...unless you're me, because obviously I'm doing just that. If you do decide to take the plunge with me, however, even if you're just as much a heathen as I am, reading something this huge is really its own reward. ***

Tyson Guthrie says

Obviously a classic. An essential read for all serious theologians, and especially any who would critique Barth. I might recommend the new T&T Clark Study Edition for those who don't read Latin. (Greek and French are also untranslated in the T&T Clark 1975/Hendrickson 2010 edition, but are less extensively quoted.)

Jimmy says

This is just a great text in neo-orthodoxy. Karl Barth provides an answer to the problem of God's existence in a world captivated by materialism and realism. He is a fundamental break with 19th Century theology and this first volume covers the groundwork in which the rest of his Church Dogmatics takes place.
