

Topic Page: [Barth, Karl, 1886–1968](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/barth_karl_1886_1968)

Summary Article: **Barth, Karl**

From *Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*

Karl Barth (1886–1968) was born and died in Basel, Switzerland. His father and both grandfathers were pastors. Barth studied in Berlin with A. von Harnack, was influenced by F. Schleiermacher, and became seriously interested in theology after reading W. Herrmann's (1846–1922) *Ethics* (1901). Barth took the Christocentric impulse that was to define his theology from Herrmann, insisting that 'If the freedom of divine immanence is sought and supposedly found apart from Jesus Christ, it can signify in practice only our enslavement to a false god' (CD II/1, 319); thus a true understanding of humanity could only start 'from Jesus Christ as the object and foundation of faith' (CD II/1, 156).

Barth was ordained in 1908, and his thinking was influenced by his ten years as pastor at Safenwil (1911–21), World War I, his involvement in the Christian Socialist movement, and his years as professor of theology. His first appointments were at Göttingen, Münster, and Bonn. During the rise of the Third Reich, Barth took an active role in Church politics and was the primary author of the Barmen Declaration, which rejected any assimilation of the Gospel to the politics of racial supremacy or nationalism. In 1935 the Nazis expelled him from his teaching post at Bonn for not taking a loyalty oath to A. Hitler (1889–1945), and he moved to Basel, where he remained until retirement in 1962 – at which point he travelled to the United States, speaking at Princeton, Chicago, and New York. These lectures later became *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (1963).

Barth broke with the liberal theology of his teachers in 1914, when he was disillusioned by the fact that most of his teachers signed a manifesto supporting war. In his search for a more viable biblical exegesis, he wrote two editions of his famous commentary on Romans (1919 and 1921). Influenced by S. Kierkegaard, Barth stressed God's otherness and eschatology in ways that he would later admit were one-sided but not absolutely wrong (CD II/1, 634–5). He consistently avoided any idea that God could be used by us 'to put the crowning touch to what men began of their own accord' (Busch, *Barth* 99) and promoted a 'dialectical theology', so called because in it Barth sought to present the good news of the Gospel through conflicting ideas that could not be overcome through some theological synthesis. The only 'solution' to the problem of God talk was God's 'yes' to humanity in Jesus Christ; but this 'yes' included a 'no' in the sense that humanity could speak of God only by actually relying on God's grace in a way that brings all human speaking of God under judgement. In short, for Barth it is impossible for us to speak of God; but it becomes possible as God actually enables it.

Against all attempts to try to found human knowledge of God either in some already-existing prior knowledge of God that undermines the need for special revelation or in some general anthropology that reverses the roles of Creator and creature, Barth insisted, 'There is a way from Christology to anthropology, but there is no way from anthropology to Christology' (CD I/1, 131). This same emphasis on God's priority in Christ was stressed in his doctrine of reconciliation, wherein Barth maintained that faith's possibility cannot be 'demonstrated and explained in the light of general anthropology' (CD IV/1, 740) and when he argued that the creation of world views was an attempt to circumvent revelation and reconciliation as actualized in Jesus Christ (CD IV/3, 257).

Barth came into conflict with E. Brunner (1889–1966), R. Bultmann, and F. Gogarten (1887–1968), his fellow 'dialectical theologians', because he sensed that they attempted to ground theology elsewhere

(e.g., in existentialist philosophy) and so compromised theology's nature as faith seeking understanding. Against those who imagined that his thinking, too, was grounded in some philosophical system, Barth abandoned his first effort at comprehensive theological statement (the 1927 *Christian Dogmatics*) and began his *magnum opus*, the *Church Dogmatics* (13 vols., 1932–67). In particular, he opposed natural theology on the grounds that it suggests that there is some generally available 'court of appeal' by which God can be known other than by grace. Natural theology for Barth amounts to a form of self-justification which was overcome once and for all in Jesus Christ for our benefit.

Barth's theology is Trinitarian in nature, beginning with his formal presentation of the doctrine in *CD I/1*, reaching a high point in his doctrine of God in *CD II*, and radiating out to pervade his view of creation (*CD III*) and reconciliation (*CD IV*) as well. God is both objective within the immanent Trinity and one who loves in freedom (primary objectivity), and objective to humanity as revealed in objects different from God (secondary objectivity). Barth insisted that a sharp distinction but not a separation between the immanent and economic Trinity was important, and his entire theology is marked by the fact that in each doctrine our inclusion in relationship with God is based solely upon God's grace and cannot be said to be necessary for God.

Barth's revolutionary doctrine of election differed from the more traditional Calvinist double predestination, in which some were saved and others damned according to an absolute fixed (static) decree preceding creation; against this Barth insisted that election had to be seen only in Christ, who, as electing God and elected human being, was both elected and rejected for us, and that it needed to be understood as a continuing action of the living God rather than as a fixed decree. Hence the rest of us stand in relation to God only in and through Christ himself, who experienced God's wrath in our place and so reconciled us with the Father. Rejecting both universalism and any idea that God could not in the end be gracious to all, Barth intended to affirm the power of God's gracious 'yes' over God's 'no' to sin which Christ himself endured for the human race in his death for us (*CD II/2*, 417, 477). Election then is the sum of the Gospel, an election of grace (*CD II/2*, 3 *et al.*): not a dark mystery concerning some arbitrary decree on the part of a distant God, but rather the establishment by an action of the living God of true human freedom and thus the very basis of Christian ethics, through which humanity is thus included within the doctrine of God itself (cf. *CD II/2*, 509ff.). In *CD II/2* Barth's vision of the relation between Israel and the Church, his thorough treatment of evil, and his fearless opposition to antisemitism all were marked by a hope engendered by the resurrection of Jesus himself from the dead.

Barth's later view of the sacrament (*CD IV/4*, fragment) has been vigorously criticized for: separating divine and human being and action too sharply (e.g., Holy Spirit from water baptism); rejecting infant baptism; insisting that Christ is the only sacrament (thus denying Barth's own earlier view that sacraments are means of grace in the more traditional Reformed sense); rejecting even his earlier sacramental views espoused in *CD I/2* and *II/1*; and subtly redefining the sacraments as human ethical responses to God's actions within history instead of noticing that they represent our human inclusion in the life of the Trinity through Christ's own continuing high priestly mediation as the ascended and coming Lord. In his 'radically new view' of the sacrament, Barth's positive intention was to assert that Christ alone through his Spirit is our means of justification and sanctification and he wanted to avoid all forms of either sacramentalism, which would ascribe sacramental validity to the Church's action, or moralism, which would ascribe such validity to a person's own disposition or behaviour. Barth's positive aim was to stress that the visible Church is the historical form of Christ's presence on earth that could

be experienced and understood only in faith and not directly discerned or validated in its visible actions as such.

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