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BOOK REVIEW

Mark Galli. *Karl Barth: An Introductory Biography for Evangelicals*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017. xvi + 192 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-0-8028-6939-5. $18.00.

As Mark Galli himself notes in the introduction, even those who take an initial interest in Karl Barth may "flip through the nearly 9,000 pages of the *Church Dogmatics*, read a passage or two of his dense prose, and run for our theological lives" (ix–x). It is precisely for this reason that titles like this one are helpful and, indeed, necessary for non-specialists wishing to become acquainted with arguably the most influential theologian of the twentieth century. Galli makes it clear from the outset that he has not read the *Church Dogmatics* in its entirety, nor does he try to present every meticulous detail about Barth's life. Galli's aim, rather, is to produce an accessible introduction to the man and his theology, particularly those themes which he believes to be of particular importance to contemporary evangelicals.

Chapter 1 discusses the longstanding wariness many conservative evangelicals have displayed toward Barth, embodied forcefully in the critiques of Reformed theologian Cornelius Van Til and, on a more popular level, evangelist Billy Graham. Yet Galli notes that, especially since the early 2000's, many respected scholars within the evangelical tradition have adopted a much more amicable view of Barth and his theology, despite certain disagreements. Indeed, he even points to a recent doctrinal controversy within the parachurch organization, Young Life, as evidence that Barthian theology has begun to significantly influence evangelicalism on the layperson's level as well.

Chapter 2 details Barth's upbringing in a traditional Swiss family. As the son of a theology professor, he was exposed at a young age to pietistic thought and the importance of heartfelt

faith. After attending confirmation classes during his mid-teenage years, he decided to pursue a life as a theologian. Notably, Galli points out that Barth's confirmation teachers spent considerable time "defending the rationality of the Christian faith"—an ironic detail given the theologian's adamant rejection of natural theology and the discipline of apologetics later in his life (18).

Galli then surveys the pervasive influence of liberal Protestant theology upon the nineteenth- and twentieth-century European landscape, asserting that "One cannot understand Barth and his eventual theology without understanding what he eventually rebelled against" (19). Though he initially began his education at the theologically liberal University of Berlin and later Marburg, much to the chagrin of his conservative father, Fritz, upon his assumption of pastoral ministry, his sermons began to display a notable shift from liberal thought, albeit only implicitly at this juncture. Having met his wife, Nelly, during his first pastorate in Geneva, they married in 1913 after the young minister's transition to a new position in the small town of Safenwil. It was here that he first earned the label of "red pastor" due to his affinity for Marxist thought. However, with the emergence of the First World War in 1914, Barth's theological liberalism, and the emphasis on subjective experience integral to it, would be rocked to its core.

As Galli explains in chapter 4, experience lay at the heart of the liberal German theology in which Barth was immersed. Yet, at the outset of this conflict, which he did not consider justified, many of his mentors constructed theological justifications for Germany's military actions on many of the very principles Barth had learned under them. In short, not only did such principles fail to stem the tide of war, but they were actively used to promote it. It was in the immediate aftermath of such a catastrophe that Barth concluded that the Bible was ultimately not about humanity at all, but God himself. Despite his sympathy for socialism early in his ministry, it dawned on him that the Kingdom of God, as the Bible depicted it, was not a human construction but a "radically transcendent idea" (36).

This massive theological shift was demonstrated extensively in Barth's legendary work, *The Epistle to the Romans*, which

Galli engages in chapters 5–6. Penned during the latter years of the war, "in the midst of a social, political, and religious crisis" (38), it was soundly rejected by the liberal theological establishment in Germany, with his mentor Adolf von Harnack disparaging him as a "radical revolutionary" (39). Spurning the historical-critical method that typified commentaries of the day, Barth followed in the footsteps of John Calvin, who aimed to interpret the Scriptures in such a way that, as the former put it, when "Paul speaks, the man of the sixteenth century hears" (42). Though adamant that believers must remain "in the bosom of the church" (51), his newfound approach to Scripture, a God-centred vision rather than one centred on humanity, led him to conclude that any human project—even religion itself—presented an occasion for idolatry. Though Barth would later regret some of his more extreme assertions, Galli observes that it was indeed this particular work that "put Barth on the theological map" (56).

In chapter 7 Galli details how in April of 1921, Barth was invited to Göttingen, Germany to become the sole faculty member of Reformed persuasion at an otherwise firmly Lutheran institution. Though an unpleasant time to live and work in the country, due to the social and economic havoc wrought by the War, it was during this time that he developed a deep appreciation for the Reformed confessions and the Reformers themselves, particularly Calvin. It was also during his tenure there that he authored the *Göttigen Dogmatics*, which, contrary to the likes of Friedrick Schleiermacher, von Harnack, and their liberal Protestantism, placed the doctrine of the Trinity at the heart of theological reflection.

Chapter 8 details perhaps the most significant episode of Barth's life following his move to the University of Bonn: the rise of National Socialism in Germany and the theologian's response to it. Originally believing the country's citizens "too sensible to fall prey" to Hitler's destructive ideology (72), he was appalled at the outpouring of support, particularly from fellow Protestants. He first instructed his students to simply carry on as normal, addressing political issues as they arose through a distinctly theological lens. However, as the Nazi party grew in popularity, Barth began to attack the theology "of the German

Christians (as) nothing less than heresy" (80). While Barth may have regretted not voicing his concerns more forcefully early on, in hindsight it seems history did indeed vindicate his worst fears concerning the co-option of German Protestantism by the Nazi Party—and his willingness to vocally oppose it when few others would.

The Barmen Declaration is taken up in chapter 9, drafted in 1934 at a time when senior officials within Hitler's party began to attack Barth openly. Co-authoring the declaration with two Lutheran theologians, Barth and his fellow signatories offered a scathing critique of the German Christian movement, rejecting natural theology and the notion that believers ought to support a totalitarian government. Further cementing his opposition to natural theology as a key part of his theological legacy, Barth also penned a lengthy rejection of Emil Brunner's *Nature and Grace* that same year. Suspended from teaching due to his refusal to pledge unqualified obedience to Hitler's regime, he was dismissed from his teaching position and returned home to Switzerland to continue his career in Basel.

Chapter 10, entitled "The Basel Years," begins with the theologian's 1939 assessment that "Wherever there is theological talk, it is always implicitly and explicitly political talk also" (93). Perhaps this is quite appropriate given that the years immediately following his return to Switzerland were devoted to developing his landmark *Church Dogmatics* and writing letters to remaining members of the Confessing Church in Germany, encouraging them to speak up over the ever-intensifying persecution of the Jewish community. He was placed on active duty in the Swiss Army for the duration of the war; yet, no matter how horrified at the actions of Germany during Hitler's rule, unlike many of his fellow countrymen, he voiced a desire to extend friendship and mercy to the German people following the conflict's end.

Chapters 11–12 focus on Barth's two doctrinal positions which have likely caused the most consternation among modern evangelicals: the Word of God and his complex (some would even say incomprehensible) doctrine of election and universal reconciliation. Galli notes that Barth identified the Word of God as a "threefold reality: the preached Word, the written Word, and

the revealed Word" (110). The latter reveals Jesus Christ, while the preached and written words serve as a witness to Jesus. Thus, Galli explains that for Barth, "Jesus Christ is the definitive Word while Scripture is merely human beings' word about Christ" (112). On election, Barth posits that "From all eternity, Christ is both the only one who elects and the only one who is elected," and that if he is indeed representative of the entire human race, "all humanity is forgiven and reconciled" (118). Though Galli points out that Barth denied charges of universalism, he also grants that "it is not unfair . . . to think his theology moves inevitably toward universalism" (120). The succinct explanation of these two Barthian distinctives clarifies why many evangelicals are still hesitant to engage Barth, as Galli notes in the chapter 1. Moreover, regarding universalism, his citation of individuals who have engaged Barth's doctrine of election at length (e.g., Oliver Crisp, Hans Urs von Balthasar) may help the curious reader to further explore the question.

Barth's pastoral inclinations are highlighted in chapter 13, along with his family life, retirement years, and thoughts on prayer. Galli finally takes up the question of Barth's supposed "liberalism" in chapter 14, indeed an ironic charge given his strong reaction against the veritable liberalism of figures like Schleiermacher. Given that this title is aimed specifically at evangelicals, Galli might surprise more than a few readers in citing Barth to criticize the overemphasis on experience displayed by many within the tradition. This, he and others like Philip Cary charge, is often little more than "a reincarnation of the theology of Schleiermacher" (141). Lamenting the fact that "in many evangelical circles, we have begun to equate *our experience* of Christ with *the gospel*" (143), he points to Barth's rejection of nineteenth-century Protestant theology—in all its subjectivity—as something of a corrective to contemporary evangelicalism, which can all too often resemble it, even if unknowingly.

While clearly friendly toward the Swiss theologian, unlike his numerous evangelical critics, Galli nevertheless engages Barth's flaws as well, both theological and moral. He labels his affair with Charlotte von Kirchbaum as "emotional adultery" at the very least, whether their "relationship was ever physically

consummated" or not (68). It is appreciative yet objective, and therefore a rather refreshing read. Perhaps Galli's greatest achievement is his ability to condense a rather heavy topic into a relatively brief volume, no easy task for a theologian of Barth's legacy. Apart from serving as a solid overview of his life and thought for the theologically curious layperson, Galli's title would be a useful resource for an introductory class on Barth, twentieth-century theology, or church history more broadly. While few individuals would be capable of probing the weighty *Church Dogmatics* to understand Barth's theology, this book stands out as an informative, insightful, and accessible title. Indeed, the church would do well to produce more works like this one that make the thought of major Christian theologians of history accessible to students of all backgrounds.

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