

The Text: Revelation in the Theology of Karl Barth (1886-1968)

When you have read the text from the Church Dogmatics, look at the following note.



The primary text for this unit is a passage from Barth's massive work the *Church Dogmatics* (Bd. I/1, §4). His polemic, particularly in the early stages of his career, is against the supposed legitimacy of natural theology and the theological liberalism of the late nineteenth century. Barth's espousal of theological orthodoxy, with the prime source and norm being God's revelation in Christ, has been hugely influential.

The *Church Dogmatics* is six million words in length. The very short passage suggested as reading for this Unit comes at the very beginning. For Barth, theology must begin with the fact that God has declared himself and made himself known. In this respect, theology is always what Barth calls 'a speaking after'. In other words, dogmatic theology is our response to God's initiative: it comes after God's self-declaration in Christ. Any pretence that we can say anything about God outside God's own self-declaration would diminish God.

In this passage, Barth is particularly concerned with the status of the Bible as revelation. He is clear that God's self-declaration occurs in the event of Jesus Christ. Scripture is not in itself 'revelation', but the record of God's revelation in Christ. It becomes the Word of God insofar as it attests to God's Word in Christ. It so attests by proclamation within the Church. For Barth, therefore, revelation has a three-fold structure: Jesus Christ is revelation, recorded in Scripture and proclaimed within the Church. Barth writes, 'revelation is originally and directly what the Bible and Church proclamation are derivatively and indirectly, i.e. God's Word.'

Barth's understanding of revelation is, in the end, thoroughly Trinitarian.

Further Reading

***On Barth* (please note that much of this reading appears on the 'Further Reading' list for the next unit).**

Bromiley, G. (1979), *Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark), ch.2

- Ford, D. (ed.) (1997), *The Modern Theologians* (Oxford: Blackwell), ch.1
- Hart, T., 'Revelation' in Webster, J. (2000) (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp.37-56
- Hartwell, H. (1964), *The Theology of Karl Barth: an Introduction* (London: Duckworth), ch.2
- Veitch, J. A., 'Revelation and Religion in the Thought of Karl Barth' in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 24 (1971), pp.1-22
- Webster, J. (2000), *Karl Barth* (London: Continuum), ch.3