

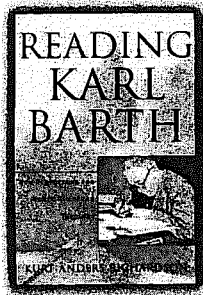


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**READING KARL BARTH:
NEW DIRECTIONS FOR NORTH
AMERICAN THEOLOGY**

Kurt Anders Richardson
Grand Rapids: Baker (2004)
246 pages, paper, \$21.99

Evangelicals have been discovering Karl Barth in recent years, now three decades after his death (1968). The only view of Karl Barth many of my generation of Evangelicals was given was represented by the late Cornelius Van Til, who treated Barth's epistemology as his theology. Many who have bothered to read Barth have found him surprisingly biblical and amazingly important for the modern situation. Kurt Richardson, professor of theology at McMaster University, in Hamilton, Ontario, is one of several important Barth scholars who can help Evangelicals gain theologically through fresh interpretations of this great thinker. Recommended for serious academic scholars and pastoral readers.

FINAL THOUGHTS

John H. Armstrong

For sometime I have believed that there are consensual roots of historic classical Christianity to be found in the common faith and practice of the early church fathers. This faith is not monochrome, for sure. But it is vibrant, confessional and catholic. As a convinced Evangelical, with a deep awareness and commitment to the Reformation, I believe, with both Calvin and Luther, that we need to go back in order to go forward. True renewal is, in Bob Webber's term, an "ancient-future faith."

Simply put, there is an apostolic tradition that is living, not dead. The need for our time is not the *dead faith of the living* but rather the *living faith of the dead*. Put another way, we do not need to reinvent the wheel.

One theologian who has resurrected a wide-scale interest in the early church, to whom many of us are personally indebted, is Thomas Oden, a contributing editor to *Reformation & Revival Journal*. Dr. Oden was once a card-carrying modernist. His exposure to the Jewish philosopher, Will Herberg, changed his direction. He wrote of this change: "[Friendship with Herberg] did more for me intellectually in the six years of our close friendship (1971-1977) than any other person during that time, by requiring me to ground my thinking in classical sources." As early church theologian, Christopher A. Hall, tells the story it was this Jewish philosopher who warned Oden that his overall perspective would be badly defective unless he gave concentrated time to the study of the church fathers and mothers of the early church. Thankfully, Oden heeded Herberg's advice. In Hall's words, "As Oden immersed himself in ancient sources, he discovered an antidote to his past idealization and idolization of the new." I am persuaded that one of the most damning trends in evangelicalism is the

"idealization and idolization of the new." We rush hither and yon looking for the "new" thing, all the time living in a dense theological and practical fog that worships at the shrine of the "hot" new movement. We are a "movement" driven age. Technology has its own power and appeal, as the late Jacques Ellul pointed out powerfully, and it alters everything it touches, including the church. One might even say, *especially* the church.

Christopher Hall adds that Tom Oden came to the place where "the need to create was replaced by the call to listen." This is a dramatic shift in mind and heart. I believe this is precisely where we need to be if we would genuinely renew the church of the West in our time. We need to stop the strategy of trying this and trying that and "listen" to the ancient voices and the old paths very carefully. Oden puts this much better than I can, so listen to his prophetic words:

I realized that I must listen intently, actively, without reservation. Listen in such a way that my whole life depended upon hearing. Listen in such a way that I could see telescopically beyond my modern myopia, to break through the walls of my modern prison, and actually hear voices from the past with different assumptions entirely about the world and time and human culture. Only then in my forties did I begin to become a theologian. Up to that time I had been teaching theology without ever having sufficiently met the patristic mentors who could teach me theology (Kenneth Tanner and Christopher A. Hall, editors. *Ancient & Postmodern Christianity: Essays in Honor of Thomas A. Oden* [InterVarsity Press; Downers Grove, Illinois, 2002], 10).

If every minister is called to teach and preach the Bible, and thereby relate the message of the cross and Holy Scripture to healthy theology, then the absence of the perspective of consensual early church theology is toxic. The tragedy it has produced is staggering thus every Christian will gain much, and add their part to the renewal of the church, by listening attentively to the voice of the early church. To do otherwise is arro-

gance. To do otherwise perpetuates the modern problem without a real solution.



Early Christian worship, spirituality, doctrine and vitality all speak powerfully to our present need. As our age becomes increasingly secular it looks and feels more and more like the ancient world than the modern, at least in its way of thinking about ultimate truth. Early Christians sought not to invent a new world but rather to attract men and women from the old one, through consistent argument and practice, to faith in Christ. They believed that in Christ all things were made new. Men like Ignatius, Irenaeus, St. Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, Basil, and Athanasius were inspired by Jesus Christ to new love, new thought and new action. Humble, faithful, ordinary men and women who believed that God had raised Jesus from the dead, became new communities, living a life together that transformed everything they did. Their message, expressed in disciplines, lifestyle changes, rituals of worship, creeds, and traditions, all became the setting for powerful spiritual renewal. The study and interaction of Evangelicals with this living faith will also be part of a deep and powerful renewal today if we humble ourselves and listen.

Early church historian, Robert Louis Wilken, writes of how these earliest Christians understood their life of faith as a journey, a pilgrimage. As a result of this understanding Wilken says:

The church is not an instrument to achieve other ends than fellowship with God. It serves society by being unapologetically itself and by bearing witness to the justice that alone makes human community possible, the justice due God. The greatest gift the church can give society is a glimpse, however fleeting, of another city, where the angels keep "eternal festival" before the face of God. . . . By offering itself to God as a living sacrifice, the church's life foreshadows the peace for which all men and women yearn, the peace that God alone can give (Robert Louis

Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* [Yale University Press: New Haven, Connecticut, 2003], 211).

Until Evangelicals recapture this sense of life together, seen so clearly in the early church, we will keep trying to renew our communities without real success.



The early Christians were noble and heroic folks. They not only lived their faith but many of them died for it. Ultimately they transformed cities, countries and even empires. They transformed culture by their faithfulness unto death. When I am asked—"Where is the great work of renewal happening now?"—I always answer, "Look for the martyrs, find those who are presently suffering for their faith, and there you will see early church Christianity lived and revival actually taking place." Justin Martyr put it well: "You can kill us, but you cannot hurt us." They understood the faithful words of Ignatius of Antioch: "I am the wheat of God, and let me be ground by the teeth of wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of Christ."

These men were not without their faults. Some, like Tertullian, possessed "every virtue but moderation." And Jerome was said to have possessed an "abominable gift for invective." But, as T. R. Glover once noted, "They out-fought, out-taught, out-loved, and out-died the pagan." We could do far worse in this politically-correct and morally-tepid age.

COMING THEMES IN REFORMATION & REVIVAL JOURNAL

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