Foreword

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I have never been a Barthian. I have never lusted after being a Barthian. Indeed, I have at times considered Karl Barth to be a disaster for the intellectual life of Christianity in the twentieth century and now on into the twenty-first century.

To be sure, I know that Barth has worked wonders in restoring interest in and commitment to the doctrine of the Trinity. However, when I read the small print, I find his vision of the Trinity with its sophisticated vision of modalism thin and unconvincing. To be sure, I have rejoiced at his recovery of the significance of divine revelation for providing warrants for central Christian claims. However, when I read the details, I find the sophisticated fideism involved to be inhabited by conceptual muddle and fraught with extremely poor epistemological backing. To be sure, I have at times been overwhelmed by the sheer beauty and audacity of his thought, especially in those early essays, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*. However, working through all the dense and maddening prose of the *Church Dogmatics* and the prolix historical diversions in the small print leaves one exhausted and full of probing objections. They become suffocating and disastrous when deployed by insiders who expect critics to read further so that in time our worries will be allayed by the voice of the master.

So what am I doing writing a laudatory Foreword to a book on Karl Barth and Evangelicalism? This is not just a favor to wonderful friends and colleagues whose intellectual fecundity I never cease to admire. Nor is it that I consider the range and content of these essays to be first-rate in style and content (I do). The enthusiasm for this volume stems from the following considerations.

First, I do so because there is no future for Christian theology without working through rather than around the colossal contribution of Barth to

Christian theology. Barth will still be read when most theologians we know, not least our own good selves, will not even make it into the footnotes. From beginning to end he is a theologian's theologian. His personal biography, his stance against the Nazis, his immersion in the ministry of the church, and the like, draw us into the drama of his intellectual endeavors. He became a theologian almost by accident, so we can lay aside any drive to professional stability and stardom. When he took up the challenge of theology, he was all in from the start. The result was an extraordinary reappropriation and restatement of the Christian faith that bristles with energy and a host of intellectual virtues. He never yielded to the gloomy conservative instincts that can so readily mar those of us who are looking for fresh fish when we have been fed stones. His appreciation, say, for the legacy of Lotze (a legacy carried to America by Borden Bowne and then highjacked by Liberal Protestants in Methodism) and what it might have been is startling in its insight. In the end, it is his detailed and utterly fresh treatment of the whole gamut of Christian theology that matters. He returns us to the proper subject of theology—God and God's actions in creation and redemption. On this score, I indirectly owe a debt to Barth and the legacy he unleashed in the English-speaking world. These essays much more fulsomely display the fecundity of the Barthian legacy for us all.

Second, I do so because Barth's return to the deep resources of the faith is crucial to the welfare of the Evangelical tradition. Brought up in and then converted in Irish Methodism, I have never been tempted to disown the Evangelical tradition. I have long held that Evangelicalism is an essentially contested tradition. Its strength lies in part precisely in varied historical instantiations of the tradition and in the intense feuds that take place within it both synchronically and diachronically. Efforts to corral the evangelical tradition into the legacy of fundamentalism over the last generation are legion; they are now apace afresh in the move to canonize Carl F. H. Henry as the great hero of Evangelicalism whose work is to be the source and the benchmark for the future. In these circumstances it is vital that alternative sources and norms of intellectual propriety be taken up in conversation about the future of evangelical theology. On this score, Barth is an obvious choice as inspiration and intellectual partner. To be sure, this move will destabilize the tradition; it will evoke a new round of debate. Rather than lamented, this is exactly what is needed. Without the Barthian voice Evangelicalism will surely give birth to a new round of post-evangelical liberals and progressives who invariably give away the store. At crucial points, I think Barth did that himself; it is no accident that a raft of Death of God and secular theologians started out on Barthian territory. However, if I am right about this Barth's mistakes are deeply illuminating mistakes; it is up to Evangelical

theologians to avoid them in the future. So right or wrong, engaging Barth is pivotal for the health of the Evangelical tradition. It is radically incomplete in itself; it needs nourishing partners in distress; and Barth is as good as any in filling this desideratum.

Third, I do so because wrestling with Barth's vision of divine revelation is the spur to the invention and pursuit of a new subdiscipline in theology and philosophy that I have dubbed the epistemology of theology. Barth's vision of divine revelation and its concomitant account of Holy Scripture are dense and nuanced. His deepest insight, as I see it, is that God is made known through God's acts. What he did with this insight and how it got mishandled among his children and grandchildren are another matter that need not detain us here. What matters is that he was on the money and that in articulating his vision he was interested not in some thin theism beloved of so many analytic philosophers but in a robust Trinitarian version of the Christian faith. Hence, Barth has to be a crucial canon for work in the epistemology of theology. What I mean by this is a new subdiscipline lying in the cracks between theology and philosophy that engages in fully critical investigation of the relevant warrants for Christian theological claims. What is at stake here is not just this or that set of material claims about how a theologian justifies or renders credible his or her version of Christianity, but rather the further investigation of how we should best conceive and execute this enterprise in the first place. No doubt Barthians will smell a rat here, complaining that this makes theology subject to alien philosophical categories that will undo their deepest insights. If they do, then let them bring their rat poison, as Barth himself tried to do in his own inimitable style. The rest of us, however, reserve the right to check the biochemistry of the rat poison for its efficacy. Serious Barthians, as opposed to the camp followers who want to wallow in their disguised dogmatism, will not take this line. They will come to the table without reserve and see how their proposals fare in the light of historical, conceptual, and material epistemological inquiry.