

Preface

Myk Habets and Phillip Tolliday

COLIN GUNTON ONCE, NOW FAMOUSLY, REMARKED THAT EVERYTHING “looks different when theologized with and through the doctrine of the Trinity.”¹ It could also be said that “everything looks different when theologized with and through the theology of Karl Barth.” This is, at least in some quarters, a fair assessment of his influence. The most outstanding church thinker of the twentieth century is proving to be the most pivotal theological figure of the twenty-first century as well. It is no wonder some have referred to Karl Barth as a “Father” of the church. Such is the influence of Barth on the theological world. It is this conviction that stands behind the rationale for the present volume.

Karl Barth is acknowledged as the most influential theologian of the modern era. His work has occasioned appreciation, critique, and rejection; and works on aspects of his theology threaten to fill entire libraries. Indeed, the appreciation for Barth and the resurgence of his theology in recent years is remarkable. As just one example note the following comments from Barth’s English interpreter (and fan!), Thomas Torrance:

Karl Barth is the greatest theological genius that has appeared on the scene for centuries. He cannot be appreciated except in the context of the greatest theologians such as Athanasius, Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, nor can his thinking be adequately measured except in the context of the whole history of theology and philosophy. Not only does he recapitulate in himself in the most extraordinary way the development of all modern theology since the Reformation, but he towers above it in such a way that he has created a situation in the Church, comparable only to the

1. Gunton, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, 22.

Reformation, in which massive clarification through debate with the theology of the Roman Church can go on. Karl Barth has, in fact, so changed the whole landscape of theology, Evangelical and Roman alike, that the other great theologians of modern times appear in comparison rather like jobbing gardeners.²

It is now possible for scholars to deliberately work in the wake of Barth in areas of constructive trinitarian theology. This volume draws together scholars whose essays exhibit work “after Barth” in the doctrine of the Trinity and its related themes. That is not to say each contributor is a “Barthian,” whatever such an epithet means. But it is to say that Barth has been encountered along the theological journey and has affected such a journey one way or the other. For some contributors Barth’s theology is the mainspring of their academic career and they are amongst the rare few today who may genuinely be considered experts on his theology. To conclude, however, that there is a univocal interpretation of Barth’s theology would be a grave mistake. Barth’s thought, as evidenced amongst his most expert commentators, allows for a variety of interpretations, the details of which are being hammered out on the pages of academic journals and volumes such as the one you presently hold in your hands. Other contributors may be described as observers of Barth, while others still would accept a stance in critical but appreciative opposition to Barth. It is this variety of responses to and interpretations of Barth’s theology that gives such vibrancy to the essays in this volume. This echoes something of the sentiment of William Stacy Johnson, who wrote:

It should be clear by now that Barth’s theology is being read today in provocative new ways by a generation of interpreters who see well the contradiction in trying to recapture the doctrinal propositions of Barthianism without the dynamic movement of revelation in which Barth himself was caught up and in which he placed his hope. If there is to be any future for Barth’s theology, therefore, it lies in looking far beyond the theology itself and toward the grace to which Barth was seeking to bear witness.³

Barth’s influence has been particularly influential in regard to the doctrine of the Trinity. James Packer, for instance, once remarked that

2. Torrance, “Introduction,” 7.

3. Johnson, “Barth and Beyond,” 17.

Barth provided contemporary theology with a “powerful Bible-based restatement of trinitarian theism,” before going on to note that “Barth’s purpose of being rigorously, radically, and ruthlessly biblical and his demand for interpretation that is theologically coherent, is surely exemplary for us.”⁴ And he was right of course, but not if by “exemplary” is meant all must follow in his precise footsteps. Such a following would amount to the form of “Barthianism” Barth so famously despised.

Bibliography

- Gunton, Colin E. *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Toward a Fully Trinitarian Theology*. London: T. & T. Clark, 2003.
- Johnson, William Stacy. “Barth and Beyond.” *The Christian Century* (May 2, 2001) 16–17.
- Packer, James I. “Theism for Our Time.” In *God Who Is Rich in Mercy*, edited by Peter T. O’Brien, 1–23. Homebush, Australia: Lancer, 1986.
- Torrance, Thomas F. “Introduction.” In *Karl Barth, Theology, and Church: Shorter Writings, 1920–1928*. Translated by Louise Pettibone Smith. New York: Harper & Row, 1962.

4. Packer, “Theism for Our Time,” 10.