

**Jan, 2018**

**Karl Barth, *Fragments Grave and Gay*. Glasgow, Scotland: Fountain Books, 1971.**

Karl Barth is the most influential thinker about the relationships between God, human beings, and creation in the twentieth century.

Barth was born in 1886 in Switzerland to Anna and Fritz Barth. His father was a theological professor and pastor. Karl served as pastor from 1911 to 1921 in a small industrial town of Safenwil. He then taught in Gottingen, Muster, Bonn, and Basel. During WW1 he reacted against his teachers who supported the German cause in the war. In writing his famous commentary on Paul's letter to the Romans, he worked through his revulsion at the ways his teachers and the majority of the German church rationalized their support of the war as faithful to the Gospel. Much of Barth's subsequent teaching and writing worked out the implications of his conviction that the Gospel, especially as seen in the living Word of God in Jesus Christ, confronted all human culture with the need for collective and individual conversion to the justice, kindness, and humility that will shape the coming Commonwealth of God. His *magnum opus* is the 13-volume (8,000 pages) *Church Dogmatics*, written between 1932 and 1967.

Insofar as Canadian Presbyterianism has a coherent theological framework for its mission and ministries, it is rooted in Barth. You can find it expressed in our *Declaration of Faith concerning Church and Nation* (1954) and in our brief statement of the Christian faith, *Living Faith* (1984). The core truth of the Gospel, as Canadian Presbyterians interpret it, is a reconciling orthodoxy grounded in the reality summarized by Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:19, "... in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us."

There are two things that attract to these fragments from Barth's prolific output. First, they contain the essence of what he had to say about the Bible, theology, and the role of Christians in the modern world. Second, they have been edited and introduced by a good friend and mentor of mine, Martin Rumscheidt. Martin was born and raised in Nazi Germany, came to North America to study theology at McGill University, studied with Barth during his last year of teaching, and taught for years at the Atlantic School of Theology in Halifax, NS. We met through the Student Christian Movement in the early 1970s and I have followed his work in activist political theology ever since.

The pieces in this book were written by Barth after his retirement from teaching in 1962. They reveal his poise and freedom, his humour and vision, and his humility and modesty. All of these arose from his gratitude for the grace that found him in Jesus Christ and accompanied him in the world as he sought to contribute faithfully to the Commonwealth of God. Rumscheidt reminds us that Barth himself saw all his work as carrying God's Word where it needed to be carried, like the foal of an ass that carried Jesus into Jerusalem to confront its 'wrong' theology. What consumed Barth, according to Rumscheidt, was working with and for the church in finding the best ways to articulate a 'right' theology, all the time knowing it needed to be continually reformed by the collective wisdom of the Christian community to align with what God revealed to us in Jesus Christ about authentic human flourishing in God's Commonwealth.

Here a just one quote from the articles in this collection that provoked a deeper understand of my faith:

*If Christianity is properly understood, the documentation of its origins in the Old and New Testaments – and that, incidentally, is the task of theology – it is impossible to shut one’s eyes to the realization that, in contrast to religion, its essence is not man’s arising to go to God, but God’s arising to go to man. None of the men referred to in those documents engaged in straining their human capacities to the uttermost, their feelings, intellect, will, and ability, to track down a supreme other-worldly being, or to do justice to him by cruder or more sophisticated concepts of the divine or by forms of worship emphasizing either the ritualistic or moral side. Instead they are mentioned only because for their sake and that of the whole world the other-worldly became this-worldly before their eyes and in their ears. ... Essential Christianity consists of – or rather happens when there is – attentiveness to the acts and words of this God. (28-29)*

Barth ended his response to the celebrations of the 80<sup>th</sup> birthday in Basel by quoting the second verse of ‘Noe thank we all our God.’ He had sung it with his students when he was forced out of Bonn by the Nazis in 1935 and again when he returned there in 1946 after the horrors of WW2:

*O may this bounteous God  
Through all our life be near us,  
With ever joyful hearts  
And blessed peace to cheer us;  
And keep us in his grace,  
And guide us when perplexed,  
And free us from all ills  
In this world and the next.*

Barth’s love of hymns as a means of getting to the simplicity on the other side of complexity is also found in his comment that his entire corpus of writing was but a footnote on “Jesus loves me/this I know/for the Bible tells me so.”

In its weekly considerations and conversations about following God’s living Word, Jesus Christ, guided at all times by the Holy Spirit, Brentwood seeks to do in our secular urban context what Barth did in his totalitarian war-torn context. We trust God to be among us, nourishing our souls to flourish.