



Karl Barth's *Romans Commentary* 1919: A Document to the Living God, One Hundred Years Later

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One hundred years ago, European Protestant theology experienced a conversion that it is still making sense of today. That conversion was precipitated by the publication of the *Romans Commentary* by Karl Barth, who was then a little-known pastor in the Swiss village of Safenwil-Aargau. His book would become one of the most important books in theology and biblical criticism of his day, and he would go on to become the twentieth century's most important theologian. All this not because he intended to shock his world but because he embarked on a personal, deeply needy search for the living God in the ancient experiences of the apostle Paul.

Barth started the work in 1916 and published it in 1919. A second, revised volume was published in 1922. These years were profoundly confusing, devastating, and riddled with everyday violence and cultural crisis. As the Great War of 1914–1918 ended, the world was more complicated and conflict-ridden than ever

In a time of crisis, a young pastor became disillusioned with the established theology he had learned from his teachers, which no longer seemed to speak to his new realities. Through his study of Romans, Barth learned from Paul to encounter God in personal and direct ways that he had never before understood. His theological bombshell changed the course of twentieth-century Christian theology.

before.¹ By early 1919, all the rules had changed. Military might was being transferred from Britain to the United States. As for Germany, it was cut down at its knees by the Treaty of Versailles just when it was catching up to the military power of Britain.

Socially, all the rules were changing as well. The all-male world of politics was opened up to white American women, who were given the right to vote; alcohol was banned; and children's welfare was brought to the fore with the founding of the charity Save the Children. In Russia, the social upheaval was even more violent. Tsar Nicholas II and his entire family were murdered in the summer of 1918, swinging Lenin's Bolshevik Revolution into full force. Communists were in full blown civil war with the Russian empire. Colonies in Afghanistan, the Middle East, and Africa were violently rebelling against European imperial powers of Britain, France, Germany, Portugal, and others. Little did Barth know that his thought experiment on Paul's Letter to the Romans would only add to the general feeling of cultural anarchy.

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BREAKING ALL THE METHODOLOGICAL RULES

The *Romans Commentary* was not highly anticipated. Nor was it received with any pomp and circumstance. In fact, its publishers were so unfazed by the project that they only printed a thousand copies to be distributed in the small Swiss city of Bern. And yet, as the well-known Catholic thinker Karl Adam famously put it, Barth's *Romans Commentary* landed like a "bombshell which exploded on the playground of theologians."² Here was a book from a pastor who had been schooled by the best teachers in Germany in every correct method of interpretation and historical investigation. But his *Commentary* broke every hermeneutical rule of the academy.

Ever since the days of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) and Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889), German and Swiss scholars followed strict methodological rules for interpreting the bible. A proper reading of the text was to read "what" the author said but then to also look to see what was "behind" the text. That meant understanding more than just the author's words. It also meant respecting the shrouds of historical eras that separated ancient authors like the apostle Paul from

¹ See the online, James E. Kitchen, "Colonial Empires after the War/Decolonization," *International Encyclopedia of the First World War, 1914–1919*, October 8, 2014, <https://tinyurl.com/y4c6bhzl>.

² Karl Adam, "Die Theologie der Krisis," *Hochland: Monatsschrift für alle Gebiete des Wissens der Literatur und Kunst* 23 (1926/27): 271–86.

modern thinkers, or, as Lessing famously put it, respecting the “broad and ugly ditch”³ of history between modernity and the ancient past of the bible.

Driving this strict methodology in biblical and theological study was Christianity’s sense of being pushed out of university departments. Theological study needed to follow generally accepted rules of research in order to maintain its legitimacy as a proper field of study in the academy. Biblical exegesis and theology in Germany and Switzerland were concerned first and foremost with *method* in a world that was politically confusing, economically devastating, and culturally in shambles. If theologians and biblical interpreters found their *way* into the text correctly, they would be able to unlock the actual “intent” of ancient voices. They then could find a way to translate those ancient and foreign ideas into the modern self-conscious imagination.

To scholars like Adolf von Harnack, Wilhelm Hermann, and Adolf Jülicher—who had also been Karl Barth’s teachers—these hermeneutical commitments meant that Christian theology must confine itself to only those things that could be historically evidenced. It meant that theologians could only ever study the different kinds of human morality and ethical codes that grew out of a Christian worldview. It could not study God as such. The study of God as a living subject was seen as outdated, unenlightened, and metaphysical—that is, inappropriate for modern scholarship. It also meant that some of the more spiritual statements by Paul and his experiences of God were only products of his cultural imagination; they were not statements about any “real” experience.

Barth knew that his *Romans Commentary* broke every hermeneutical rule. As he was writing the preface to the first edition, he was painfully aware that his method of reading Romans would be too idiosyncratic, too original to be taken seriously as a biblical commentary. He struggled whether to include an explanation of his method in his preface and then chose to leave it out. This clearly risked misunderstanding among the critics. He was not wrong.

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Because leading scholars did not see Barth following any kind of conventional methodological rules that had governed theology and biblical criticism for the past 150 years, they struggled to make sense of his work. Like all typical academics, they therefore slapped all kinds of labels on Barth to see which ones would stick. He was accused of enthusiasm, biblicism, antinomianism, abstractionism,

³ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, “On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power,” in *Lessing: Philosophical and Theological Writings*, ed. and trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 87.

and dogmatism.⁴ Reviewers described his exegesis as “pneumatic”—or overly spiritual and naïve. The day’s most well-known New Testament scholar, Adolf Jülicher, called Barth a “gnostic”—someone seeking a secret knowledge of God not based in anything historical. Those around Adolf von Harnack called Barth a modern-day Marcion, who ripped the Bible out of its historical contexts for spiritual—and suspicious—reasons.⁵

Such labels demonstrate the shock that thinkers in the field of theology and Bible felt at Barth’s book. Such was the *Commentary*’s profound influence that even forty years later scholars were trying to discern Barth’s *method*. As late as 1960, Gerhard Ebeling, a noted theologian in his own right, dedicated an entire semester to analyzing the numerous prefaces⁶ to the many editions of the commentary for any clear method. To Barth’s dismay, thinkers like Ebeling failed to critically engage the *content* of the commentary, namely, the subject of *God*.

SEEKING GOD

While all the critical reviews were coming in from establishment theological journals, another group of readers became more and more intrigued by Barth’s work. These were the students, young scholars, and pastors who were witnessing seismic change, workers’ revolts, economic hardship, and political chaos in their own lives. They were experiencing the barrenness of strict theological method and biblical criticism; it simply did not help them pastor or preach in an era of crisis. The Great War showed them that the Christian faith *did not* translate into ethical behavior. Nor was the church able to uphold civil society.

These younger readers were seeking a deeper spiritual engagement with the Bible. They were flocking to works like Barth’s *Commentary* as well as the deeply spiritual and humanizing work *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (1918), by the Roman Catholic thinker Romano Guardini, as well as Rudolph Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy* (1917).⁷ Guardini’s work argued that the Catholic liturgy ought not be operationalized to soothe people’s consciences or bring about social order. It was an end unto itself. Otto’s work also argued for a divine presence in the world that could not be quantified or functionalized. It was the *mysterium tremendum* with which every human being needed to contend. Young pastors were seeking God among the ruins. Seen in this light, Barth’s *Commentary* was indicative of a widening generational gap in Christianity.⁸

⁴ Richard E. Burnett, *Karl Barth’s Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 16.

⁵ See Burnett, *Karl Barth’s Theological Exegesis*, 16–18, for a variety of reviews of Barth’s *Commentary*.

⁶ See Burnett, *Karl Barth’s Theological Exegesis*, 264–92 (Appendix 1 and 2), for the prefaces of all the *Commentary*’s editions translated into English.

⁷ Romano Guardini, *Spirit of the Liturgy* (New York: Crossroad, 1998); Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1950).

⁸ See Frank Jehle, *Ever Against the Stream: The Politics of Karl Barth 1906–1968* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 36–38; and Paul Silas Peterson, *The Early Karl Barth* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 146–47.

The younger generation was discovering a Protestant thinker who did not stop at knowing *about* God but rather sought to *know* God. Paul's writings were not simply a witness to his times or his language or his Middle Eastern context but also a witness to real experiences of a real Divine subject. They were a record of a "real reality" that was more real than human reality. In other words, Barth came to believe that *God's reality precedes any questions that humans might have about God.*⁹ This single material insight propelled Barth's entire *Commentary*—and finally his whole project of the later *Church Dogmatics*. God is a more real subject than humans are in our created reality. God's history is *in* human history, but it cannot be fully comprehended *by* human history. Nor can God's reality be explained away by modern interpretations of history. When we read the Bible, we are grasped by the God who "immediately and creatively comes near to us."¹⁰

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THE POWER OF THE RESURRECTION

In a radical move, Barth based the "real reality" of God in the *resurrection* of Christ. This extra-historical starting point made all prolegomena based in history, language, or culture superfluous, for the resurrection was (and is) an event that makes no sense to historical reasoning; it does not fit in to the modern imaginary of what is "real." Hence, scholars schooled in strict historical-critical methods could make no sense of it. But according to Barth, Paul's witness to the resurrection is precisely that which historically reveals the *power* of the resurrection (*Kraft der Auferstehung*¹¹) and which gives us historical knowledge of God. "In the resurrection of Christ from the dead, a *power* from God has been unleashed."¹² It is a power that is above all powers, an idea that is above all ideas. It brings knowledge of God not only because it happened at one particular point in history but because it is *still happening* today (a commitment that breaks even more rules of historical investigation), ushering in a new eon and new humanity.¹³ In Christ's resurrection,

⁹ See Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis*, 43–50.

¹⁰ Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1985), 19 (hereafter *Rb 1919*).

¹¹ *Rb 1919*, 15.

¹² *Rb 1919*, 19.

¹³ For more on Barth's "process eschatology" in the 1919 *Romans Commentary*, see Bruce McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 141–55.

“the history of another humanity has been opened,”¹⁴ a “new Eon, the epoch of the Spirit breaking in for the whole world.”¹⁵ It is precisely *in* “the light of this once-and-for-all completed turn/event [that] we are to consider all things from now on.”¹⁶ In other words, the resurrection establishes a viewpoint from God upon all of history. Barth took all the tools of the historical-critical method and rather than using them to interrogate Paul’s ancient historical context, he turned them on the present context and interrogated *it*.

This was a 180-degree turn from the conventional ways that modern people were and still are reading the Bible. Barth’s approach insisted that Christians read the Bible in order to analyze the world *from its light, and from its Spirit*. Generations of biblical interpreters were raised in a hermeneutical tradition that did just the opposite. It put *human questions* about ourselves and our histories first and foremost in all biblical interpretation. But Barth answered this question of “how shall I approach the Bible?” with the comment that the Bible’s rejoinder to us is: “My dear friend, that is *your* affair, which you must not ask *me* about. . . . If you do not want to get involved in *my* questions, . . . you will not glean from it what actually stands there.”¹⁷ What was “actually” there in the Bible was a strange, new world that *claimed* us, and that brought us into proximity with Christ and with fellow Christians from across the ages.

PERSONAL BETRAYAL

Despite all the ripples that the *Romans Commentary* made in the church and theological world, Barth actually began his *Commentary* out of a deep personal need. He felt betrayed by the leading thinkers of his day—thinkers who had been his teachers as well. Despite all the ink they had spilled arguing that the Christian faith is seen in history as the highest form of human morality and decency, they were choosing to support a dubious and irrational war. The sense of betrayal came in 1914, when many of his teachers and respected scholars signed a “Manifesto of the 93 Intellectuals” supporting the outbreak of the Great War.¹⁸ His beloved Adolf von Harnack even helped write the speech that Kaiser Wilhelm II gave on August 6, 1914, calling Germany to enter the war.¹⁹

Then, he was disillusioned politically when the Social Democrats in Germany—those politicians who he thought were fighting for rights and workers and against militarism—approved of war credits to the German government. The financial support of the war by Social Democrats was a final straw in Barth’s

¹⁴ *Rb 1919*, 13.

¹⁵ *Rb 1919*, 13.

¹⁶ *Rb 1919*, 13.

¹⁷ Karl Barth, “The New World in the Bible,” (1917), in *The Word of God and Theology*, trans. Amy Marga (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 24.

¹⁸ Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1975), 81–83.

¹⁹ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 95, photo 26.

trust in politics as a means to the kingdom of God.²⁰ Protestantism as he knew it seemed morally and theologically bankrupt. Devastated by these developments, Barth turned back to Scripture. He turned to the apostle Paul for companionship as he sought to take God seriously in a new and different way. The *Commentary* has been seen often as his “break” with this liberalism.

The apostle Paul turned out to be a faithful traveling companion for Barth. Despite the layers of history that lay between Barth and Paul, Barth approached Paul as a fellow human being waiting to hear God. Paul was not simply an ancient witness who could no longer speak to us directly through the eons of history. He was a person struggling to understand his experiences of the divine—*just like modern people were seeking*. Barth points to Rom 5:3–5 where Paul says that no matter the time or place, where people cry out for God, “Abba!,” there are the children of God. Both the past and the present are living contexts that are equally close to God’s Self-revelation.

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THE PASTOR

The personal and pastoral are often deeply intertwined, and Karl Barth was no exception. The *Romans Commentary* had never been a strictly academic or scholarly project for him. Next to his sense of personal betrayal, Barth also struggled with how to preach God in his times of cultural crisis, post-War trauma, and political turmoil. He was one more pastor wrestling with the word of God. As a village pastor, Barth juggled the many tasks and struggles of all pastors, then and today. He baptized and buried the citizens of Safenwil. He struggled to write relevant sermons, preaching on the sinking of the Titanic in 1912 and the Great War when it broke out in 1914. He was criticized for his war sermons, so he backed off of that theme. Then he was criticized that his sermons were too long and academic. But apparently, his funerals were too short. He met his best friend for life, Eduard Thurneysen, during his time in Safenwil. And a former confirmation student, Nelly, would become his future wife.

But Safenwil was no sleepy village. In fact, it found itself caught in the crosshairs of a rapidly industrializing region of the Aargau in Switzerland, and Barth’s parishioners soon became deeply involved in the Swiss Workers’ movement for better working conditions, wages, and rights for the numerous employees of the textile industry in the area. Although the Bolshevik Revolution was in far-away

²⁰ Jehle, *Ever against the Stream*, 37.

Russia, its ideals and demands soaked into every part of Swiss and German life at the time, and Barth realized that he could no longer simply preach a “neutral Gospel.”²¹ He began to preach on politics and the economy. His theological library gave way to economic books and journals as he fought local leaders for better wages and working conditions. As he wrote at the time, “Class warfare, which was going on in my parish, before my very eyes, introduced me almost for the first time to the real problems of real life.”²²

Barth went on to write many sermons on Jesus and the Social Movement, as well as many articles for the local press during these years. One of his most famous lectures on his context was a lecture he gave at a Tambach conference in summer of 1919, entitled “The Christian in Society.” In this lecture, he echoed his sentiments from the *Romans Commentary* that Christ has been resurrected into modern society with its struggles against capitalism, militarism, money, and imperialism.²³ He joined the Swiss Socialist Workers’ Party, started being referred to as “Comrade” by his parishioners, and even became known in the area as the “Red pastor.”²⁴

In other words, Barth’s ministry of accompaniment did not just shape his preaching and publishing. It also deeply affected his sense of justice, righteousness, and the role that institutions played in the lives of Christians.²⁵ He saw how big industry and political institutions put barriers up against his working-class parishioners. One wonders if this is why he speaks so strongly against “Capitalism, militarism, statism and every evil -ism” in the *Romans Commentary*;²⁶ and why he states that the sin of humanity is turning itself into God, and thus “*having* to fill its world that has become lordless with idols.”²⁷ He was witnessing predatory capitalism with his own eyes, in his own congregation.

But the impetus for the *Romans Commentary* was not simply the struggles of his parishioners. Even as he was deeply involved in the Swiss Socialist Movement, he witnessed its perversions and the limits of its philosophy. Not only did Barth experience serious and genuine struggle among his people, but he also saw power moves, petty disputes, and competition among respected leaders of socialist thought in Switzerland and Germany. Once enamored with leading socialist thinkers like Leonard Ragaz and Hermann Kutter, Barth became frustrated with

²¹ Barth in a letter, cited in Jehle, *Ever against the Stream*, 27.

²² Busch, *Karl Barth*, 69.

²³ Barth, “The Christian in Society,” in *Word of God and Theology*, 42ff and 66ff.

²⁴ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 82–83.

²⁵ A significant amount of scholarly work has been done on Barth’s socialist politics, and the debate still rages as to how far his socialist political views shaped his theology and his place among cultural critics of his era. See the original analyses of his politics from the 1970s: Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, *Theologie und Sozialismus: Das Beispiel Karl Barths* (Munich: Kaiser, 1972); and Ulrich Dannemann, *Theologie und Politik im Denken Karl Barths* (Munich: Kaiser, 1977). See also McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic*, 78–125. For more recent interpretations of Barth’s politics in the 1920s, see George Hunsinger, *Karl Barth and Radical Politics*, 2nd ed. (Oregon: Cascade, 2017); and Paul Silas Peterson, *The Early Karl Barth* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018).

²⁶ *Rb 1919*, 36.

²⁷ *Rb 1919*, 27.

the all-too-human foibles and hubris that held back so many of the efforts of working people. The faith that he put into the power of politics reached its limit at some point. Barth knew instinctively that the Christian faith could not partner unproblematically with these—or *any*—humanly devised social movement.

CONCLUSION

A hundred years later, Barth's *Romans Commentary* from 1919 has not yet been translated into English (the second edition, revised and published in 1922, is the only English translation²⁸). This is partly due to its girth and partly due to his own comments about the first edition.²⁹ Scholars have struggled to place this trailblazing, formative work next to his more mature, more familiar, more dogmatic work in the *Church Dogmatics*. Many biblical scholars have also written him off because of his deep theological commitments to a living subject who speaks through historical texts. To Barth, the Bible is not just literature; it is a living witness. On the one hand, Barth's politics and theology from 1919 have been overly analyzed and wrung dry by those seeking a key to unlock the development of his own thought. On the other hand, theologians today are just beginning to discover this work again.

One of Barth's most well-known lines is that every generation of theologians must start again from the beginning in their study of God. As a new generation of theologians turns to face the twenty-first century, Barth's condemnation of militarism, capitalism, and the idol worship that accompanies empire building seems as prescient as ever. Perhaps because Christian theology has passed through the rough days of postmodern deconstruction, the urgent criticism of white feminism, womanism, and Black theology, and now the decolonizing of Christian theology across the globe, it is ready to receive Barth's message again. Perhaps now, scholars will focus on the *content* of Barth's thought and not just his method.

Barth's intimacy with Paul as a fellow faith sojourner can teach theologians and pastors to view all those who seek God as fellow sojourners despite their social context, economic or legal status, skin color, gender identity, age, education, or ability. As Barth states, when we rebel against God, we suppress our own needs and desires; we betray our own most intimate being.³⁰ This is still the truth of Christianity, and God remains the Truth above all truths.³¹ If theologians, pastors, and scholars agree with Barth on these points, then in many ways, the conversation

²⁸ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (1968), trans. E. C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).

²⁹ In the preface to the second edition of the *Romans Commentary* (1922), Barth commented that the first book was a "preliminary investigation" (*Vorarbeit*) and that in the new edition, "no stone remains in its old place." See *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Hoskyns, 2. See Bruce McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic*, 207–88, for the differences in eschatology between the two editions.

³⁰ *Rb 1919*, 28.

³¹ *Rb 1919*, 42.

with Barth's century-old *Romans Commentary* will perhaps be picked up in earnest again. ⊕

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