Reading the *Church Dogmatics* by Karl Barth: A Primer

© David Guretzki, PhD (2008)
Associate Professor of Theology
Briercrest College & Seminary
Caronport, SK, Canada
Email: dguretzki “AT” briercrest.ca

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There doesn’t appear to be signs of declining interest in the work the twentieth century Swiss theologian, Karl Barth (1886-1968), whom some have called a twentieth century “church father.” Barth is, of course, probably best known for his monumental *Church Dogmatics* (hereafter abbreviated as *CD*). For those who first come into contact with what some have called “the white elephant” for the first time, they may become quickly discouraged from even beginning to read it by its sheer size. It is, after all, over 10,000 pages of relatively small print in the English translation! Yet for those who want at least to attempt to become acquainted with this important work, the following is a short “primer” that may help to readers to ease into that daunting task.

1. **Get an overview.**

   Because the *Church Dogmatics* (German, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* [*KD]*) is such a massive work, it helps to get a broad overview of the “whole” before engaging the “parts.” This can be accomplished by reading through the compiled “Summaries” (*Diktatsatz* – literally, “dictations”) compiled and available in the *Index Volume* of the *CD* (pp. 1-13). Beyond that, you may want to consult the appropriate section in Bromiley’s book entitled, *An Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth.* ¹ There Bromiley seeks to provide a section-by-section exposition of the content of the *CD.* However, be forewarned: reading Bromiley’s text can in no way replace reading the *Dogmatics* for yourself, any more than reading a biblical commentary can replace reading the Bible for yourself.

   If you are still daunted by the gargantuan size of the *Dogmatics*, and just aren’t sure you want to “commit” to reading it, then I would recommend reading the next best thing: Barth’s 1946 lectures on the Apostles’ Creed to theological students and colleagues in Bonn, and later published as *Dogmatics in Outline.* It is still in print. [Barth, Karl. *Dogmatics in Outline.* New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959.] While the *Dogmatics in Outline* are not an abridged *CD*, reading this little book will nevertheless provide insight into some of Barth’s distinctive theological ideas, all of which are greatly expanded upon and extended in the *CD.*

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2. Understand what the Church Dogmatics is.
Occasionally first time readers of the CD are offended that anyone could presume to write such a long work on any topic, even on theology! However, the “offense” can be lessened once one understands that the CD is a (half)life-long record of Barth’s lectures to his students (with the exception of some of the very last parts). Nearly all of the content of the CD first saw the light of day as an oral lecture which Barth delivered to his theological students and which was only subsequently later polished for publication.

Knowing that the CD has an underlying “oral tradition” can help by reminding yourself that these lectures were originally meant to be “heard.” In fact, when you are struggling through a particularly difficult passage, it may sometimes help to read the passage out loud (to yourself or to whomever may care to listen!) to highlight the “oral” element. Beyond this, awareness of the oral tradition underlying the CD can help to explain some of the repetition that one encounters throughout. What may seem to be full of repetition when read silently may come rhetorically alive once read aloud. To deliver a lecture lasting over three decades obviously required that Barth needed to remind his students of things that had been said earlier, not to mention that he was continually speaking to new students who were just becoming acquainted with his unfolding theology! I hope therefore you can safely forgive Barth for these repetitions, all of which serve to solidify and nuance his ideas.

3. Understand the Broad Structure and Outline of the Church Dogmatics.²
Barth intention was to present the CD in 5 volumes and he worked at expanding the broad outline for over 35 years (from approximately 1932 until Barth’s death in 1968). Even becoming aware of the broad movement of the work can help when you sometimes find yourself lost in the details. It may also be helpful to understand that the CD is structured around a trinitarian framework. Thus, in volume I, Barth expounds upon his trinitarian doctrine of revelation, and in volume II about the knowledge of God and his election in Christ. This is followed in volumes III, IV, and V, to speak broadly about God the Father the Creator, God the Son the Reconciler, and God the Holy Spirit the Redeemer.
• Volume I – The Doctrine of the Word of God (2 half-volumes)
• Volume II – The Doctrine of God (2 half volumes)
• Volume III – The Doctrine of Creation (4 quarter volumes)
• Volume IV – The Doctrine of Reconciliation (incomplete, but includes 2 part volumes, and 1 part volume in 2 parts, and 1 “fragment” volume! = 5 parts)
• Volume V – The Doctrine of Redemption (never begun)

4. Understand how the Church Dogmatics works.
Barth conceived of the CD as being comprised of a single work in multiple part-volumes. The entire work is divided up into “chapters” and “paragraphs,” with the paragraphs being marked off with the symbol known as a “section sign” (§). Each

² Though the article was written even before the CD as we now have it was completed, an article commenting on the structure of Barth’s Dogmatics is still helpful. John Godsey, “The Architecture of Karl Barth’s Church Dogmatics,” Scottish Journal of Theology 9 (1956): 236-50.
“paragraph” begins with a “summary” (Diktatsatz) which originally was a carefully worded sentence which Barth would likely have expected students to write down verbatim and upon which he would expound for the remainder of the section. Also, within the chapters and sections there are “regular” and “small print” sections. The regular sections are where Barth expounded his main ideas and the “small print” sections are where Barth provided insight into the “exegesis” and “historical background” that led him to his conclusions. You might think of these sections more or less as Barth’s well developed research notes. They are also the sections most likely to contain references to other works and authors with whom Barth was engaging. (There are virtually no other “footnotes” in the CD, other than an occasional editorial insert). While not always true, it is also the case that the regular print sections tend to have more of an “oral” style, while the small print sections tend to read more as technical or encyclopedic in nature.

Barth occasionally insisted that people who couldn’t afford the time to read the whole CD could still benefit from reading the large print sections and simply ignoring the “small print” sections. However, in reality some of Barth’s greatest theological nuggets are often embedded in the small print sections. One may get to know what Barth said when reading the regular print sections, but one has a better chance of understanding why Barth said what he said if one is patient enough to read the small print sections carefully. One small warning: Greek, Hebrew and Latin citations from biblical and classical authors are scattered liberally throughout the small print sections, especially in the earlier volumes. Those without the ability to read these languages unfortunately will have to rely on someone who has the linguistic training to help them through, though having appropriate dictionaries available can help. Fortunately, Logos Bible Software has now released an electronic version of the CD on CD-Rom in which all the Greek, Hebrew, and Latin sections have been translated into English.3

5. Read a lot and read a little!

As already mentioned, the massive size of the CD is often daunting to beginning Barth readers and initial forays into the work can be quite discouraging. Add to this the fact that it sometimes takes three or four times longer to read a paragraph in Barth than average, and the beginner can easily be tempted to give up barely before she has started. My advice: Learn to read Barth in both large and small chunks. Press yourself to read large sections, without even bothering to pretend to know all that is going on. This will help you get a better sense of Barth’s “rhythm” and “movements.” (Some scholars have noted parallels in Barth’s work to the music of Mozart, which included repetition of “leitmotifs” or “themes” that arose throughout a piece of music.) Then, once you have a feeling for the larger sections, intersperse this large section reading

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3 For purchase information, see http://www.logos.com/products/details/2607. I’m grateful to the good folks at working at the Center for Barth Studies at Princeton Theological Seminary for the release of this new electronic edition of the CD. You can visit the Center online here: http://libweb.ptsem.edu/collections/barth.
with “close” or “slow” reading of smaller sections to become more attuned to the
delicate theological nuances that Barth provides.4

Also, don’t neglect the prefaces to each work, many of which contain insight into the
issues Barth was dealing with, as well as some humorous items as well. (For starters,
you might want to read Barth’s lament about Dutch Neo-Calvinist views of Mozart in
*CD* III/4, and his slight backtracking in *CD* IV/1!)

6. **Start a Church Dogmatics Reading Group**
I have personally been involved with a group of students and friends in reading
slowly and carefully through a section of Barth’s *CD* and I have found this to be an
enjoyable, stimulating, and spiritually uplifting way to learn and read Barth while
being challenged to think through theological issues on my own. Our group meets
once a week during the academic year to discuss a 4-8 page section. We’ve found that
really fruitful discussion can’t really cover more than a maximum of 10 pages in one
week—not to mention that for busy people, 5 or 10 pages might be all that they can
really get to in one week. No, this strategy will not give you much hope of finishing
the *Church Dogmatics* even in a lifetime, but in many respects this slow reading of
Barth has had the positive side-effect of encouraging us all to read more on our own.
Perhaps most importantly, reading the *CD* in this way has also forced us all to read
our Bibles afresh as we consider ways of reading the Scripture that perhaps had not
occurred to us before. Indeed, I believe that Barth would not be happy to know that
people were getting together only to discuss his works in dogmatics, but I do believe
that he would be happy if he knew that by reading his *Church Dogmatics*, we are also being
pressed to return to the Bible again and again, “from the beginning,” as Barth was
fond of saying.

Beyond that, we’ve made it a rule in our own group to start and finish each session
with prayer. Though Barth did not write this in the *CD*, but in his earlier *Göttingen
Dogmatics*, it is nevertheless worth citing here at length:

> It was significant that Thomas Aquinas put at the head of his *Summa Theologica* the
> prayer: “Merciful God, I ask that thou wilt grant me, as thou pleasest, to seek earnestly, to
> investigate carefully, to know truthfully, and to present perfectly, to the glory of thy
> name, amen.” If there is any mortally dangerous undertaking on earth, any undertaking in
> which we have reason not only at the beginning but also in the middle and at the end to
take the last resort of invoking the name of the Most High, then it is that of a *summa
> theological*, a dogmatics, and I must add that in our day and our situation such a prayer
> will have to be made out of materially much deeper distress and perplexity than in the
time of Thomas.5

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4 In fact, this is a good reading strategy to follow in Bible reading as well. We need to read both broadly and
narrowly, in large (chapters and books) and small (words and verses) portions. On this concept of the whole and the
parts, see an important section in Richard E. Burnett, *Karl Barth’s Theological Exegesis. The Hermeneutical Principles
of the Römerbrief Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 78-84.

7. **Read George Hunsinger’s *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology*.**

*But don’t read it before you’ve started reading Barth!* The title of the book is a little misleading because it suggests that it will serve as an introduction to the beginner to Barth. While in certain respects that may be true, in reality, this important book is better read and much more profitable once you’ve gotten through a few hundred pages of the *CD* yourself. In essence, Hunsinger provides guidance on the massive difficulties of trying to provide a “hermeneutical key” to Barth. Instead of pointing to a single key that will unlock Barth, Hunsinger argues that no one “center” or “theme” that can “get at” Barth. Rather, Hunsinger points out that at least six “motifs” or “patterns” characterize Barth’s theology in the *CD*. While I certainly can’t expound on these to any great length, the six motifs or patterns which shape Barth’s thought are:

- **Actualism** – Actual events of God’s action in history shape reality as we experience it. E.g., We understand history by how God has actually acted; we do not interpret how God has acted through a general theory of history.

- **Particularism** – The particular and concrete logically and theologically precedes the general and the abstract. E.g., the Incarnation in its unique particularity must inform the general nature of humanity; a general theory of humanity does not inform the particular nature of a human named Jesus.

- **Objectivism** – Theological claims must be shaped by the object they seek to describe. E.g., God must be spoken of in terms of how he himself objectively presents himself (“reveals” himself) to us.

- **Personalism** – Knowledge of God is knowledge of God as one who is to be known as a “personal” being and not merely as a “control belief.”

- **Realism** – Language about God is based on Scriptural language that is neither “literalist” (theological language cannot be equated directly to God) nor “expressivist” (theological language is not merely that which is expressed when thinking about God), but a “real analogy” to God.

- **Rationalism** – the mystery of God can be coherently spoken of without needing to comprehend God; i.e., theology is a “rational wrestling with mystery.”

8. **Remember that Barth wrote a “Church” Dogmatics.**

Barth was a theologian for the pastor. He intended that the *CD* serve the pastor who was faced with the task of preaching from week to week. Indeed, Barth insisted that a theology that forgot that it was in service to the task of preaching was a theology that had lost its moorings. The *CD* is intended (and whether Barth succeeded or not can only be tested in the pulpit and podium) to help to answer the question of what it is that we should *preach* and *teach* concerning God and the Gospel, and not simply what we think we can “know” or “prove” about God. For Barth, a dogmatics that does not ask how this or that doctrine needs to be preached or taught, is a dogmatics that has not yet understood its own task. As he says,

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No single item of Christian doctrine is legitimately grounded, or rightly developed or expounded, unless it can of itself be understood and explained as part of the responsibility laid upon the hearing and teaching Church towards the self-revelation of God attested in Holy Scripture. (CD II/1, 35)

Barth’s intention that the CD serve the preacher first and foremost was confirmed, in part, by the editors of the CD who, in the Index volume to the CD, include what they call “Aids to the Preacher” which include about 800 extracts from the volumes of the CD, mostly exegetical notes on a particular Sunday’s selected Scripture passages for the Church Year as outlined in the Lutheran 1958 Ordnung der Predigttexte (“Rules of Sermon Texts”).

9. Enjoy the Journey!
Whatever you do, do not allow yourself to become discouraged if you do not reach your goal of reading a certain number of pages in a year, or when you fail to finish the whole CD in the years you allotted. Remember that not even Barth himself finished the task he has set out to accomplish. In one of numerous interviews conducted near the end of his career, Karl Barth quipped, “There is a certain merit to an unfinished dogmatics,” he said, “It points to the eschatological character of theology!” In other words, the goal should be less to worry about finishing the Church Dogmatics and more to realize that the work of dogmatics is never finished! So enjoy the journey, learn, grow, and cry out, as Barth often did, “Come, Lord Jesus! Veni Creator Spiritus! [Come Spirit Creator].

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8 Church Dogmatics, IV.4, 210.
Select Bibliography: The Annotated Top 10

It nearly goes without saying that the bibliography on Barth is so massive that it is almost beyond comprehension. Literally not a week goes by without new books and articles being published on Barth. But do not despair: there are still some classics in the secondary literature. In what follows are what I consider to be the most important secondary works on Karl Barth that students who want to go further on Barth must eventually read. They are listed in alphabetical order, not order of importance.


3. Burnett, Richard E. *Karl Barth’s Theological Exegesis*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004. [Though focusing on Barth’s early work in his commentary on Romans, Burnett’s study is the best available on getting a handle on Barth’s hermeneutical theory and practice.]


5. Busch, Eberhard. *The Great Passion: An Introduction to Karl Barth’s Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004. [While not as easy to read as Bromiley’s classic Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth, Busch’s work is bound to become the standard introduction]


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9 The standard bibliography on Barth, covering primary and secondary literature only up to 1984 is Hans Wildi’s three volume (!) *Bibliographie Karl Barth*. Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1984.
Company, 1969. [An early and important interpretation of Barth’s doctrine of God by one of Barth’s most sympathetic Lutheran critics]


10. Torrance, Thomas F. *Karl Barth, Biblical and Evangelical Theologian*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990. [Torrance was arguably the most important English interpreter and sympathetic critic of Barth and was responsible for oversight of editing the Church Dogmatics and for disseminating Barth to the English speaking world]