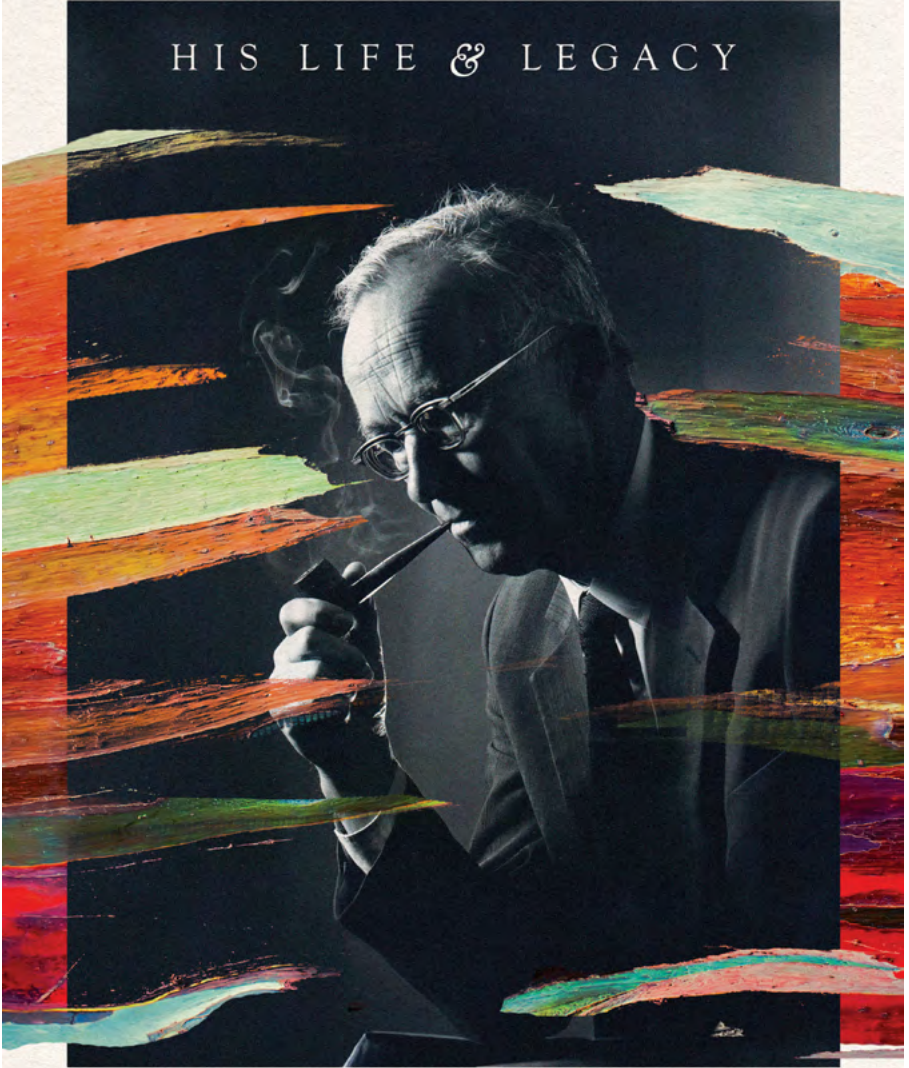


MARKUS BARTH

HIS LIFE & LEGACY



MARK R. LINDSAY



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1

A CHILDHOOD OF “PARTICULAR AFFECTION”

The Early Years, 1915–1930

KARL MARKUS BARTH was born on Wednesday, October 6, 1915, in the small, semi-industrial town of Safenwil in the Aargauer Canton, where his father had been pastor to the Reformed community since 1911. The second of Karl and Nelly Barth’s five children,¹ Karl Markus—known from birth by his middle name—was welcomed into the family with much rejoicing. His godfather, Karl’s great friend Eduard Thurneysen, greeted Markus’s birth as an occasion of “great joy.”² But while his arrival was a source of undeniable happiness, he was, in truth, born during a period of considerable upheaval. North over the borders, the First World War had been raging for just over a year. The devastating effects of the Gallipoli campaign, the battle for Ypres, and the Artois-Loos Offensive were still being felt across Europe and even beyond.

The Barths themselves were out of harm’s way in Switzerland, but they were not for that reason isolated from the war or its effects. While Switzerland itself was neutral, its borders were not entirely secure. Certainly, the executors of Germany’s Schlieffen Plan had, in the end, opted to attack

¹Franziska (April 13, 1914–January 11, 1994); Karl Markus (October 6, 1915–July 1, 1994); Christoph Friedrich (September 29, 1917–August 21, 1986); Robert Matthias (April 17, 1921–June 21, 1941); and Hans Jakob (April 6, 1925–July 25, 1984).

²E. Thurneysen to K. Barth and N. Barth, October 8, 1915, in Karl Barth, *Gesamtausgabe*, 56 vols., ed. Hinrich Stoevesandt, Hans-Anton Drewes, and Peter Zocher (Zurich: TVZ, 1971–2022), V.3, 90 (hereafter GA).



France through Belgium instead of through the more mountainous Switzerland. Nevertheless, a tactical violation of Switzerland's border had been considered, even if momentarily, meaning that Swiss citizens could not take their security for granted. As it was, there were occasional attacks on Swiss territory throughout the war, particularly in the Porrentruy region, some 85 kilometers from Safenwil, and only 45 kilometers from Basel. While such attacks were uncommon, they did serve as constant reminders of how close Switzerland was to the fighting. As Markus recalled in an interview toward the end of his life, "When the wind came from the West or North West, we could hear the sound of guns coming from the Alsace region . . . and we thought: 'Oh, they're shooting at each other again.'"³

Just nine days after Markus's birth, his father, Karl—at this time, still a largely unknown pastor, and very far from the towering theological figure he was later to become—told his congregation that the darkness of the coming winter would coincide with the dreadful consequences of the war's "great foolishness," and that only a very few would not be affected.⁴ Karl himself chose to be affected quite personally. He joined the Swiss home guard and—when time permitted and duty called—put aside his pastoral duties to patrol the fields around Safenwil with a rifle, a task to which he would return in 1940 with equally unbridled enthusiasm (if not, perhaps, skill!).⁵ With somewhat greater regularity than his soldiering duties, Karl also found himself drawn at this time—and as he would be, time after time, throughout his career—into the battles for the church's own conscience. During World War I, this fight increasingly took place

³"Conversation with Dr Markus Barth," 1. M. Barth interview in Tokyo, May 1987. MBMC. Subject Correspondence 3. Box 7. In the same interview, Markus noted that Safenwil garrisoned a company of Swiss soldiers.

⁴"Dieses Jahr wird es der Winter wohl auch bei uns an den Tag bringen, was die große Narrheit des Krieges für Folgen haben muß; nur ganz Wenige werden nichts davon merken." K. Barth, sermon, October 24, 1915, in *GA* I.27, 422.

⁵E. Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. J. Bowden (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 81, 305-6. By his own admission, Karl was not an especially good soldier, but he relished the opportunity to don the uniform and share in the collegiality of his Sentry Company V. Perhaps this is not surprising; much earlier, during his student days, Karl had gained something of a name for himself for his "passionate involvement in the exercises and route marches of the Bern cadet corps." See Busch, *Karl Barth*, 26. Even then, though, he displayed only "modest talent" with his rifle. See C. Tietz, *Karl Barth: A Life in Conflict*, trans. V. Barnett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 17.

in heated conversation with the Swiss Religious Socialists, among whom the sharply divergent opinions about the church’s proper stance toward the war—between a prophetic quietism on one hand, and a radical activism on the other—were personified by Herrmann Kutter and Leonhard Ragaz, respectively.⁶

In large part because of the war, these were also theologically tumultuous years. There was, especially but not only in Germany, the dominating presence of an ardently nationalistic “war theology” (*Kriegstheologie*), by which all manner of heresies could be, and were, justified. The Marburg theologian Martin Rade—under whom Karl Barth had studied in 1908, and with whom he worked in 1909 as editorial assistant for *Die Christliche Welt*—famously insisted that God was “the only possible ground and author” of the German people’s enthusiasm for the war.⁷ Rade’s belief in the providential nature of the German war effort paled, though, in comparison to the sentiments expressed by some others. Dietrich Vorwerk, for example—a Lutheran pastor from Pomerania—“praised the God of the cherubim, seraphim, and Zeppelin,” and even saw fit to rewrite the Lord’s Prayer along distinctly German lines: “Thine is the Kingdom, the German land; may we through Thy mailed [armoured] hand, come to power and glory.”⁸

When, therefore, in October 1914—almost exactly one year before Markus’s birth—Karl Barth recognized a number of his former professors among the signatories to a pair of manifestos defending Germany’s war aims, he could do nothing other than diagnose the complete bankruptcy of modern liberal Protestantism.⁹ Behind it all, of course, was the

⁶B. L. McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909–1936* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 117–25.

⁷M. Rade to K. Barth, October 1, 1914, in C. Schwöbel, ed., *Karl Barth—Martin Rade: Ein Briefwechsel* (Gütersloh: Gütersloh Verlagshaus, 1981), 101.

⁸“Dein ist das Reich, das deutsche Land; uns muss durch deine gepanzerte Hand, Kraft und Herrlichkeit werden!” D. Vorwerk, *Hurra und Halleluja: Kriegslieder* (Schwerin-in-Mecklenburg: Verlag von Friedrich Bahn, 1914), 31. See also P. Jenkins, *The Great and Holy War: How World War I Became a Religious Crusade* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 13.

⁹Traditional historiography, including that presented in Busch’s seminal biography, has assumed that the trigger for Karl Barth’s break with his liberal Protestant heritage was the so-called Manifesto of the 93 from October 4, 1914—*Der Aufruf der 93 an die Kulturwelt*. While that was certainly a significant document for Barth’s growing disaffection with his theological forebears, it was not the only, nor even the most decisive, one. In his magisterial book on Rudolf Bultmann,

ever-present figure of Friedrich Schleiermacher. “He was unmasked,” said Barth. “In a decisive way all the theology expressed in the manifesto and everything that followed it . . . proved to be founded and governed by him.”¹⁰ And so with nothing left of his theological schooling to fall back upon, Barth, together with his friend—and Markus’s godfather—Eduard Thurneysen, from the neighboring parish of Leutwil, began “learning [their] theological ABCs all over again.”¹¹ It was this venture that would eventually culminate in that “bomb on the playground of the theologians,”¹² the much-vaunted *Römerbrief*.

In the Barth household itself, life in Safenwil was busy and at times difficult. Bruce McCormack has detailed some of the more obvious consequences of the war by which Switzerland, even in its neutrality, was impacted. There was a doubling of the cost-of-living index during the years 1914–1918, a 30 percent drop in real wages, the institution of food rationing in 1917, and the first ever direct national tax as an emergency response to skyrocketing national debt.¹³ Within such strains of those war years, Nelly Barth gave birth to three children. The Barths’ fourth child, Matthias, was born little more than two years after the Armistice, at a time when Switzerland’s economy was still in the doldrums and its political stability was in consequence under threat from widespread strikes and civil

David Congdon has shown that Barth was just as, if not more, profoundly shaken by a similar manifesto that had been published exactly one month prior to the *Aufruf der 93*; a manifesto written not by the intelligentsia in general but specifically by Christian pastors and professors. *Der Aufruf deutscher Kirchenmänner und Professoren: An die evangelischen Christen im Ausland*—published on September 4, 1914—not only theologically legitimized Germany’s wartime objectives but did so on the basis of Germany’s distinctive missiological task. See D. W. Congdon, *The Mission of Demythologizing: Rudolf Bultmann’s Dialectical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 243–44, 838–43. Barth preached intentionally against the sentiments of this manifesto in, among others, his sermon on September 6, 1914, when he declared—against the “German people, who said from the beginning: we will conquer or perish”—that in fact “God does not want this war!” In the face of those among his former professors who were seeking to claim God’s justification for Germany’s wartime victories, Barth instead insisted: “Wartime successes are—like everything in human life—transient and provisional [*Vorübergehenden, Vorläufigen*].” Sermon, September 6, 1914, in GA I.5, 457–62.

¹⁰K. Barth, “Nachwort,” in *Schleiermacher-Auswahl* (Munich: Siebenstern-Taschenbuch, 1968), 293. Cited in Busch, *Karl Barth*, 82.

¹¹Barth, “Nachwort,” 113–14. Cited in Busch, *Karl Barth*, 97.

¹²K. Adam, “Die Theologie der Krisis,” *Hochland* 23 (1926): 271–86.

¹³McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 137–38.

disturbances.¹⁴ In this challenging economic climate, Karl Barth’s vigorous advocacy on behalf the town’s factory workers caused Safenwil’s industrialists considerable irritation.¹⁵ Like most young Swiss families during these years, the Barths had therefore to live under considerable pressure. As was recalled at her funeral, it was often hard for Nelly Barth “to have an open house despite [in view of] the required frugality.”¹⁶



Figure 1.1. Barth family portrait, 1921. Left to right: Karl, Matthias, Christoph, Markus

To compound the difficulties, a young Markus contracted scarlet fever in early 1921 while Nelly was pregnant with Matthias. To keep both mother and baby safe, Markus was hospitalized 100 kilometers away in the lakeside town of Stäfa, where Nelly’s widowed mother, Anna, lived. With the risk of infection so great, Nelly was, of course, unable to check up on Markus herself. She relied instead upon her mother to visit him and to provide reports on his

¹⁴Switzerland’s inflation peaked in 1918 at 25 percent, which coincided—unsurprisingly, perhaps—with a national strike in 1918 and a severe recession in the early 1920s. C. Stohr, “Trading Gains: New Estimates of Swiss GDP, 1851-2008,” London School of Economics and Politics, Working Papers, No. 245 (June 2016), 18.

¹⁵The story of Barth’s campaign for workers’ rights in Safenwil—and his subsequent nicknaming as “the Red Pastor”—has been told in considerable detail by both Busch and McCormack. See Busch, *Karl Barth*, 68-72; McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 86-104, 184-95. As Busch records, “Already as a 25-year old, he had declared . . . [that]: ‘For 1800 years, the Christian church has always looked to heaven in the face of social distress. She has preached, converted, comforted—but she has not *helped*. She probably recommended good works of Christian charity, but she did not say that “this should not be,” and then use all her strength to make sure that this *would not* be. Such is the great, heavy apostasy of the Christian church.’ But *he* [Barth] campaigned for the ‘this should not be.’” Busch, *Glaubensheiterkeit. Karl Barth—Erfahrungen und Begegnungen erzählt von Eberhard Busch* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1994), 33.

¹⁶F. Zellweger-Barth, “Lebenslauf,” in *Nelly Barth-Hoffman 26. August 1893–23. Oktober 1976* (n.d.), 6. MBL. Series I. Box 25.

condition. The strain of not only of Markus's sickness but also of her separation from him must have been heart-wrenching for Nelly. Thankfully, though, Markus was lucky. Whereas in Aargau alone there were 134 deaths from scarlet fever in 1921, with 3,733 deaths across Switzerland as a whole, Markus himself made a full recovery.¹⁷ In mid-February, "the young doctor" was able to inform Anna that "the disease [was taking] an entirely normal course, and that even a little fever was completely usual."¹⁸ Nevertheless, Markus remained in the hospital until the first week of April, and even then Nelly's sister Hedwig¹⁹ was concerned that he stay quarantined, lest the other children become sick. "You [Anna] should keep Markus away from [Nelly's] house . . . as it may be that he is still infectious." "It seems to me," Hedwig cautioned, "that a child should not be released from hospital if there is still the possibility of infection."²⁰ Yet despite all these concerns—the post-war economic downturn, the challenges of three young children, a new baby, and Markus's serious illness—Nelly could still find reason for joy. On Easter Day 1921 she wrote to her mother that "they are all so dear to me—Karl, and each of the children—I am so lucky as a mother, and so happy!"²¹

It would not only be regrettable, but indeed a falsification of the record, if Nelly's declaration of her own happiness at this time were to be glossed over or interpreted as something less than sincere. The longer history of the Barths' domestic arrangements—including the indispensable role played by Charlotte von Kirschbaum, to which we shall have to attend in due course—renders this, of course, a conclusion at which one might reasonably, if inaccurately, arrive. It is certainly the case that even in the early years of their marriage, Karl and Nelly's relationship was not without its tensions. There was a certain territoriality to this. Christiane Tietz, in her biography of Karl Barth, has drawn attention to the fact that Nelly was determined not to be subsumed entirely by her husband's work but worked

¹⁷"Gemeldete Fälle von Scharlacherkrankungen nach Kantonen 1901-1930," Historische Statistik der Schweiz, accessed May 8, 2024, <https://hso.ch/de/2012/d/26>.

¹⁸A. Hoffmann to N. Barth, February 14, 1921. MBL. Series II. Box 4.

¹⁹Hedwig Kisling-Hoffmann (1888–1957).

²⁰H. Kisling-Hoffmann to A. Hoffmann, late March 1921. MBL. Series II. Box 4.

²¹N. Barth to A. Hoffman, Easter 1921. MBL. Series II. Box 4.

hard to retain her own sense of identity. As she informed Thurneysen, a wife should not “self-evidently” give up or postpone “her own deepest interests . . . in order to be filled post-haste with Kutter etc.” In Nelly’s case, those deeper interests often revolved around taking time to practice her violin, at which she was highly proficient.²² Barth, responding occasionally out of jealousy, admitted that he sometimes “allowed stupid complexes to arise against the violin—the violin teacher, the violin case, violin virtuosos.”²³

It is equally clear that the causes of that friction were more than simply the economic and political pressures occasioned by the war and its aftermath, or the very natural negotiations around role expectations that form part of any new marriage. At least according to Suzanne Selinger’s account, the young Barth’s wedding in 1913 had been engineered in part by Karl’s mother, Anna, who had been adamantly opposed to her son marrying his first love, Rösy Münger.²⁴ The match with Nelly was, therefore, at least in part an attempt to move Karl on toward a more appropriate partner.²⁵ Nevertheless, despite the occasional tensions between them—not to mention the catastrophe into which Europe had been plunged throughout these years—Nelly was unmistakably still able to find great joy in her marriage, her husband, and her children.

²²K. Barth to E. Thurneysen, July 14, 1915, in *GA* V.3, 64. See also Tietz, *Karl Barth*, 75-76. Nelly had taken her first violin lessons at the age of ten and continued with formal tuition at the Geneva Conservatory until her withdrawal from those studies following her engagement to Karl.

²³K. Barth to E. Thurneysen, July 14, 1915, in *GA* V.3, 64.

²⁴Karl and Rösy had met in Bern in 1907, and the two had fallen deeply in love. Karl’s parents, however, were opposed to the marriage on account of Rösy’s family belonging to a more liberal-minded church. The result was that Karl ended his relationship with Rösy in May 1910, apparently breaking it off in writing, so that he did not have to look her in the eye. Selinger records that Barth “never got over this love and kept a picture of Rösy till the end of his life.” As he wrote to her sister in 1943, “I cannot imagine my life without her.” Five years later, he told a friend that he had “never been able to forget” his first love. Rösy and Karl met only once more after their breakup in 1915. According to Selinger, Rösy died of leukemia ten years later, in 1925. Rösy’s older sister, however, has a different recollection, namely that Rösy, too, never fully recovered from the end of her relationship with Karl and died “of a broken heart.” For these two contrasting accounts, see S. Selinger, *Charlotte von Kirschbaum and Karl Barth: A Study in Biography and the History of Theology* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 5-6. See also Tietz, *Karl Barth*, 32-33.

²⁵While the marriage was largely arranged by Karl’s parents, he and Nelly were far from strangers. They had met first in Geneva in 1909, when Karl was working under Adolf Keller as an assistant pastor in the German-speaking Reformed Church, and of which Nelly and her parents were members. Nelly also attended Karl’s confirmation classes, and the following year was confirmed by him. For a brief period between October 1909 and February 1910, Karl had pastoral oversight of the congregation, following Keller’s relocation to Zurich and before the arrival of his successor.

Markus's own early childhood in Safenwil was also, by all accounts, a happy one. Eberhard Busch has noted that for the rest of their lives, the entire Barth family "remembered Safenwil with particular affection" (*besonderer Anhänglichkeit*).²⁶ That having been said, it was a family life that was nonetheless increasingly punctuated by a very specific set of challenges and circumstances. Being part of this particular family meant being intricately connected with, and understanding and accepting of, Karl Barth's sense of purpose and his feelings of responsibility to God and to the world. Thus, for Markus, while the Safenwil years were very happy, they were also transformative. While he could not have been aware of it at the time, the contours of his own theological career would be decisively shaped by his experiences there. In 1961, Rose Marie Barth penned a curriculum vitae of sorts for her husband, in which she recounted that "one of his earliest memories was that, from time to time, he was allowed to nestle silently in the attic, and watch while his father, at his little standing desk, would pore over Paul's letter to the Romans." Neither father nor son, Rose Marie noted, "was aware of just how explosive that material would prove to be."²⁷ Notwithstanding, then, that Karl's first pastorate was characterized by pressures and strains within the family home, the parish, as well as within the town itself, the children at least seem not only to have been sheltered from the more robust aspects of those years but indeed—at least in Markus's case—significantly and positively influenced by them.

NORTH TO GÖTTINGEN

Things were not to stay so simple. No matter how pleasant Safenwil might have been, it was not to be Markus's home for long. Just one week after his sixth birthday, Markus and his family moved 600 kilometers north to the Lower Saxon city of Göttingen, where Karl had been appointed honorary professor of Reformed dogmatics. Not only was this a radical new beginning for Karl—from the pastorate to the academy—it also required a very great deal from each family member. For Nelly, there was a significant reduction

²⁶Busch, *Karl Barth*, 125; E. Busch, *Karl Barths Lebenslauf* (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1975), 138.

²⁷R. M. Barth, "Markus Barth CV," January 1961, I. MBL. Series II. Box 10.

in the household budget, occasioned less by a lower salary for Karl and more by Germany’s postwar skyrocketing inflation.²⁸ The difficulties of these circumstances were not lost on Markus despite his youth. As he later recalled, “Our arrival in Göttingen [coincided with this] inflation. There were many unemployed people around, many younger men still in uniform. Their uniforms were in rags . . . but they had no other clothes.”²⁹ For Markus and his siblings, the move to Germany also meant adapting from one day to the next to a new school system in a different language. To have roots both in Switzerland and in Germany could, and would, be enriching, but it was also a challenge to everyone’s sense of identity.

For the next four years, Markus was to live in what his father described as the “better quarter” of the city,³⁰ in Nikolausberger Weg 66. The businessman Rüdi Pestalozzi—who Karl had met through Eduard Thurneysen and who would, for many years to come, be a friend, sponsor, and host at the “Bergli”—had been able to secure the purchase of a house from the systematic theologian Arthur Titius, whose fortunes had risen with his appointment to Schleiermacher’s chair in Berlin.³¹ The house, however, was both a boon and a burden, and Nelly was not shy in expressing her apprehension that it might prove too expensive for them. As she wrote to her mother, “It’s now ours—but it also exceeds our credit!”³² Moreover, and despite its cost, it was more than a little dilapidated. While the rooms were considerably larger than those they had enjoyed in the Safenwil vicarage,

²⁸Because the position was only an honorary professorship, its stipendiary conditions could be negotiated, meaning that Barth’s salary was approximately the same as that of a pastor. As it was, though, Karl and Nelly had been used to fairly meager salary provisions in Safenwil. According to Karl’s grandchildren, his pastoral stipend was consistently reduced over the years of his ministry there by the town’s industrialists, who he angered through his advocacy of workers’ rights and who themselves sat on the local church council. Thus, Nelly was not unused to the difficulties of managing a tight budget. Nevertheless, Germany’s economic woes hit the family budget harder than any churlish Swiss industrialist could! Correspondence with Rose-Marie Barth, Anna Barth, and Ruth Naveau, July 20, 2019.

²⁹“Conversation with Dr Markus Barth,” 2.

³⁰K. Barth to W. Spoendlin, December 21, 1921. Cited in Busch, *Karl Barth*, 126.

³¹Arthur Titius (1864–1936) had already made a name for himself in church politics, as well as in the academy. In November 1918, Titius had founded the *Volkskirchenbund*, a grassroots movement that sought to unify the disparate strands of German Protestantism that had been left foundering in the political chaos of the immediate post-war months. K. Scholder, *The Churches and the Third Reich*, vol. 1, 1918–1934, trans. J. Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 10.

³²N. Barth to A. Hoffmann, September 27, 1921. MBL. Series II. Box 4.



Figure 1.2. Barth family portrait, 1922. Left to right: Markus, Christoph, Matthias, Franziska

only the kitchen and two of the bedrooms were presentable; according to Nelly, the rest of the house was most definitely not. “You wouldn’t believe it,” she wrote to her family. “The house was just not in a suitable condition.”³³ She noted, too, that to begin with, they would have to do without the use of some of the rooms to accommodate both a janitor who lived on the top

floor and some of Titius’ furniture, for which he was unable to find space in Berlin.³⁴ On the other hand, despite these irritations, the house was conveniently located just 1.5 kilometers from both the Botanical Gardens and the Georg-August University, where Karl was to teach.

The move to Germany coincided with the start of Markus’s schooling, with his older sister, Franziska, having begun her formal education the previous year in Safenwil. This may well have been regarded as serendipitous timing by their parents; Safenwil had, after all, boasted only a single school, which had itself been in operation for only a decade. Göttingen, on the other hand, being considerably larger, had plenty of schooling alternatives available to the Barth children. Markus himself

³³N. Barth to her family, October 28, 1921. MBL. Series II. Box 3. Markus’s memories were, perhaps unsurprisingly, somewhat more positive. “It was a very stately house which my father had been able to buy because my mother had received an inheritance. For a ridiculously small Swiss sum, which in comparison to the grossly inflated German mark represented a fortune, he got a marvelous three storey house. . . . I remember that other professors were very envious of it.” “Conversation with Dr Markus Barth,” 3.

³⁴N. Barth to A. Hoffmann, September 27, 1921. It is worth noting that Karl Barth finished the second edition of his *Romans* commentary the very day that Nelly wrote this letter to her mother. As she said in the letter—“*Der Römerbrief ist heute fertig.*”

notes that he completed both his *Volksschule* and the *Sexta* (the equivalent of American fifth grade) in Göttingen.³⁵ While there are no records to indicate precisely where he might have done this, Nelly’s letters suggest that it was a semi-private school—that is, most likely a confessional school that was partially funded by the state.³⁶ Franziska, on the other hand, most likely attended the Hainberg-Gymnasium, a girls-only school that was situated a little over one kilometer from the family home. Nevertheless, despite its apparent advantages over the limited educational possibilities that Safenwil had been able to offer, Karl was not immediately encouraged by the quality of Göttingen’s school system. It was utterly perplexing to him that even after the war, children (such as his eldest daughter, Franziska), could still be taught the song: “Der Kaiser ist ein lieber Mann, er wohnt in Berlin, / und wär es nicht so weit von hier, so ging ich selber hin.”³⁷

Karl was convinced that Markus also was ill-served by the local school. His son, he complained, had fallen into the hands of a “modern teacher,” from whom, week after week, the students would learn nothing but useless games instead of the serious business of reading and writing.³⁸ Markus himself did not share his father’s concerns. As he was later to recall, “I had an excellent teacher [Lüderitz] . . . and it was a pleasure to be in school.”³⁹ In any event, regardless of the quality of schooling Markus received, his mother continued to tutor him. On their walks to and from the markets, Markus and his mother would converse in “Deutsch”—that is, *Hochdeutsch*, as opposed to the *Schweizerdeutsch* with which he had been brought up—and according to Nelly, he was “alert and eager to learn.”⁴⁰ These impromptu

³⁵M. Barth, “Eigener Lebenslauf,” unpublished, April 3, 1945. MBL. Series II. By *Volksschule*, Barth was probably referring to the “compulsory *Grundschule* [elementary] schooling.”

³⁶Nelly writes of Markus being enrolled in “*eine halbe Privatschule*,” that is, a semi-private school. N. Barth to her family, October 28, 1921.

³⁷K. Barth, circular letter, January 22, 1922, in *GA* V.4, 28. “The Kaiser is a lovely man, he lives in Berlin; and if it weren’t so far from here, I would go there myself.” This was a song written in honor of Kaiser Wilhelm I, but taught to children in Prussia during the First World War as a propaganda device in support of Wilhelm II.

³⁸K. Barth, circular letter, May 9, 1922, in *GA* V.4, 70.

³⁹“Conversation with Dr Markus Barth,” 3.

⁴⁰N. Barth to A. Hoffmann, November 20, 1921. MBL. Series II. Box 3. It is worth noting that these were not the only language lessons Markus received. Due to a curricular change, he entered the *Gymnasium* at age nine, and immediately began studying Latin. According to his recollections,

language classes evidently paid off. One day toward the end of their first year in Germany, Karl was relieved to see that Markus had at last been able to come home from school and “read and write nicely.” It was, he said, enough to make him “revoke the accusation he had made against [Markus’s] kindergarten.”⁴¹

Alongside these new school routines, the move to Göttingen brought about other significant changes to the family’s daily schedule, with Karl forced to spend long hours adjusting to the rhythm of academic life. Lamenting what he saw in retrospect as his own lost opportunities for further study, Karl warned his friends in a circular letter that they “should let no hour pass fruitlessly in [their] rectories or be spent on the newspaper *as happened unfortunately only too often with me in Safenwil*.”⁴² While he was almost certainly overstating the extent to which he had wasted his time in the pastorate, Barth was nonetheless acutely conscious of what he called his “horrible theological ignorance,” not least in comparison to his faculty colleagues, and so worked assiduously to prepare himself for every lecture. As Bruce McCormack has put it, the task of filling in the gaps in his theological learning was “a traumatic one.”⁴³ Possibly, this sense of unpreparedness for life in the academy had roots as far back as his student days in Tübingen in 1908. On receiving a “Zwei” (roughly equivalent to a B) for his final thesis—prepared for Hermann Lüdemann on the topic “The Concept of Christ’s Descent into Hell in Church Literature up to Origen”—Karl confessed in a letter to his parents that “academic work in a narrow sense is not for me. . . . I have come to see that with growing clarity.”⁴⁴ In light of all this, it is no wonder that in

he then began taking French classes at eleven, Greek at twelve, and, during the final three years of schooling in Bonn, Hebrew. “Conversation with Dr Markus Barth,” 4.

⁴¹K. Barth, circular letter, December 19, 1922, in *GA* V.4, 125.

⁴²K. Barth, circular letter, March 26, 1922, in *Revolutionary Theology in the Making: Barth-Thurneysen Correspondence 1914–1925*, trans. J. D. Smart (London: Epworth, 1964), 93 [hereafter *RevTh*]. Emphasis added.

⁴³McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 293–94. According to Barth’s own estimation of his lecture schedule in Basel, each fifty-minute lecture—of which he delivered four per week—required as much as ten hours’ preparation. If this was the investment of time needed once he was an experienced scholar of twenty years’ standing, the burden of lecture preparation in his very first academic post must have been even weightier. See Busch, *Karl Barth*, 373.

⁴⁴Letter, K. Barth to F. and A. Barth, December 14, 1908, *GA* III.21, 247.

one of his letters to friends back in Switzerland, Markus’s father confessed to his own sense of inadequacy: “I have to build my own scholarly structure, achieve a ‘thorough mastery,’ as they say, in something. How does one do it? Will they ever be able to say that of me? Or shall I always be this wandering gypsy among all the honourable scholars by whom I am surrounded, one who has only a couple of leaky kettles to call his own, and who occasionally sets a house on fire?”⁴⁵

Barth’s colleagues did not make it easy for him to overcome his feelings of self-doubt. Emanuel Hirsch, quite aside from his increasingly zealous nationalism, was a “know-it-all” (*Alleswisser*), while Carl Stange, as dean of the faculty, led the “hateful piece of mischief-making” by which Barth’s curricular freedom was severely curtailed.⁴⁶ Symbolizing the contempt with which they regarded him, the faculty even posted Barth’s announcements about his lectures next to those of the harmonium teacher!⁴⁷ It is little wonder, then, that Karl Barth’s early years in the academy were overshadowed by a profound sense of inferiority and an urgent need to improve his own theological education. As he recalled in 1935,

I shall never forget the spring vacation of 1924. I sat in my study at Göttingen, faced with the task of giving lectures on dogmatics for the first time. No one can ever have been more plagued than I then was with the problem, could I do it? And how? My Biblical and historical studies to date had more and more expelled me from the goodly society of contemporary, and, as I began to realise ever more clearly, of almost the whole of more recent theology; and I saw myself, as it were, alone in the open without a teacher.⁴⁸

The upshot was that whereas Karl had been an ever-present figure at the family’s vicarage in Safenwil, in Göttingen he would begin teaching at 7:00 a.m., having frequently only finished writing the lectures between two or three hours beforehand. For the first few months in the new job, Karl

⁴⁵K. Barth, circular letter, December 11, 1921, *GA* V.4, 20-21.

⁴⁶K. Barth to E. Thurneysen, January 22, 1922, *GA* V.4, 29; K. Barth to E. Thurneysen, December 27, 1923, *GA* V.4, 213. See also *RevTh*, 162. During the Nazi years, Emanuel Hirsch was an outspoken advocate for Adolf Hitler, joining the Nazi Party in 1937 and even becoming a patron member (*Förderndes Mitglied*)—that is, a financial supporter—of the SS.

⁴⁷Busch, *Karl Barth*, 133.

⁴⁸K. Barth, “Foreword,” in H. Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics: Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources*, trans. G. T. Thomson (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1950), v.

was, by his own admission, “almost always on night shift,” and consequently often unavailable to the rest of the family.⁴⁹ Thus, Nelly’s accompanying of Karl to his lectures on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays—while it was certainly borne of her own genuine interest in the subject matter, and her desire to learn more about her husband’s way of thinking—had the additional pragmatic benefit of allowing her time to spend with him.⁵⁰

In other ways, too, Karl was less accessible to Nelly and to his children than he had been in Switzerland. Deeply aware that the recent war had upturned most of the long-held and cherished assumptions about Christianity and its God, and that many of his students felt a consequent and urgent need “to put questions and register objections,” Barth—in addition to his regular lecturing schedule⁵¹—held “open evenings” in his house each Wednesday night, during which lengthy conversations could be had.⁵² On Saturday afternoons, too, he took interested students on walking tours, thus providing yet further opportunities for discussion and debate.⁵³ Such commitment to his students’ education must have been a godsend to them, yet the pressures of this workload would inevitably have been felt not only by Karl himself but also Nelly and the children.

And of course, the frequency of these absences was simply exacerbated by the traveling to which Karl was more and more committed. The immense interest in his *Romans*, which had been the reason for his call to Göttingen in the first place, led to an increasing number of invitations to speak at conferences and pastors’ meetings throughout the country—from

⁴⁹Busch, *Karl Barth*, 127.

⁵⁰“It’s a lot [of extra work] that I go with Karl to his lectures. . . . But I want to do it [*Aber ich möchte das durchführen*].” N. Barth to A. Hoffmann, November 20, 1921. Note that Karl typically also read his sermons to Nelly before delivering them—demonstrating both her interest in his work and his reliance on Nelly as a sounding board.

⁵¹Bruce McCormack provides an overview of Barth’s lecture cycles during his years in Göttingen. During each semester (with the exception of summer 1922), he would teach two courses—one on theology, and one exegetical course on a New Testament epistle.

⁵²This was something that Barth had perhaps learned from his father, Fritz. Almost immediately after his marriage to Anna, and while still a pastor, Fritz made a habit of inviting students over to his house, one evening a week, for conversation. Tietz, *Karl Barth*, 12. As shall be seen, the practice would pass also to Markus, in the next generation.

⁵³Busch, *Karl Barth*, 128-29. See also Nelly Barth’s letter to A. Hoffmann, November 20, 1921. “Samstag Nach[mittag] spaziert Karl mit Studenten.”

Wiesbaden to Lüneberg, and from Bochum to Elgersburg. “Good heavens,” Karl wrote to Thurneysen, “how huge and varied Germany is!”⁵⁴

Despite all this, the Barths were content with their life in Göttingen. Karl and Nelly would occasionally tour the surrounding countryside on bicycle and in the summers would participate in the International Handel Festival that had been founded in 1920.⁵⁵ “Everything is going well for us here,” wrote Nelly to her mother. “We are happy, and have no wish to return to Safenwil.”⁵⁶ They were not, of course, sheltered from the effects of the economic downturn by which Germany was crushed in the early 1920s. Nelly wrote frequently to her family about how exorbitant prices were for the most basic of items and was keenly aware that there was significant poverty in the suburbs surrounding them. But in their part of the city, the Barths were separated from the most obvious signs of it. Indeed, Nelly could even foresee “a rich life” for them in Göttingen.⁵⁷

The one darker cloud that appeared over the Barth family during these years concerned Nelly and Karl’s marriage. Strains between the pair—some of which, as has been seen, had been present from the earliest days of their marriage—began to re-emerge. Stephen Plant suggests that contributory factors included the inevitable upheaval of moving from Switzerland to Germany—and thus to a place where family support was harder to access—the stress on Nelly of having to provide for a growing family within straitened economic circumstances, Karl’s increasing absence from family

⁵⁴K. Barth to E. Thurneysen, October 26, 1922, in *RevTh*, 115. It is worth noting that broader interest in, and even awareness of, Karl Barth was occasioned only after his Tambach lecture—“Der Christ in der Gesellschaft” (“The Christian in Society”)—of September 1919. The first edition of his *Romans* commentary, published at the beginning of 1919 by the Bern-based company G. A. Bäschlin, had a print run of only one thousand copies, of which only about three hundred were actually sold, almost exclusively within Switzerland. In other words, it was not, in the first instance, the commentary itself that secured Barth’s reputation in Germany. That shift happened more as a consequence of his presentation to the Religious Socialist conference in Tambach, where he was a very late replacement for Leonhard Ragaz. Attending the conference put Barth in contact with a wider network of German pastors and scholars than he had previously known—including Hans Ehrenburg, Friedrich Gogarten, and Gunther Dehn—and also enabled publishing and distribution rights for *Romans* to be transferred from Bäschlin to the much larger Christian Kaiser Verlag. See Busch, *Karl Barth*, 112-13.

⁵⁵A celebration of the music of G. F. Handel (1685–1759), the festival celebrated its centenary in 2021—a year late due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁵⁶N. Barth to A. Hoffmann, November 20, 1921.

⁵⁷N. Barth to A. Hoffmann, December 7, 1921. MBL. Series II. Box 3.

life on account of his work pressures, and Nelly's own sense of being looked down upon by Karl's faculty colleagues.⁵⁸ Whatever the causes, it would seem that Nelly had begun considering the possibility of seeking a divorce from Karl from as early as 1923.⁵⁹ The situation was evidently still tense between them the following year and was compounded when Nelly, sick with what Plant describes as "nervous exhaustion," sought respite in a sanatorium.⁶⁰ During these middle months of 1924, when they were apart from one another during Nelly's treatment, Karl expressed an anxiety that his wife had seemingly stopped communicating with him. "How are you?" Karl wrote to her at the end of July. "You are not writing to me at the moment, and yet I love you so much."⁶¹ The second half of 1924 was hardly any happier. Nelly, by this time pregnant with Hans Jakob, was hospitalized in Stäfa, on the Zürichsee. Following a summer vacation together, Karl—"with a heavy heart"⁶²—had to leave her in Switzerland, together with Christoph and Matthias, while he returned to Göttingen with Franziska and Markus. Back at their home in Germany, he wrote frequently to Nelly, updating her on the activities of her two eldest children. "Fränzeli [has been] practicing her English this morning, [while] Markus worked on a jigsaw from the Church."⁶³ Both of them were, he told her, "marching now to school healthy and happy."⁶⁴ And then, in early October, Karl could report that "today, Markus won 'first-prize' in a big scooter race with the rest of the neighborhood lads, and is now planning on building a 'car' so that he can compete in another race in four weeks' time!"⁶⁵

While he was evidently trying to keep things as normal as possible for Franziska and Markus throughout this time, Karl was nevertheless clearly

⁵⁸S. Plant, "When Karl Met Lollo: The Origins and Consequences of Karl Barth's Relationship with Charlotte von Kirschbaum," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 72, no. 2 (2019): 132.

⁵⁹Tietz, *Karl Barth*, 245n123.

⁶⁰Plant, "When Karl met Lollo," 132. It is worth remembering that Nelly, who was a physically slight woman, had given birth to four children in just seven years. One can hardly be surprised if this took a physical toll on her.

⁶¹K. Barth to N. Barth, July 28, 1924. MBL. Series II. Box 3.

⁶²K. Barth to E. Thurneysen, September 13, 1924, GA V.4, 274.

⁶³K. Barth to N. Barth, September 17, 1924. MBL. Series II. Box 3. "Fränzeli" was the diminutive name by which Franziska was known in the family, from her birth until her death in 1994.

⁶⁴K. Barth to N. Barth, September 22, 1924. MBL. Series II. Box 3.

⁶⁵K. Barth to N. Barth, October 11, 1924. MBL. Series II. Box 3.

bereft. His letters went either unanswered—“Again, no news from you today”⁶⁶—or, when Nelly did write, it caused him only sorrow. Certainly, much of the distress was occasioned by Nelly’s poor health and exhaustion. However, there were also subterranean tensions within the marriage that went beyond her periods of sickness, and even beyond the two of them. On one hand, there were angry exchanges between Karl and Anna Hoffmann, who accused Karl of placing her daughter under too much stress and of not doing enough to help with the children. On the other hand, the relationship between Karl’s mother and Nelly was similarly bitter. Indeed, there had been a history of suspicion and animosity between them both that had played out since Karl and Nelly had first married. Karl, apparently, tried to mediate: “I have been writing letters to mama . . . all evening, imploring her on all sides to take it easier on you. . . . It just cannot go on like this.” As he put it in another of his letters, “Oh, these ‘in-law relationships’—how the devil has his fingers in this game!”⁶⁷

It would, of course, be easy to interpret these difficulties retrospectively—through the prism of the later history between Karl, Nelly, and Charlotte von Kirschbaum—and to read into the Barths’ marriage both an unhealthiness and an unhappiness that made Karl’s relationship with Charlotte somehow inevitable. Indeed, this is the conclusion at which Stephen Plant seems to arrive when he contends that neither the conception of Hans Jakob in August 1924 “[nor] anything else” could mend the fatally broken marriage.⁶⁸ Yet such a conclusion would be far too simplistic. In spite of all the stresses and intrafamily conflicts with which the Barths had to deal throughout the latter months of 1924, the epistolary evidence demonstrates unequivocally that Nelly and Karl continued to be close, loved each other deeply, and worked hard to build a happy home for their children.

INTO THE CATHOLIC HEARTLAND

With Nelly having returned from Stäfa, Hans Jakob was born in Göttingen in April 1925. The family was, for a time, reunited. Again, however, their

⁶⁶K. Barth to N. Barth, September 22, 1924. MBL. Series II. Box 3.

⁶⁷K. Barth to N. Barth, September 22, 1924; October 11, 1924; October 14, 1924. MBL. Series II. Box 3.

⁶⁸Plant, “When Karl Met Lollo,” 132.

domestic situation was not to stay the same for long. In late October 1925, three weeks after Markus had turned ten, the family was on the move again, this time to the predominantly Catholic city of Münster, in Westphalia. Markus's father had been appointed professor of dogmatics and New Testament exegesis by the Protestant faculty at the university there. Given that the new post was offered without the restrictions under which he had to teach in Göttingen, and was being made at the rank of *ordentlicher Professor*,⁶⁹ it represented a significant promotion for Karl and one not to be dismissed. There were also monetary benefits. As Karl wrote to his friend Thurneysen, "The financial improvement which I need for my five [children] to be educated is considerable. The provision in case of death is also worth something."⁷⁰

In the first instance, however, Karl made the move to Münster alone, with the sale of the family house in Göttingen taking longer than anticipated. And so, aside from some rare holiday visits, from October 1925 to March 1926 the family was divided "into two groups: the better part, Nelly and the five children [in Göttingen]; the lesser part, [Karl] in Münster."⁷¹ During these months, Karl "lived a bachelor existence" in a room that he rented from a widow in Warendorferstraße 23. Karl's loneliness during this time was at least temporarily alleviated when he was able to return to Göttingen for Christmas. Even this visit, however, was bittersweet. As he put it in letters to Charlotte von Kirschbaum and various other friends, "the 'Papa' . . . was more an object of entertainment and amusement"; indeed Nelly seemed to have everything under control in his absence, with "everything [going] very well even without me."⁷² The family was together again in Göttingen for New Year's celebrations,

⁶⁹In Göttingen, Barth was permitted to teach *Reformed* theology only—a restriction which did not apply to the Münster position. Moreover, even though the post Barth was being offered was normally appointed at the level of *extraordinarius Professor* (*außerordentlicher Professor*)—that is, a senior lecturer, or perhaps associate professor—the Münster faculty was willing to appoint him to the rank of full professor. While this was procedurally unusual, the fact that Münster had already bestowed upon Barth an honorary doctorate in February 1922 perhaps renders this less surprising. As a "thank you" to the faculty for the honor, Barth dedicated to them his 1924 book, *Die Auferstehung der Toten: Eine akademische Vorlesung über 1 Kor. 15*. He may have come to regret that decision—in 1939, the University rescinded the honorary doctorate on account of Barth's vocal opposition to the Nazi regime. The award was reconferred only in 1946. See Tietz, *Karl Barth*, 280.

⁷⁰K. Barth to E. Thurneysen, July 22, 1925, in *RevTh*, 235.

⁷¹K. Barth, circular letter, January 17, 1926, GA V.4, 396.

⁷²K. Barth to C. von Kirschbaum, February 5, 1926, GA V.45, 15; K. Barth, circular letter, January 17, 1926, GA V.4, 400.

albeit this time with von Kirschbaum, of whom we will speak again shortly, also present. Unsurprisingly, after seven months spent largely apart, the family reunion—when they were all finally able to move into their new house in Himmelreichallee 43—was a happy occasion.

Once the family was together again, the children’s most immediate priority was to familiarize themselves with a new home in a new city. Their house was ideally situated—particularly for the three older children—between the cemetery on the one side, from which came the daily serenade of trombone-led funeral processions, and the zoo on the other, with its own distinct soundtrack—the “roar[ing] of the predators.”⁷³ Both the zoo and the cemetery provided ample green space to play and explore. Not everything, however, was to the children’s taste. According to Franziska, at first—and compared to the hilly surroundings in which they had been raised—they did not much like the flatter land of Westphalia. The purchase of new bicycles, though, proved a happy consolation. Not only were the children able to ride to school along the walls of the old city, they were set free to discover various landmarks, including the Wasserburg Hülshoff—birthplace of the nineteenth-century writer Annette von Droste-Hülshoff (1798–1848)—which lay ten kilometers west of the city.⁷⁴

As it had in their early days in Göttingen, school again posed fresh challenges. Markus went to the *Schillergymnasium*,⁷⁵ a five-minute bike ride from home. Its convenient proximity notwithstanding, however, the school was governed by a very different curriculum (*ein anderes Schulsystem*) from that which had prevailed in Göttingen. As a result, Nelly was obliged to take on the role of tutor (*Nachhilfslehrerin*) to both Franziska and Markus, particularly in French, in which they were three years behind.⁷⁶

As for Markus’s father, his own academic environment proved significantly more amenable than it had been in Göttingen. There, the theology faculty had been populated, at least in Karl’s experience, by “backbiters and poison-spreaders.”⁷⁷ And so even though he did not find his Protestant colleagues in Münster to be especially academically stimulating, he at least

⁷³F. Barth, October 1992. MBL. Series II. Box 5.

⁷⁴F. Barth, October 1992.

⁷⁵M. Barth, “Eigener Lebenslauf.” MBL. Series II.

⁷⁶F. Barth, “Nelly Barth Gedenkbüchlein,” 1976. MBL. Series II. Box 5.

⁷⁷Busch, *Karl Barth*, 167–68.

got along well with them socially—something which had never been possible in the toxic culture of Göttingen. His encounter with north German Catholicism, on the other hand, was a breath of fresh air and a source of considerable stimulus for him. Notwithstanding that Catholicism’s “attempt to claim control over God’s grace” was its “one, fundamental error,” Karl’s engagement with the Westphalian Catholic community “became very important to [him]”⁷⁸ and was far more intellectually satisfying than any conversations he was able to have with his Protestant colleagues.⁷⁹

Karl’s students in Münster were also a constant source of delight. They were “rather a rough crowd,” and Karl was initially scandalized by the (in his view) woefully low academic expectations that his faculty colleagues had of them.⁸⁰ Nonetheless, “their openness, their delight in telling stories, their capacity to keep up with the professor and, once aroused, to spur him on to new heights,” was a tonic.⁸¹ One of his students, in particular, caused Karl great joy during these Münster years; in the winter semester of 1928–1929, a thirteen-year-old Markus attended his first set of theology lectures, on the epistle of James.⁸² While they were the first, they would not be the last of his father’s classes that Markus would take.

NEW CITY, NEW RELATIONSHIPS

It was noted above that when Karl Barth first moved to Münster in late 1925, delays in the sale of the Göttingen house meant that he had to make the move alone, with the remainder of the family joining him only in March 1926. The narrative would be incomplete, however, if it were not

⁷⁸Busch, *Karl Barth*, 168, 178. The Jesuit theologian Erich Przywara (1889–1972) was particularly stimulating for Barth. Having invited him to Münster to present a guest lecture in February 1929, Barth said of Przywara afterwards that, after teaching a “masterclass” (*Meisterstück*) on the church, “he shone for another two hours in my seminar . . . and finally ‘overwhelmed’ (*überströmt*) me for two whole evenings here. In this way he was an illustration of the way in which, according to his doctrine, the good God (at least within the Catholic Church) overwhelms men with grace.” K. Barth to E. Thurneysen, February 9, 1929, GA V.4, 651–52.

⁷⁹Busch, *Karl Barth*, 168. Conversely, these years in Münster were the very ones during which Barth’s relationship with his erstwhile “dialectical” colleagues—Bultmann, Gogarten, Merz, and (to a much lesser extent) Thurneysen—began, finally, to fracture into distance, disagreements, and even hostility.

⁸⁰See Tietz, *Karl Barth*, 156.

⁸¹Busch, *Karl Barth*, 167.

⁸²Busch, *Karl Barth*, 181.

also noted that by the time that they arrived, Charlotte von Kirschbaum was already there.⁸³ Karl and Charlotte had first been introduced by a mutual friend, George Merz, in 1924. Within the space of a year, Charlotte had been drawn and accepted into that somewhat exclusive group of close friends—Barth, Thurneysen, Merz, and Rüdi and Gerty Pestalozzi—who regularly vacationed in the Pestalozzi’s summer retreat, the “Bergli.”⁸⁴ In September 1925, Barth and von Kirschbaum visited the Bergli together.⁸⁵ By February 1926, Karl and Charlotte were close enough friends for Charlotte to visit him for a month in Münster, while he was living his self-described “bachelor existence” in the Warendorferstraße. In a letter to Charlotte from this time, Barth openly acknowledged “all the difficulties” (*allen Schwierigkeiten*) that were part and parcel of his marriage.⁸⁶ Thus it is perhaps not surprising that it was also during this time that the two first declared their love for each other. Charlotte, Barth would say, not only brought to an end his terrible loneliness but was at last a woman who understood him.⁸⁷ While she would not move into the Barth family home until October 1929, her time with Karl in early 1926 established three things that would remain in place until 1966, when her deteriorating health necessitated that she be moved to a sanatorium: first, that Karl both wanted and needed Charlotte’s help with his theological work; second, that they loved each other deeply enough to refuse to be separated; but third, that Karl also loved Nelly enough that he did not wish to cause her the pain of a divorce.⁸⁸

⁸³Busch, *Karl Barth*, 165.

⁸⁴It is worth noting that Nelly Barth never felt included within this circle—“sie stand allenthalben außerhalb.” M. Flesch-Thebesius, “Nelly Barth,” in *Ich bin was Ich bin: Frauen neben grossen Theologen und Religionsphilosophen des 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. E. Rohr (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1997), 230.

⁸⁵Busch, *Karl Barth*, 164.

⁸⁶K. Barth to C. von Kirschbaum, February 28, 1926, GA V.45, 24. It should be appreciated, however, that in the same letter, Barth told von Kirschbaum that his marriage was, nonetheless, “happy” (“glücklich”).

⁸⁷Selinger, *Charlotte von Kirschbaum*, 6, 82-83.

⁸⁸For fuller histories of the relationship between Karl, Nelly, and Charlotte, see Selinger, *Charlotte von Kirschbaum and Karl Barth*, 1-20; C. Tietz, “Karl Barth and Charlotte von Kirschbaum,” in *Theology Today* 74, no. 2 (2017): 86-111; S. Hennecke, “Biography and Theology: On the Connectedness of Theological Statements with Life on the Basis of the Correspondence Between Karl Barth and Charlotte von Kirschbaum (1925–1935),” *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 77, nos. 4-5 (2016): 324-36.

And thus it was that during these years in Münster, Charlotte von Kirschbaum became a more regular member of the Barths' household. In August 1927, the family vacationed in Nöschenrode, at the foothills of the Harz mountains. Von Kirschbaum traveled with them to help Karl prepare for publication the book that would, in time, come to be known as Karl's "false start"—his *Christliche Dogmatik*.⁸⁹ In Selinger's words, by this time "a rhythm and sense of normalcy in working together [had] been established."⁹⁰ Karl himself said much the same thing in a letter to Thurneysen: "Lollo and I have our hands full with the *Dogmatics*, so all our days are passed in the same tranquil tempo—interrupted by pleasant late walks, evening visits to the inn, and so on."⁹¹

In autumn of the same year, Karl was offered a job at the University of Bern.⁹² In a letter to Thurneysen, Karl noted that "the children rejoice at the idea of moving back to Switzerland."⁹³ Karl's description of why his children were keen to make the move is perhaps slightly uncharitable. In his view, they had "high hopes for something like an eternal vacation stay with snowy mountains and the ringing of cowbells and among people who 'don't talk and cackle so loud.'"⁹⁴ In reality, however, there was likely more to their desire than simply this. As already mentioned, the family's memories of Safenwil were happy. Moreover, given the (almost-certainly obvious) tensions that were now re-emerging between Karl and Nelly in Münster—not least on account of the growing love between Karl and Charlotte—it is hardly surprising that Switzerland beckoned as an attractive option. In the end, however, the demands made by both Bern and Barth upon each other proved irreconcilable, and so the family remained in Germany.⁹⁵

⁸⁹Busch, *Karl Barth*, 174.

⁹⁰Selinger, *Charlotte von Kirschbaum*, 56.

⁹¹K. Barth to E. Thurneysen, August 21, 1927, *GA* V.4, 515.

⁹²The offer was precipitated by the retirement of Hermann Lüdemann (1842–1933), who in 1884 had been appointed professor of church history in Bern, and then professor of theology in 1891.

⁹³K. Barth to E. Thurneysen, August 21, 1927, *GA* V.4, 517.

⁹⁴K. Barth to E. Thurneysen, August 21, 1927, *GA* V.4, 517.

⁹⁵The University of Bern insisted that, were Barth to be appointed, the next chairs in the faculty would have to go to more liberal theologians. Karl, for his part, refused to accept the offer unless the university rescinded this insistence. Busch, *Karl Barth*, 175.

As it turned out, though, Nelly and the three youngest children—Christoph, Matthias, and Hans Jakob—did return to Switzerland for five months the following year, from May to September 1928. Throughout this time Karl’s mother, Anna, looked after the rest of the family, including Markus, in their Münster home.⁹⁶ While Busch does not give any reason for Anna’s presence in Germany, Selinger claims that von Kirschbaum herself was the cause. In May 1928, Karl’s relationship with Charlotte had provoked “a terrible quarrel” with his brothers and mother. Apparently taking advantage of Nelly’s extended summer holiday in Switzerland with the younger children, it would seem that Anna traveled to Münster, ostensibly to keep house, but rather more probably to have it out with her son.⁹⁷ The situation was, understandably, profoundly painful for everyone concerned. While Karl, Nelly, and Charlotte were—each and together—burdened by “unspeakably deep suffering” and the presence of tensions that “shook them to the core,” the “intimacy” of Karl’s relationship with Charlotte placed “particularly heavy demands” on Nelly.⁹⁸

But the circle of those affected was far wider than these three. Marlies Flesch-Thebesius has argued that Nelly was so determined to provide a normal home for her children, albeit a home that included “Aunt Lollo,” that the children “did not feel the tension.” Markus was able, she says, to recall his childhood, even in this strange context, as being “peaceful.” “Only later did the Barth children discover that not everything was the same as other families.”⁹⁹ Eberhard Busch, however, offers a different and rather more credible suggestion that each of the five Barth children—Markus included—“faced the burden of this difficulty at home and suffered under it.”¹⁰⁰ While direct evidence is scant, it stretches credibility to believe that either Franziska or Markus, both of whom had stayed in Germany with their father during the summer of 1928, would have been unaware of the tensions or indeed their underlying cause.

⁹⁶Busch, *Karl Barth*, 180.

⁹⁷Selinger, *Charlotte von Kirschbaum*, 7. Busch records that “many people, even good friends, and not least his mother, took offence at the presence of ‘Lollo’ in [Karl’s] life, and later even in his home.” Busch, *Karl Barth*, 185.

⁹⁸Busch, *Karl Barth*, 185-86.

⁹⁹Flesch-Thebesius, “Nelly Barth,” 234.

¹⁰⁰Busch, *Karl Barth*, 185-86.

Precious little else is recorded about Markus's time in Münster. In late 1928, Karl wrote with undisguised pride to Eduard Thurneysen about how well Markus was doing in his Latin and Greek lessons, noting with some wryness that his eldest son was better at them than he himself had been. Nonetheless, Karl could not resist a slight quip at Markus's expense—he was still somewhat willful and was likely, in his father's opinion, to remain so for some time!¹⁰¹ Then, just before Christmas of the same year, Markus was diagnosed with galloping myopia, a side effect of having earlier contracted measles. While poor eyesight was to follow him throughout his life, the immediate consequences of the diagnosis were particularly difficult to bear, as Markus's doctors forbade him to read for an entire year.¹⁰² “The poor thing!” wrote Thurneysen. “It won't be easy for him to keep up, if he isn't allowed to read.”¹⁰³ As she had previously done with her children's language instruction, Nelly again stepped in to take control, reading to Markus every day so that he would not fall behind in his schoolwork.

One other key event in Markus's life during these years, around which there was some consternation, was his decision not to follow his sister Franziska in being confirmed. Fränzeli had been confirmed on March 17, 1929, in rather strange circumstances, the pastor having been dressed in the brown uniform of a SA (Sturmabteilung) member.¹⁰⁴ Markus, on the other hand—his own confirmation having been scheduled for the following year, on March 27, 1930—refused to go ahead with it. As he told his father in a “solemn conversation,” his instruction had been less than impressive—the pastor lacked discipline, and his lectures were confused (*verworrene Reden*). Moreover, Markus was not even certain that he believed in the rite itself.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹“Ist es mir ein Vergnügen zu sehen, wie gediegen Markus im Lateinischen und Griechischen unterrichtet wird, besser als ich seinerzeit. Aber er ist doch auch noch ein rechtes Kalb und darf es wohl auch noch eine Weile sein.” Letter, K. Barth to E. Thurneysen, September 9, 1928, in *GA* V.4, 616.

¹⁰²Personal correspondence with the Barth family, August 2019.

¹⁰³E. Thurneysen to K. Barth, December 14, 1928, in *GA* V.4, 633.

¹⁰⁴F. Barth, October 1992. The *Sturmabteilung* was the Nazi Party's original paramilitary organization that had been formed over the course of two years, between 1920 and 1921. Known colloquially as the “Brown Shirts,” on account of the color of their uniforms, the SA was led by Ernst Röhm until the infamous “Night of the Long Knives” in late June 1934, which severely curtailed its power. From then on, the SA was overshadowed by the *Schutzstaffel* (SS).

¹⁰⁵K. Barth to E. Thurneysen, February 8, 1930, in *GA* V.4, 715.

Shortly after having this discussion with Karl, Markus—having been instructed by his father to do so—provided a fuller written explanation for his refusal, which Karl then forwarded to Markus’s godfather, Thurneysen. In it, Markus outlined the reasons for his decision in the following way. “Why do I not want to be confirmed? Because: A. I am unsatisfied with the [catechetical] instruction. B. I do not believe [in] confirmation, as I understand it to be, to be able to participate in it honestly.”¹⁰⁶

Markus’s reasoning is instructive for understanding who and what he was like as a fourteen-year-old. While it might be tempting to put this episode down to simple adolescent contrariness, there was clearly more than that going on here. Far from this being an open rebellion against his parents, Markus was, on the contrary, seeking to exercise some independence of thought.¹⁰⁷ When pushed by his father for a more fulsome explanation of his convictions, Markus showed himself capable of offering his own type of theological critique. It would appear, in fact, that his negative assessment of both the catechesis and the pastor by whom it was offered was shared by his father: on witnessing the public examination of the confirmands, Karl was horrified by what he saw. As he described it to Thurneysen, the spectacle was “a gruesome impression” (*schaurigen Eindruck*) of what those students had been taught!¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶A written report of these reasons, dated February 16, 1930, is held by the Thurneysen estate. For details, see K. Barth to E. Thurneysen, March 23, 1930, in *GA* V.34, n6.

¹⁰⁷That Markus was not stubbornly refusing on principle to go ahead with his confirmation *at some stage* is demonstrated by Karl’s comment to Thurneysen: “In any case, I will now make up for those unsuccessful lessons [i.e., by providing personal instruction to Markus]—whether for the sake of making his confirmation possible in a hurry, or whether to have it go ahead afterwards in Bonn, in peace and quiet, remains to be seen. Markus himself wants the latter.” K. Barth to E. Thurneysen, February 8, 1930, in *GA* V.4, 715.

¹⁰⁸K. Barth to E. Thurneysen, March 23, 1930, in *GA* V.34, 8.

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