

Confessing Christ for Church and World: Studies in Modern Theology

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Karl Barth's Doctrine of the Church Meets American Evangelicalism in *Confessing Christ for Church and World*

To ask whether Karl Barth and American evangelicals are friends is an interesting question to pose regarding two contentious partners. Certainly the actual relationship between them did not begin well, and the first challenge to answering such a question in any affirmative way entails that this history be overcome.

Barth's own interaction with American evangelicalism during his lifetime cannot be described as auspicious by any stretch of the imagination, with one particular episode especially significant and telling. At the request of the editor of the evangelical magazine *Christianity Today*, Geoffrey Bromiley wrote Barth in the summer of 1961 asking whether he would be willing to answer questions from three prominent American evangelical theologians, questions that Bromiley forwarded with his letter. Having surveyed the questions sent, some of them from Cornelius van Til— who had already chastised Barth severely in print— Barth's reply to Bromiley was genial but also terse. He must be forgiven, he said, if he could not and would not answer the questions, for he was busy with his teaching and writing responsibilities during his last semester as a professor before retirement. Yet even if he had the strength and time, Barth related, he would not enter a discussion based on such questions. A discussion presupposes a serious attempt to understand what he himself had written in the *Church Dogmatics* about related matters. But in his estimation, this prerequisite was conspicuously missing, readily apparent from the questions themselves, which Barth found superficial and trivial.

But there was an even more important reason from abstaining from dialogue, as he writes:

The decisive point, however, is this. The second presupposition of a fruitful discussion between them and me would have to be that we are able to talk on a common plane. But these people have already had their so-called orthodoxy for a long time. They are closed to anything else, they will cling to it at all costs, and they can adopt toward me only the role of prosecuting attorneys, trying to establish whether what I represent agrees or disagrees with their orthodoxy, in which I for my part have no interest! None of their questions leaves me with the impression that they want to seek with me the truth that is greater than us all. They take the stance of those who happily possess it already and who hope to enhance their happiness by succeeding in proving to themselves and the world that I do not share this happiness. Indeed they have long since decided and publicly proclaimed that I am a heretic, possibly (van Til) the worst heretic of all time. So be it! But they should not expect me to take the trouble to give them the satisfaction of offering explanations

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which they will simply use to confirm the judgment they have already passed on me. . . . These fundamentalists want to eat me up. They have not yet come to a “better mind and attitude” as I once hoped. I can thus give them neither an angry nor a gentle answer but instead no answer at all.

While such a letter provides little hope for a fruitful dialogue between Barth and evangelicals, things are quite different today. Since the time of this letter, much has changed on the evangelical side of the aisle (Barth himself is no longer with us to answer from his own side, of course). Just as Barth could mellow in his old age, so evangelicalism seems to have mellowed (at least in some circles) with regard to Barth. Within the past few decades especially, evangelicals have come to appreciate Barth as a fruitful dialogue partner, even if there remains an implicit and sometimes explicitly expressed wariness regarding his theology. Yet the challenge pertaining to the question of the relation of evangelicals and Barth is no longer one of a problematic history but is one of identity. To be specific: What is evangelicalism? To place Barth into a dialogue with American evangelicalism requires that we know what evangelicalism itself is.

This question itself may seem trite, but it is important to recognize that evangelicalism is a contested concept. The multifarious and complex nature of evangelicalism as a subculture has been much discussed and readily documented. Indeed, evangelicalism is such a slippery term and so contentious a concept that some from both the Wesleyan and Reformed wings of the movement have in effect called it meaningless and requested a moratorium on the use of the term. Nevertheless, despite such minority voices, the majority of American historians and theologians continue to preserve it as a useful if imperfect designation for a broad consensus among a variegated grouping of American Christians.

Evangelicalism is then usually defined in one of two ways: according to a narrative history that traces its genetic development, or by means of a list of key convictions that seeks to capture its essential nature. The first is a historical and sociological approach, while the latter strives for a theological definition. With regard to the first, it must be noted that while the narrative history is itself disputed, there is a broad consensus among historians that American evangelicalism arose as a movement with roots in the Protestant Reformation, the confluence of Puritanism and Pietism in the Great Awakenings and revivalism of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America, and the Fundamentalist and Modernist controversy of the early twentieth century. These are, in fact, the periods in which the term “evangelical” came to prominence. This history is told a bit differently depending on denominational perspective (for example, Wesleyan or Reformed, dispensational or Pentecostal, confessional or pietist). Indeed, few concepts in American religious history are as disputed and amorphous as that of evangelicalism. The history of evangelicalism is even traced by some all the way back to the first century and to those who embraced the *euangelion* of Christ, entailing that the first great divisive event in the church was not that between Protestant and Catholic, nor even Catholic and Orthodox, but between Christians and Jews. Such a



This collection of new and previously published essays by Kimlyn Bender sheds light on both the task of modern theology and the witness of the church. Among other topics, the essays discuss Barth's understanding of atheism, Schleiermacher's Christology and the challenges posed to the canon by Bart Ehrman.

definition of evangelicalism is so broad as to render the term devoid of any meaning or usefulness. More common, however, is a historiography that begins in the Reformation and marks evangelicalism as distinctly Protestant in nature. In its most strict form, evangelicalism refers to the neo-evangelicals, such as Harold John Ockenga and Carl F. H. Henry, of American post-World War II society who attempted to reform fundamentalism and overcome the deficiencies of its separatism and anti-intellectualism. Evangelical divisiveness and plurality are an inheritance of Protestant divisiveness and plurality and not unrelated to them. Evangelicalism is thus a reform movement within Christianity itself.

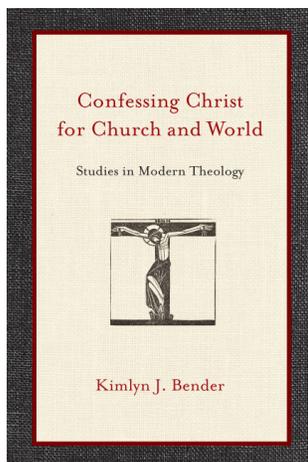
The other way of defining evangelicalism is by means of an essentialist, rather than historical, approach. The defining doctrines or convictions are most often stated as (1) an authoritative and normative place for Scripture in determining all of faith and practice; (2) the necessity of conversion; (3) the centrality and definitive nature of Christ's atonement; and (4) the imperative of evangelism. This evangelical quadrilateral has gained much acceptance as an accurate description of evangelical theological identity, and though other lists do exist, they usually amplify, rather than differ from, these four basic convictions.

In brief, it is this prevalent definition of evangelicalism as a post-World War II phenomenon with roots in American Puritanism, Pietism and revivalism – and as defined by these four convictions – that I will assume, rather than argue for, in this chapter. Nevertheless, it should be noted that it serves better as a descriptive rather than as a strictly definitional term as well.

If we are then to answer the question of whether Barth and American evangelicals are friends or foes, we have to keep these challenges of history and identity in our purview. But this chapter asks this question with regard to a specific theme, namely, that of ecclesiology as the topic of comparison between these dialogue partners, and here we reach a challenge that surpasses those of a troubled history and an elusive identity. This challenge can be illustrated by a bit of humor shared among some evangelicals involved in formal dialogue with Roman Catholics. As they put it: "The main difference between us and the Catholics is ecclesiology. They have one and we don't." As Mark Noll comments, the joke is funny because it is at least partially true. Indeed, one evangelical theologian has even floated the idea that "evangelical ecclesiology" may be an oxymoron.

To see why this strange statement makes a bit of sense, we again must return to the question of identity.

– Taken from chapter two, "Karl Barth's Doctrine of the Church in Conversation with American Evangelicalism"



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Confessing Christ for Church and World “A Vibrant and Enriching Conversation”

“A distinguished expert on Barth’s doctrine of the church, Kimlyn Bender now extends his agenda to include an impressive range of new topics. His lively and incisive essays cast fresh light on modern theology from a sophisticated evangelical perspective. He will help American evangelicals to see that Karl Barth, whom they once regarded as a fearsome enemy, is actually their best friend.”

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“More than just a description of Karl Barth’s theology, Kimlyn Bender’s erudite collection of essays explores a variety of topics and interlocutors engaging Barth as a persuasive conversation partner. These essays are theologically sophisticated and written in a lively and intellectually engaging style, discussing topics in ecclesiology (Reinhard Hütter), Christology (Schleiermacher), Scripture and theology (von Harnack and Bart Erhman), natural theology (William James and Alasdair McIntyre), and atheism (Feuerbach and the ‘new atheism’). Ecumenical in tone, Bender’s arguments are shaped by a strong Reformation sensitivity and written in an ‘ad hoc’ apologetic style (or what Barth calls ‘good apologetics’), demonstrating the truth of confessing Christ in the church and the world. This book is highly recommended for scholars in Barth’s thought yet accessible to non-experts, especially Catholic and evangelical observers, who seek to think more critically about their own commitments and traditions.”

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ENDORSEMENTS

“Clear, scholarly and accessible, these essays draw extensively upon the work of Schleiermacher and Barth as vital resources for Christian reflection today. As a collected volume, this will provide an indispensable point of reference for the further understanding of their theological contributions in new and changing contexts.”

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“Kimlyn Bender’s beautiful collection of essays brings us again and again before the living Jesus Christ. He reminds us of the scandal of the gospel and uses it as the starting point from which to explore several key questions and issues that have shaped modern theology. The richness of his scholarly work is reflected in the topics covered, which range from matters of ecclesiology to epistemology, from creation to Christology, from Scripture to ecumenism. With a careful and fair hand, he brings his two great interlocutors, Barth and Schleiermacher, into conversation with thinkers and ideas from a wide variety of traditions and points of view. The result is a vibrant and enriching conversation that will be of interest to anyone studying dogmatic theology. This book represents the best of contemporary Protestant theology, and it challenges us to see Christ once again with new and more discerning eyes.”

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