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The Church Made Strange for the Nations

Essays in Ecclesiology and Political Theology

Edited by

Paul G. Doerksen *and* Karl Koop

THE CHURCH MADE STRANGE FOR THE NATIONS
Essays in Ecclesiology and Political Theology

Princeton Theological Monograph Series 171

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The Young Karl Barth's Critique of Anabaptism

Arnold Neufeldt-Fast

THOUGH MORE THAN THIRTY YEARS HAVE PASSED SINCE THE DEATH OF KARL BARTH, interest in his theological work has not abated, especially in the English-language world. The Karl Barth Archive in Switzerland continues to make new volumes of heretofore unpublished Barth sermons, lectures, papers, and letters available to scholars of twentieth-century theology. On the basis of some of these newly available documents, I want to examine Anabaptism as one of Barth's conversation partners—especially in his early years as a young professor in Göttingen, where he lectured on Zwingli. I will offer an initial summary and critical evaluation of Barth's 1922 account of sixteenth-century Swiss Anabaptism, and also trace briefly Barth's changing presentation of Anabaptist beginnings and of those theological themes that were of crucial importance to the Anabaptist witness to the Gospel. It is my hope that this exercise in historical theology will make a contribution to the church's ongoing ecumenical task of giving witness to the gospel in the shadows of modernity.

Until recently the writings of Karl Barth have suggested that he had only a very limited knowledge and understanding of sixteenth-century Anabaptism. The 2004 German publication of his 1922–1923 lectures in Göttingen on the “Theology of Zwingli”—specifically the section on “Zwingli's Struggle with the Anabaptists”¹—shows otherwise. In 1921 the young Swiss pastor was appointed Honorary Professor of Reformed Theology at the University of Göttingen, Germany, a position he held for four years. In Göttingen, Barth was assigned to teach Reformed doctrine and church life. He prepared and taught a cycle of five courses on historical theology. The first course in the cycle was “An Exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism” (1921–1922). Then Barth turned to the masters of the Reformed tradition, offering courses on “The Theology of Calvin” (1922) and “The Theology of Zwingli” (1922–1923). In the following year he lectured on “The Theology of the Reformed Confessions” (1923) and then on “The Theology of Schleiermacher” (1923–1924). In each semester Barth also taught shorter New Testament courses. Six years after arriving in Göttingen, Barth admitted that he “did not even possess the Reformed confessional writings, and had certainly never read them, quite apart from other horren-

1. Barth, “Zwingli's Kampf mit den Täufern,” in *Theologie Zwingli's*, 231–51. This volume has not yet been translated into English; translations from German publications throughout this essay are my own.

dous gaps in my knowledge.”² It was under this pressure to teach Reformed theology that Barth first engaged Anabaptism with any seriousness.

Barth's preparations for the Zwingli lectures began in the summer of 1922 and proved to absorb almost all his energies until the course's conclusion early in 1923. In the same semester he also offered an exegetical course on the Letter of James. Only a week after lecturing on Zwingli's struggle with the Anabaptists in December 1922, Barth wrote in a circular letter, “Really since the beginning of the semester there has not been a quiet hour. Again and again, Zwingli, Zwingli, James, Zwingli.”³

To date, the first German publication (2004) of Barth's 1922–23 lectures on Zwingli have only received limited commentary and evaluation. John Webster has written an excellent introduction and evaluation of the text;⁴ missing, however, is a commentary on the section titled “Zwingli's Struggle with the Anabaptists.” This section is Barth's only extensive reflection on sixteenth-century Anabaptism, and as such, it is worthy of commentary and analysis.

The section begins with an introduction that is extremely odd—even for Barth. Barth begins with a lengthy description of our capacity to “grimace” when we expend energy, experience joy and sorrow, or when we suffer sickness or death. Then Barth comes to his point, namely that

Anabaptism [*Täuferium*] is the grimace of the Reformation. Each of the essential insights of the Reformation—its understanding of the Word of God in the unity of letter and Spirit, its understanding of faith which alone justifies before God, its understanding of good works which flow necessarily from faith, its understanding of church as the community of believers established by the Word of God, its understanding of God as the Holy One, who is merciful, and above all as the one who is unfathomably free, glorious, and who goes his own way—this all reappears in the differing variations of the Enthusiasts [*Schwärmertum*]⁵—the same, but yet not the same; incredibly contorted as in curved mirrors, brought to its most extreme conclusions—first to the one side and then to the other.⁵

Barth recognizes that the Swiss Anabaptists, specifically those around Zwingli, were in agreement with all of the essentials of Reformation, but characterizes them as extremists and enthusiasts who contorted the “real face” of the Reformation. Notably, Barth holds here to the longer tradition of Protestant hostility toward Anabaptism and uses the terms *Schwärmer*, *Schwärmerei*, and *Schwärmertum* sweepingly. In contrast, Barth's contemporaries—liberal Protestants like Ernst Troeltsch, for example—refrained almost completely from the use of the largely derogatory and polemical term *Schwärmer* (Enthusiasts), and sought generally to distinguish carefully between ecclesial Anabaptists and free, individualistic spiritualists. But more significant for our purposes, as I will show, this difference

2. Barth, “Appendix 38: Autobiographical Sketches (Barth),” 156.

3. Karl Barth, circular letter written December 18, 1922, in *Barth-Thurneysen Briefwechsel*, 120. This was a very hectic year for Barth; many speaking engagements had to be declined, including one on “Christianity and the Enthusiasts,” about which Barth writes: “the formulation shows insight; the opportunity is important and promising” (74).

4. Webster, “Theology of Zwingli.”

5. Barth, *Theologie Zwinglis*, 233.

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reveals something more basic to Barth's own program of the 1920s: Barth's overwhelming concern at this time was to create a space over against the Protestant liberalism of his day, and his evaluation of Anabaptism becomes an important, if in the end flawed, part of that strategy.

Barth admits that there are countless overlapping and mixed forms of Reformation and *Schwärmertum* in "a most intimate, indissoluble complexity." Yet *Schwärmertum* for Barth is "the sickness of the Reformation, and it is the Reformation itself which is sick."⁶ The sickness manifests itself as a "splinter movement" from which the Reformers had no choice other than to "defend themselves," according to Barth. He writes: "One can justify the Reformers' stance; indeed one must. But one should not overlook the fact that here the human—the earthly—limit becomes concretely visible, even in the Reformation. It was precisely with and in response to the *Schwärmer* that this breaks through."⁷ In this context Barth repeats the common political-tactical argument for Zwingli's defense: if Zwingli had not put the church under the protection and administration of the state, it would not have survived. Consequently the move against the Anabaptists was justified for the health of Zurich. Unfortunately, but necessarily, the Anabaptists became the "scapegoats" of the Reformation. "While it may cause anger and repugnance in us," Barth writes, "fear and sympathy would be most appropriate when we see the manner in which the light of the Reformation in Zwingli was followed by its unavoidable shadow in its struggle with its 'grimaces.'"⁸ The concern for the unity of Zurich-Christendom made purging all that which contorts the face of the Reformation a *theological necessity*.⁹

In the Zwingli lectures, as well as in his other writings of the 1920s, Barth uses the term "Anabaptism" to cover positions that are logically opposed to each other. On the one hand, Barth describes the Anabaptists as enthusiastic spiritualists unfettered by objective revelation. On the other hand, he describes the Anabaptist movement as a "renunciation of the world," a "new monasticism, a new works righteousness represented by adult baptism."¹⁰ Anabaptists holding to these positions are related in their "struggle for a pure life," Barth suggests, in contrast to the Reformers whose struggle was for "pure teaching." Specifically, in his account of Zwingli's struggle with the Anabaptists, Barth examines the Zurich Disputations, quotes Balthasar Hubmaier's writings, knows that Conrad Grebel and Felix Manz were humanistically trained, and is aware of Hans Denck and Ludwig Haetzer; nonetheless, Barth judges that the Anabaptist movement "for its part never produced a really superior mind."¹¹ In contrast to Zwingli, these Anabaptists shared in common a lack of "healthy moderation,"¹² according to Barth. Conrad Grebel, for example, is presented as a "typical new convert—young and excessive—who, with a sudden turn renounces the world, and moves beyond the narrow bounds of duty to which Zwingli

6. *Ibid.*, 234.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. See Yoder, "Turning Point in the Zwinglian Reformation," 140.

10. Barth, *Theologie Zwinglis*, 235, 239.

11. *Ibid.*, 247; see also 235 and 239.

12. *Ibid.*, 233–34, 235, 239.

sought to point him, toward an extreme position of exclusive opposition.”¹³ Zwingli, by contrast, consistently acted in a measured and evenhanded manner, Barth tells us, even as those around him were impatient, independent, audacious, and impudent.¹⁴ In that context Zwingli’s churchmanship impresses Barth: compared to Luther, who dealt harshly with the concerns of the German peasants, Zwingli implemented public disputations and was willing to negotiate with the peasantry about their concerns. Barth notes that “it is quite extraordinary that the Zurich Council managed with only one single execution” in 1525.¹⁵ Whoever—like Zwingli—stands in the light will necessarily cast a shadow, according to Barth: “Greatness without culpability and shadow is an excluded possibility in human history, even where the desires and aspirations are pure.”¹⁶ Barth praises Zwingli as the Reformer who presented “a soberly moral understanding of Christianity balanced by the emphasis on God’s powerful solidarity with us in Christ.”¹⁷

With this comment we begin to sense the kind of light Barth sees shining around Zwingli. On the one hand, Barth notes that Zwingli was “only too united with these Radicals in rejecting a magical-sacramental understanding of baptism.”¹⁸ Yet while rejecting the salvific significance of pedobaptism, Zwingli energetically opposed the Anabaptist protestation that was framed publicly in terms of a “valuation of the salvific significance of the *experience of conversion*.”¹⁹ Zwingli judged this understanding of the Christian life as “another attack on the sole causality and honor of God.”²⁰ Barth adopts this criterion—“the sole causality and honor of God”—for assessing the kind of witness that the church is called to give. For Zwingli the Word of God was a unity of inner and outer witness, and the latter is a two-edged sword: the testimony of Scripture and of the sacramental sign. Against the Catholics, Zwingli employed the “outer witness of the biblical Word,” and against the Anabaptists, the “outer witness of the sacramental symbol.” The “line of thought is the same,” namely, the “emphasis on the singular authority of God.”²¹ Baptism for Zwingli was an expression that the people of God is a whole, testifying that Christ has indeed cleansed the church by his blood, and that the goal of redemption in Christ “is found not simply in the eternal bliss [*Beseligung*] of individuals, but in the building of a kingdom of God on earth,” to which children also belong.²²

Barth finds Zwingli a most helpful mentor at this point. Years later Barth employed almost the exact same language in the section on the “Unity of the Word of God” in the *Church Dogmatics* I/1 to criticize the private individualism of modern Protestant theo-

13. *Ibid.*, 235.

14. *Ibid.*, 235, 247.

15. *Ibid.*, 242.

16. *Ibid.*, 247.

17. *Ibid.*, 250. Many years later Barth will state the opposite; cf. *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3:29.

18. Barth, *Theologie Zwinglis*, 237.

19. *Ibid.* (emphasis mine).

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*, 250.

22. *Ibid.*, 249–50.

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gy.²³ Again, it gives us a hint at what Barth understands as central, on the one hand, and as a real hindrance to faith, on the other. It was in the 1920s, however, that Barth first began to think of baptism as a form of the Word of God. In this period he became a vocal advocate of infant baptism, especially because “official Protestant dogmatics” had virtually let the notion of sacraments “go to seed,” making the doctrine appear peripheral.²⁴ In response, the young Barth is convinced that the recovery of a robust theology of infant baptism is a remarkably vivid depiction of the free and omnipotent grace of God, independent of all human thought and will, belief, and unbelief. Although four decades later Barth came to the exact opposite conclusion on infant baptism,²⁵ his criterion—the call for the communion of faith to depict and give witness to the grace of God—remained the same.

In the Zwingli lectures Barth assumes without much argumentation that the roots of the “problem” of private, individual faith and its emphasis on experience can be found within Anabaptism and its high esteem for “the salvific significance of the conversion experience.”²⁶ Whence this reading of Anabaptism? It is helpful to notice that in the context of the Zwingli lectures Barth was fighting on two fronts. With the four-hundred-year anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation in 1917, German scholarship had rediscovered Luther in his self-understanding and historic importance as a theologian; with this came a polemical and one-sided Lutheran reception of Zwingli. Barth’s first aim in the Zwingli lectures was to rehabilitate Zwingli in the context of the Luther renaissance.²⁷ The second front for Barth was the battle against the modern privatization of faith in its Protestant liberal and Pietist forms. Anabaptism, rightly or wrongly, became a target for Barth on each of these larger battle fields.

On the one front, many Luther scholars simply followed Luther’s lead and dismissed the witness of Zwingli to the *Sache* of the Reformation as *Schwärmerei*.²⁸ Barth sought to rectify this. In the context of that confessional debate Barth had no need for a more nuanced and fair presentation of Anabaptism. It did not help that Barth himself was accused of *Schwärmerei* by his Lutheran colleagues in Göttingen: Emanuel Hirsch was convinced that Barth’s early account of ethics built on an understanding of the divine Word as the “great disturbance,” “crisis,” or “interruption” led inevitably to empty, “spiritualistic enthusiasm.”²⁹ Carl Stange told him that the “Reformed Church in Hanover [which appointed Barth] has no more significance than the millennial sects.”³⁰ Consequently,

23. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1:124, trans. G.W. Bromiley. Bromiley translates “Beseligung” as “saving.”

24. Barth, “Unterricht in der christlichen Religion,” 3:200, 199.

25. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/4 (fragment): 189–90.

26. Barth, *Theologie Zwinglis*, 237. Cf. Barth’s later engagement with German and Swiss Pietists: “Gespräch mit Vertretern der Gemeinschaften,” 18–19. For the Anabaptists, however, it was not at all the significance of “experience” that was at issue, but rather Zwingli’s decision against the use of Scripture as norm, his denial of appeal by threat of force, and his granting to city council the authority for deciding matters of faith and their enforcement that brought about the breaking point. See Yoder, *Anabaptism and Reformation in Switzerland*, 28; also 149.

27. Barth, “Zwingli im Urteil des Luthertum,” in *Die Theologie Zwinglis*, 3–36.

28. *Ibid.*, 3; Barth, “Ansatz und Absicht in Luthers Abendmahlslehre, 1923,” 298.

29. See Hirsch, *Deutschlands Schicksal*, 158. “The Great Disturbance” is Barth’s section heading for chaps. 12 (“The Problem of Ethics”) and following in *Epistle to the Romans*, 424.

30. Barth, letter dated May 17, 1922, in *Barth-Thurneysen Briefwechsel*, 77.

Barth's colleagues refused to approve his proposed course on "dogmatics," arguing that only *Lutheran* dogmatics could have the dignity of that generic (non-confessional) title.³¹

For Barth that debate was much more than denominational posturing. Barth was convinced that modern theology continually reaffirmed Feuerbach's conclusion that theology is in essence anthropology; both in its liberal and Pietist forms, Protestant theology had shifted "attention from what God is in himself to what God is for men."³² In part, the seeds for this reversal were, according to Barth, Luther's understanding of faith "as an almost divine hypostasis," the doctrine of the Real Presence in the Lord's Supper (versus Zwingli), and the Lutheran doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum* (interchange of attributes in the two natures of Christ).³³ Allowed to develop into semi-Pelagianism in the soil of rationalism and Pietism, the reversal was complete in the conclusion drawn by Feuerbach.

On these fronts against both Protestant liberalism and Pietism, Barth had cause to attack Anabaptism directly. Continental liberal scholarship had identified Anabaptists as the pioneers and forerunners of the modern religious spirit, and specifically as the forerunners of Pietism and the Enlightenment, and thus of Friedrich Schleiermacher. Troeltsch praised the Anabaptist emphasis on (1) the separation of church and state, (2) voluntarism in the formation of church bodies, and (3) the inviolability of the inner personal life by the state. "What the world today understands as Protestantism is indebted more to the legacy of Anabaptism than to the legacy of the Reformers,"³⁴ according to Troeltsch. Barth comments that if this is the case, "(and there is something to it) then it is time to turn around and acquire the legacy of the Reformers, whose name and intentions we claim."³⁵ Indeed, Barth notes that he would "feel more at home in [Catholicism's] world and among its believers than in a world and among believers in which the concern of the Reformation has become an unknown or almost unknown quantity."³⁶ Barth's ultimate concern is for the sovereignty of the Word of God: just as the Reformers charged both the Roman hierarchy and *Schwärmertum* with an immediacy that bypassed the incarnate Word of God, now Protestant liberalism, Pietism, and religious socialism must be charged with the same theological error, according to Barth. "[W]e operate with the Spirit as if we ourselves were Christ, as if we had him [the Spirit] in our pocket in the form of our science, our bit of

31. See Barth, letter dated December 27, 1923, in *ibid.*, 213–14.

32. Barth, "Ludwig Feuerbach," 223.

33. Barth came across this key Christological insight in 1925 ("§28 Christus Jesus: seine Person," in *Unterricht in der christlichen Religion*, vol. 3); this became significant above all for "§64 The Exaltation of the Son of Man," in *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, esp. 73ff.

34. Barth, "Das Schriftprinzip der reformierten Kirche," 529.

35. *Ibid.* In "Protestantisches Christentum und Kirche in der Neuzeit," 305, Troeltsch argues that in the sixteenth century "the time was not yet ripe for the Anabaptists nor the Anabaptists for the time. But the Anabaptists' hour and their global historical success arrived with the English Revolution and Pietism . . . Schleiermacher's doctrine of religion in his *Speeches* is a . . . proclamation of the Anabaptist theory of religion and congregation; contemporary Protestantism stands closer to Sebastian Franck than to Luther." Barth makes a similar statement about the "Schleiermacher–Ritschl–Troeltsch" line of understanding the legacy of the Reformation in "Der römische Katholizismus," 339.

36. Barth, "Der römische Katholizismus," 318.

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ethos, our religious consciousness—or as if we could get him into our pocket through an upsurge of activism.”³⁷ In this regard Barth uncritically accepts the line of influence that Troeltsch drew from the Anabaptists to the English Revolution, the Pietists, and to Schleiermacher—and then attacks that root cause accordingly.

Barth himself also draws a line from Tolstoy back to the Anabaptists. Both, according to Barth, employed a “biblicistic” ethic that identified the relatively concrete biblical imperatives as directly applicable divine commands for us. *Nachfolge* (discipleship) is no straightforward matter, for it rests in the indicative of being “in Christ,”³⁸ Barth writes. Such a reduction of ethics to discipleship assumes, according to Barth, the “intolerable humanizing of Christ that triumphed under the aegis of Schleiermacher in the 19th century.”³⁹ Barth’s writings regularly takes Schleiermacher to task for the impetus he gave to the type of Christocentrism associated with the life-of-Jesus theology of liberal Protestantism: “To honor heroes, even the man Jesus of Nazareth, is to deny revelation, for it forgets the *Deus dixit* [that God has spoken], the divine nature in Christ, to which alone honor and worship belong.”⁴⁰ In one passing comment, Barth blames this deficient Christology on the “*Schwärmer* blood flowing through Schleiermacher’s veins!”⁴¹ Working with the questionable assumption that sixteenth-century Anabaptism is a common ancestor—either historically or in spirit—of both Pietism⁴² and liberalism, Anabaptism became a most worthy target in Barth’s historical theological work of the 1920s.⁴³

A few remarks are now necessary to tie together the loose ends and attempt an evaluation. To begin with, it is disappointing that Barth’s engagement with Anabaptist sources during this period was not as serious or rounded as we would later come to expect from

37. Barth, “Schriftprinzip der reformierten Kirche, 529. Curiously, Barth appropriates here the structure of Ritschl’s argument against Roman Catholicism and Anabaptism. Barth summarizes Ritschl’s view (whose thought Barth otherwise despises): “Christianity is an outlook upon life and it is morality, but in no way is it an immediate relationship with God. Roman Catholicism and every form of Anabaptists’ faith is finished off at one blow by virtue of the fact that they think they know Christianity, and perhaps indeed of a more perfect Christianity beside that provided by the consciousness and realization in the moral sphere of the fact that we are children of God.” Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, 644 (translation slightly altered). This was likely written in 1926 in Münster.

38. Barth, *Ethik*, 1:134. Biblical imperatives “are not direct revelation, but like the Bible as a whole, they are a witness to revelation. In this very specific sense—which excludes their application as general moral truths—they are God’s Word to us” (pp. 134–35). For Barth’s early account of “discipleship,” see *Ethik*, 2:132–33. For the mature Barth, see *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2:533ff.

39. Barth, *Theology of Schleiermacher*, 106.

40. Barth, *Göttingen Dogmatics*, 1:62. In the *Göttingen Dogmatics* Barth is already developing a specifically Trinitarian theology based on the recovery of classical Christology.

41. Barth, *Theology of Schleiermacher*, 106. Barth is thinking here of mystics in the line of Zinzendorf; he is, however, very aware that Schleiermacher’s brazen justification of war and harsh critique of pacifist Christian groups “like Mennonites and Quakers,” for example, cannot be explained from the notion of “mysticism”; see Barth, “Brunners Schleiermacherbuch,” 415.

42. See Busch, *Karl Barth and the Pietists*.

43. A number of Swiss, German, and Russian Mennonite preachers were trained at the pietistic Evangelische Predigerschule in Basel, which Barth’s father, Fritz Barth, directed between 1886–89. See Crous, “Anabaptism, Pietism, Rationalism and German Mennonites,” 246. Under the influence of Pietism, Mennonites in many areas of Europe rejected traditional Anabaptist convictions, including nonresistance, as hindrances to spiritual renewal. See Friedmann’s detailed historical study, “Anabaptism and Pietism.”

him. We know that much of the historical support that Barth offers, including his account of the Second Zurich Disputation in 1523, is copied *verbatim* (without citing his source) from his father's 1903 lecture manuscript on "Zwingli's Life and Writings."⁴⁴ Consequently, Barth is not forced to comment on the newer Zwingli materials that were prepared for the four-hundred-year anniversary of the Reformation in Zurich (1919), in particular the important historical studies by Walther Köhler—notably a "liberal Zwingli researcher" but also a foremost authority on Anabaptism.⁴⁵ A number of weaknesses result from this deficit.

First, while Barth strives to avoid the combative style of historical theology that he believed marred the Lutheran reception of Zwingli,⁴⁶ he does not assume that Anabaptist beliefs can or need to be grasped as a meaningful whole, and he shows only very limited willingness to understand their key concerns and intentions as contingent witnesses of the Reformation.⁴⁷ This diminishes the quality of Barth's work.

Second, Barth does not grapple with Zwingli's eschatological assumptions that lead Zwingli to protect the Christendom unity of Zurich at all costs. These assumptions leave Zwingli unprotected from the dangers of subjectivism and opportunism, and allow him to let the sinful present situation be its own norm.⁴⁸ Barth (more than anyone) is otherwise very perceptive to the manner in which the Word of God unsettles and challenges the self-evident quality of our present world. And Barth is indeed fascinated by Zwingli's theocentrism, but this does not allow Barth to challenge Zwingli's "Eusebian and Augustinian interpretation of the millennium" in which the "*corpus Christianum* is the *regnum Christi*."⁴⁹ Zwingli can say that while the apostles separated themselves from the world, true Christians will now separate from no one, for the entire world confesses Christ.⁵⁰ Paradoxically, Barth is very aware at this time that all ethics is inescapably "millenarian anticipation"—from Plato to Calvin, Kant, Schiller, and Ragaz. However, "[t]here is nothing in the whole range of human possibilities . . . which is capable of realizing the moral objective, the goal of history."⁵¹ In this context Barth is very anxious about identifying God's Word to us with any specificity lest it become simplified and reified as in cultural Protestantism; he is very concerned not to repeat the liberal Protestant mistake of

44. See Freudenberg, "Vorwort" to Barth, *Theologie Zwinglis*, xiv-xv; also 236n. Karl Barth's father, Fritz Barth, was a professor at the University of Bern.

45. As the doctoral supervisor of three leading twentieth-century Mennonite historians—including Harold S. Bender, longtime mentor to John Howard Yoder—Köhler was instrumental in the rebirth of Anabaptist studies in Europe. See Neff and Bender, "Köhler, Walther"; see also Freudenberg's comments in his "Vorwort" to Barth, *Theologie Zwinglis*, ix.

46. Barth, *Theology of John Calvin*, 99, with explicit reference to the combative manner in which modern Lutheran scholars dealt with Zwingli.

47. These are Barth's own criteria for judging Luther's assessment of Carlstadt, Zwingli, and Oekolampad. See Barth, "Ansatz und Absicht in Luthers Abendmahlslehre," 298.

48. For a larger discussion, see Yoder, "Peace without Eschatology?" Yoder wrote this essay in 1954 while studying with Barth in Basel.

49. Yoder, *Anabaptism and Reformation in Switzerland*, 258. Indeed, Barth saw *corpus Christianum* (the idea of the unity of church and state) as an unfortunate temptation that the church was not prepared to resist; see *Church Dogmatics*, I/2:334.

50. Zwingli, as referred to by Yoder in *Anabaptism and Reformation in Switzerland*, 258.

51. Barth, "Problem of Ethics Today," 161, 166.

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identifying specific historical movements with God's saving action. Thus it is not surprising that Barth's ecclesiology at this time does not move toward a theological examination of the church that practices discipleship faith. For the Anabaptists, baptism became that sign that commitment to Christ requires a concrete social embodiment of the gospel difference; and as such non-conformity, but not distance, is crucial to its calling to witness. In the 1920s Barth was very concerned about any claim of concretely embodying the gospel. In this regard John Howard Yoder was correct when he suggested that Barth's 1920s "Theology of the Word" was "not *explicitly* anti-establishment,"⁵² though with its careful reading of Scripture and reappropriation of the Reformation, it can be seen as the beginnings of a "post-Christendom reconstruction" of theology. While ethical absolutism remains idolatrous for both the young and old Barth, toward the end of his life Barth does see the problem of Constantinianism clearly, and he praises Mennonites and early Anabaptists for getting it right.⁵³

Indeed, despite all of the weaknesses identified above, there is something very positive in these early lectures. First, Barth remarks that with a fresh examination of the Reformers, he hopes to acquire the tools and orientation necessary to thoroughly dismantle the liberal theological tradition determined directly or indirectly by Friedrich Schleiermacher.⁵⁴ Barth makes large strides toward that goal in the Zwingli course. We have already pointed to Barth's discovery of the sole causality and glory of the Word of God. In the early writings his primary concern is to "chasten the pretensions of the then-authoritative moral theory" by beginning with the in-breaking Word, which begins to clear the space necessary for "the right sort of status for the human agent."⁵⁵ This approach gave Barth the leverage in the 1920s to call into question the entire liberal Protestant vision constructed by Ritschl, Troeltsch, von Harnack, Hermann, and Schleiermacher; consequently, Barth understood his own writings as "signposts for the reconstruction of theology and church."⁵⁶ These signposts from the 1920s remain important beacons for the church in the shadows of modernity.

Second, despite the deficiencies in his historical work, Barth learns that what distinguishes the Swiss magisterial Reformers from Luther is an understanding that the church is more than a spiritual community of worship, prayer, and Scripture reading. In contrast to the Lutheran tradition, the Reformed had always accorded a high place to morals. Their ecclesiology refused to divide intellect from practice. What is important here is not the polemical debate with Lutheranism on this point *per se*, but the manner in which Barth discovers a theologically satisfying way of reconstructing the moral earnestness of liberal Protestantism.⁵⁷ This is precisely the point that a later Mennonite student—John Howard Yoder—praises in Barth's work: "The very concept of a split between belief and action is

52. Yoder, "Karl Barth, Post-Christendom Theologian," 176.

53. Barth, "Gespräch mit den Mennoniten," 426–27.

54. See Barth, "Appendix 38: Autobiographical Sketches (Barth)," 158.

55. Webster, "Ethics and Politics," 147.

56. This is the subtitle to the German original of his *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings 1920–1928*.

57. See Webster, "Ethics and Politics," 159–60. Webster's writings on Barth's ethics show well how Barth subverts and reestablishes the ethical projects of Kantian and Ritschlian theologians, including their key ideas, conventions, and terms: command, freedom, agency, responsibility, and the good.

itself a doctrinal error . . . [I]f we were to deal systematically with theology in a specifically biblical stance or Anabaptist stance, then there would have to be some way of restoring ethics into every section of it. Few theologians have tried to do this. Karl Barth did, although we could still debate whether he had done it consistently or correctly.”⁵⁸ In these historical-theological studies Barth was coming to understand that the primary task of Christian theology and ethics is to describe that which *is*—namely, the nature of reality as it is constituted in Jesus Christ—and then to live accordingly. John Webster gives a characteristically insightful summary of Barth’s earlier writings that applies to the materials on Barth, Zwingli, and the Anabaptists above: “Barth’s basic instinct in his earlier ethical writing was to insist that culture, politics and individual moral subjectivity are not autonomous or primordial realities but functions of the presence and purposive action of God. In this way, he sought to undo a metaphysics of morals which made ethical consciousness or the work of culture and politics into first principles, and to replace it by a trinitarian moral ontology of the command of God.”⁵⁹ This was to be a lasting theological discovery for Barth—something gained in the space cleared by his early work in historical theology.

Unfortunately, Karl Barth never returned to do further work on sixteenth-century Anabaptism or Anabaptist-Mennonite theology. Curiously, however, the later Barth did come to a very different assessment of sixteenth-century Anabaptist beginnings, some of which was due to his encounter with young Mennonite students in Basel in the 1950s, including John Howard Yoder.⁶⁰ When Anabaptism is mentioned in the *Church Dogmatics* IV/3 (composed in 1959), Barth does not charge Anabaptists with exclusive separatism as he did in 1922. Rather, he recognizes that “Anabaptism itself was segregated and suppressed . . . both externally by the political authorities and internally by the Evangelical congregations.”⁶¹ Moreover, Barth notes that in contrast to the Reformers and the various evangelical awakenings since the Reformation, the Anabaptists were among the only ones whose understanding of mission (including church and eschatology) challenged the “dominant orders and disorders” of the status quo. “We cannot but admit that in this respect, for all the shortwindedness, over-haste and general weakness of their teaching and attempts to structure life, the Anabaptists and Spiritualists, the so-called Enthusiasts of the Reformation period, saw much further than the Reformers themselves. Unwilling merely to accept the validity of existing relationships, they wanted to test them in the light

58. Yoder, *Preface to Theology*, 391.

59. Webster, “Ethics and Politics,” 150.

60. Karl Barth was an internal reader of John Howard Yoder’s 1957 doctoral thesis, which has only recently been translated and published in English as *Anabaptism and Reformation in Switzerland: An Historical and Theological Analysis of the Dialogues between Anabaptists and Reformers*. The dissertation was published in German in two separate volumes in 1962 and 1968; key pieces of the research appeared in English in three essays published between 1958 and 1969. If space allowed, I would develop the following double claim: (1) that the manner in which Yoder unlocks the diasporic, missional logic displayed so well by sixteenth-century Swiss Anabaptism owes more to Karl Barth than to the “Anabaptist Vision” school of Harold Bender (who was trained under Köhler); and (2) that Yoder’s dissertation, as well as the fifty-page critique of Barth’s views on the problem of war, which he presented to and discussed with Barth for more than three hours in July 1957, had at least a small influence on Barth’s post-1957 reflections on Anabaptism, baptism, the problem of war, and the missionary nature of the church. Yoder’s personal reflections on his 1957 encounter with Barth are detailed in a presentation given later that month: “Karl Barth und christlicher Pazifismus.”

61. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3:29.

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of the Gospel. Were they altogether wrong when they said that Luther had been moving in the same direction in his 1520 writings?⁶²

Exactly one year before his death, Barth had a very amicable meeting with Swiss Mennonites at the European Mennonite Bible School (Bienenberg) in Liestal, Basel-Land, Switzerland, on December 13, 1967. Barth was asked by one of the Mennonite instructors⁶³ about the strengths of the Anabaptist movement of the sixteenth century. Barth immediately pointed to the challenge that Anabaptists posed to the Constantinian arrangement between church and society—and connected that to the challenges of the church in a post-Christendom context. According to Barth, the Anabaptists were those people

who noticed that there is something not in order in the church—namely, that it had allied itself so with state and society. In one shot the whole Canton of Bern should be one Christian people! No, no, it can't be that simple. In one shot all of Europe should be Christian. And how should that happen? Well, you baptize the little children, and then they are Christian and then we have a Christian world. Wonderful! This is how it has been since the fourth century. It was the Emperor Constantine who declared Christianity to be the state religion. The Anabaptists recognized that there is something wrong with that. Christianity is neither a state religion nor a religion of society in general. Rather Christianity is something that comes as a gift—here to the one, there to another; here to a group, there to another . . . And for this reason they opposed infant baptism because, they said, the baptismal waters are being wasted, as it were. One should baptize those people (as it was in the New Testament) who say that they would like to be baptized, who request it, who take it upon themselves as a responsible matter, and who are thus accepted by the congregation, and then they are baptized. But not to a small baby which cannot be asked! One should not be surprised . . . that the church is so secularized: it is because of infant baptism. For if everything is simply taken care of with that—and one makes the person into a Christian (it is taken care of simply with the water, and one claims that it is the new birth and the acceptance into the covenant of God and inclusion in the body of Christ, that they are baptized!), then one cannot be surprised when these people later say “No one asked me,” and then go their own way and live without being Christian. So I would say that the Anabaptists stood up and helped to recall how it was still done in the first and second centuries—this was their strength.⁶⁴

This lengthy quote should be compared with the whole of Barth's “Doctrine of Baptism as the Foundation of the Christian Life” (*Church Dogmatics* IV/4), which had just been published a few months prior to this 1967 meeting.⁶⁵ For our purposes the above quotation indicates clearly that Barth had come to an entirely different assessment of sixteenth-century Swiss Anabaptists than the position he had held forty-five years earlier. Moreover, Barth's understanding of baptism had also shifted radically during this time toward believers' baptism. We already noted above that beginning in the early 1960s, Barth began to develop a theology of baptism that brought him to reject infant baptism for the sake

62. *Ibid.*, IV/3:28 (translation altered).

63. Interview with Helmut Doerksen (questioner), July 2009, MuttENZ, Switzerland. Doerksen had taken a number of courses with Barth in Basel.

64. Barth, “Gespräch mit den Mennoniten,” 426–27.

65. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/4 (fragment).

of the mission of the community of faith,⁶⁶ namely, in order for the church to depict and give witness to the grace of God. This development is of major significance for Barth studies, and Barth affirmed in 1967 that sixteenth-century Swiss Anabaptists got this part right—and emphasized that this has some significance for the witness of the church in a post-Constantinian, post-Christendom context.⁶⁷

In his Gifford Lectures, Stanley Hauerwas provides a sympathetic account of “The Witness That Was Karl Barth.”⁶⁸ However, Hauerwas remarks that “[A]ttractive accounts of the world can often turn out to be no more than fantasies. The needed incentive not just to entertain but to live Christian convictions requires the display of a habitable world exemplified in the life of the Christian community.”⁶⁹ Hauerwas argues that Barth offers an “over cautious” presentation of the church in the economy of God’s salvation. The latter requires churches like those represented by “John Howard Yoder and Pope John Paul II,” which embody the “kind of witnesses who must exist if Christians are to recover the confident use of theological speech that Barth exemplifies so well.”⁷⁰ In this initial study of recently published materials from the Karl Barth Archive on Anabaptist beginnings, we have been able to see that there is concrete support for both claims. On the one hand, through Barth’s early engagement with sixteenth-century Swiss Anabaptist history, we have a unique perspective on Barth’s early search for theological speech (appropriate to the twentieth century) that corresponds to the reality that “God speaks.” Barth’s method during the 1920s was to search historically for tools to faithfully, confidently, and unapologetically witness to an unbelieving world about the way things really are if God has really made himself known in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Barth recognized that authentic theologizing is not an alternative to contemporary pertinence, but its precondition.⁷¹ On the other hand, we have also traced Barth’s initial critique and his growing appreciation of the concrete, ecclesial witness of this reality in the testimony of the early Swiss Anabaptists.⁷² When already firmly established as the most significant theologian since Schleiermacher, the old Barth pointed to Anabaptists as one group whose communal witness spoke eloquently that “Christianity is something that comes as a gift.”⁷³ And within a post-Christendom context, as Hauerwas suggests, this kind of witness is “not just something Christians ‘do’ but is at the heart of understanding how that to which Christians witness is true.”⁷⁴

66. *Ibid.*, IV/4 (fragment): 189–90.

67. In 1994 Yoder noted that Barth was “epistemologically post-Constantinian” insofar as he appeals to the early church as a model for present practice. See Yoder, “Karl Barth, Post-Christendom Theologian,” 179.

68. Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe*, chap. 6.

69. *Ibid.*, 214.

70. *Ibid.*, 216–17.

71. See Yoder, “Karl Barth, Post-Christendom Theologian,” 176.

72. I think that it is unhelpful to say, as did Yoder, that “Barth’s incomplete pilgrimage can best be understood as being on the way to what Anglo-Saxon ecclesiological thinking calls the Free Church”; see “Karl Barth: How His Mind Kept Changing,” 168–69. George Hunsinger, in “Karl Barth and the Politics of Sectarian Protestantism,” has strongly challenged this claim. Arne Rasmussen’s notion of “diaspora politics” and “diaspora theology,” however, may prove much more helpful; see his “Politics of Diaspora,” 110.

73. Barth, “Gespräch mit den Mennoniten,” 427.

74. Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe*, 217.

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