



RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘The visible renewal of human life’: Barth’s ethical assessment of the Reformed confessions

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Abstract

Karl Barth’s *Theology of the Reformed Confessions* characterised those catechetical texts as more ethical in orientation and more horizontal in focus than the corresponding Lutheran symbols. By examining both primary and secondary sources, this paper shows that while Barth legitimately illumines a key element of the Reformed witness regarding a connection between faith and life, his polemical eye may also distort his perspective on its distinctiveness, likely owing to contextual factors related to his self-fashioning a Reformed identity in his early academic service at the predominantly Lutheran University of Göttingen and alongside his colleague, Emanuel Hirsch.

Keywords: Karl Barth; ethics; Lutheran theology; Reformed confessions; Reformed theology

Karl Barth’s *Theology of the Reformed Confessions* characterised those catechetical texts as more ethical in orientation and more horizontal in focus than the corresponding Lutheran symbols. He goes so far as to say that ‘this understanding of Christianity as the connection, grounded in God and effected in humans, of the invisible divine truth of life and the visible renewal of human life ...’ is ‘the positive Reformed doctrine of Christianity’.¹ He builds there on earlier claims made in lecture cycles on Calvin and Zwingli about the ethical and horizontal distinctiveness of the Reformed tradition.

Barth’s location in Göttingen makes this comparative focus understandable, inasmuch as he writes as a lone Reformed voice amid a faculty of Lutheran scholars. He went back to school in those years, freshly turning to classic Reformed texts in these early years as Honorary Professor of Reformed Doctrine. Similarly, his work then in 1923 helps shapes his perception of Reformed theological identity alongside that of a Lutheranism this side of the so-called Luther Renaissance percolating in the years immediately prior to Barth’s lecture series. He returns to school alongside colleagues like Emanuel Hirsch, engaging primary sources from a particular scholarly context with its own idiosyncrasies.

¹Karl Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, eds. Darrell L. Guder and Judith J. Guder (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), pp. 147–8.

This paper examines Barth's source material to explore ways in which he renders early Reformed confessional concerns (not least by considering Zwingli's writings of 1523), but also in what ways his analysis was inflected by his engagement of Luther studies in 1923 (whether via the writings of Karl Holl or interaction with one of Holl's students: Barth's colleague, Emanuel Hirsch). Whereas his engagement of Catholicism via his more immediate sources has been addressed capably in recent years (especially by Keith Johnson, Amy Marga, Bruce McCormack, and Thomas Joseph White), rather less has been done to consider the ways in which his approach to understanding the various streams of magisterial Protestantism has likewise been shaped not only by primary sources but also by more immediate secondary scholarly sources (though see the forays of Heinrich Assel into the relationship of the dialectical theologians, including Barth, with the Luther Renaissance).²

In this paper, I seek to answer five questions, moving from matters more to less obvious, and finally to that which is almost entirely overlooked or underappreciated about Barth's self-fashioning of an identity as a Reformed theologian, vis à vis his Lutheran colleagues in Göttingen. I ask: what does Barth say of Reformed theology's ethical concerns? how does he compare this to Lutheranism's own ethical impulse? what can be said of the prompts for the former judgment about the Reformed tradition's ethical bent? what seems to account for the latter, relative judgment pertaining to Lutheranism? and, in conclusion, what do we make of this set of complexities in Barth's articulation of Reformed theology's identity vis-à-vis Lutheranism? In short, by examining both primary and secondary sources, this paper shows that while Barth legitimately illumines a key element of the Reformed witness regarding a connection between faith and life, his polemical eye may also distort his perspective on its distinctiveness, likely owing to contextual factors related to the fact that he was fashioning his a Reformed identity in these early years of his academic career at the predominantly Lutheran University of Göttingen and alongside his colleague, Emanuel Hirsch.

What does Barth say about Reformed theology's ethical concerns?

Barth clearly has a sense for the ethical focus of the Reformed tradition from as early as his lectures on John Calvin in summer 1922, a full calendar year before his lecture cycle on these Reformed Confessions.³ He there defines the Reformed uniqueness, relative to Lutherans, with their 'relating to the horizontal, this unity of faith and life, dogmatics and ethics, this attempt to answer the question of human striving and willing that Luther's discovery had for a moment pushed into the background'.⁴

When he turns to the confessions in his second year of teaching, he picks up this concern regarding the connection of God and world:

There really can be no doubt that there is truly one thing that is the same in all these documents, something that forms them all as a unity over against the Augsburg Confession, that makes them into characteristically Reformed confessions. This one thing is, of course, the understanding of Christianity as the

²Heinrich Assel and Bruce L. McCormack, *Luther, Barth, and Movements of Theological Renewal* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110612066>.

³Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995).

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 77.

connection grounded in God and effected in humans, of the invisible divine truth of life and the visible renewal of human life, of divine turning and human converting, of the knowledge of God and self, of New Testament and Old Testament revelation, of gift and task, of justification and rebirth, of covenant of grace and covenant of law, of faith and duty ... This connection is the positive Reformed doctrine of Christianity.⁵

Reformed theology centres grace and divine generosity in a full way. Christ being given in his totality, Christianity attests renewal of life as much as salvation from death. Union with Christ in his death and resurrection brings not only forgiveness but also regeneration or new birth. As he would later that year convey in a lecture on 'The Doctrinal Task of the Reformed Churches', Barth identified 'a definite conception of what practical, personal Christianity stands for in the world ... at the heart of the Reformed Confessions'.⁶ Barth's summer study of the Reformed confessions led to this claim that the personal and practical was centred in Reformed theology and integrally connected to its teaching on divine grace.

How does he compare the Reformed position to Lutheranism?

The connection of God's giving of life and of visible human renewal was not only the positive Reformed contribution but was also, he says in these 1923 lectures, quite impossible for Lutherans. Why? Barth states that 'there the first side of the matter, justifying faith, is abruptly shifted to the centre, over against which the second side, the new obedience, appears to be peripheral if still indispensable'.⁷ This is in line with what we have already seen in his earlier lectures on Calvin, where he had said that it was 'the question of human striving and willing that Luther's discovery had for the moment pushed into the background'.⁸

The architectural judgment is that Lutherans centre justification, not Christ as such. Now they affirm justification by faith alone in Christ alone, so it is not as though they would admit any decentring of Christ. Yet Barth finds them lacking in their Christology. This will be his predominant concern later in his comparison of Reformed and Lutheran theology in the 1923 lectures on the confessions, wherein the four dozen pages of material on the controversy with Lutheranism fix upon Christ and the Lord's Supper. Barth's concern here – expressed christologically – is that Lutherans only centre part of Christ, namely, the justice with which he makes forensic fulfilment of divine promises. In so doing, Lutherans elevate justification over sanctification and centre forgiveness whilst marginalising rebirth.

John Webster argues that Barth never quite settles on which he prefers, whether the Reformed focus on keeping the active life bound with the life of faith or upon the Lutheran insistence that divine supremacy manifests in the centring of the forensic.⁹

⁵Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, pp. 147–8.

⁶Karl Barth, 'Doctrinal Task of the Reformed Churches', in Horton Douglas (ed.), *The Word of God and Word of Man* (Chicago, IL: The Pilgrim Press, 1928), p. 261.

⁷Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, p. 148.

⁸Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, p. 77.

⁹John Webster, 'Justification, Analogy, and Action: Barth and Luther in Jüngel's Anthropology', in *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 179–80.

He claims this on the basis of a single line: 'We see the need for both Luther and Calvin, both Calvin and Luther.'¹⁰ We might add others, however, that seem to offer a more balanced accounting. In the September 1923 lecture, 'The Doctrinal Task of the Reformed Churches', Barth says that while 'the narrower, more one-sidedly "religious" spirituality of the Lutherans' is 'clearly less equal to the problem of actual life', it is also 'incontestably more emotionally, logically, and theologically satisfying'.¹¹ He is capable of acknowledging weaknesses in his own positions and strengths elsewhere. That said, the notion of indecision or of actual difficulty in weighing Lutheran and Reformed positions goes above and beyond the claim that Barth actually makes on these two occasions. Though he occasionally acknowledges strengths in the Lutheran position, he plainly, pointedly, and persistently praises the Reformed approach as its alternative at just this point, namely, regarding its ethical impulse.

What are the causes of Barth's judgment of the Reformed position?

Barth reads the confessional writings after having already wrestled with Calvin and Zwingli. His claim is not merely that these figures and those texts have a centred concern regarding the connection of spirituality and human renewal, but that this centring has marked the Reformed tradition from its inception.

The validity of this claim can be shown by examining writings from seminal reformers from the inaugural year of the Reformed movement, exactly 400 years before Barth's lecturing on the confessions. In 1523 Zwingli's Zurich would issue the 67 Articles of Faith,¹² and Zwingli would also pen a treatise 'on the upbringing and education of youth'. The full title pertains to their training 'in good manner and Christian discipline', which serves as a capstone in the outlined programme. Zwingli envisions a threefold course of study, pertaining to the things of God, the things of oneself, and conduct toward others. Not only does he wrap up by tending to love of neighbour, but he begins as early as the instruction regarding things of God to highlight the way in which that foundational course of study implicitly and necessarily forms the frame of the later ethical material. 'Confidence in Christ does not make us idle. On the contrary it equips and constrains us to do good and to live rightly, for such confidence is not of man.'¹³ When he turns finally to part three and the ethical topics, he not only follows theology with ethics but also again shows their enmeshed character. The ethical duty to neighbour is shaped by the christological claim that 'we are not born to live to ourselves, but to become all things to all men', which is drawn out of the incarnational and soteriological model of Christ's death and resurrection, a narrative to which we are united.¹⁴

We might also, secondly, consider another reformer writing in 1523. Martin Bucer has just begun ministry in Strasburg and was asked to attest his *bona fides*. He pens his first treatise, the *Instruction in Christian Love*. It consists of two parts. First, 'everyone

¹⁰Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, p. 90.

¹¹Barth, 'Doctrinal Task of the Reformed Churches', p. 269.

¹²Huldrych Zwingli, *Selected Works of Huldrych Zwingli* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, 1901), p. 78.

¹³Ulrich Zwingli, 'Of the Upbringing and Education of Youth in Good Manners and Christian Discipline: An Admonition by Ulrich Zwingli', in G. W. Bromiley (ed.), *Zwingli and Bullinger* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1953), p. 107.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 113.

should not live for himself but for others', sounding the same note that Zwingli highlighted in part three of his treatise on education. Second, Bucer turns to 'how man may attain the ideal of living not for himself but for others', wherein the christological union and the matrix of divine grace again serve to frame out this distinctly theological ethic. Interestingly, Zwingli had also made this same point. In his concluding exhortation, he had said that 'the young man ought to fix his whole attention upon the fullest possible absorbing of Christ himself'.¹⁵ As for Bucer, his call to living in service for others flows also from a theological source, for 'only faith can bring and impart such a life to us' and 'restoration will reach each man according to his degree of receptivity and responsiveness'.¹⁶ As this brief sketch shows, in early writings in both Zurich and Strasburg, ethical interests were also integral to the Reformed theological programme, such that Barth's claims about its foregrounding of ethical concerns finds strong textual warrant.

What seems to account for his negative judgment of Lutheranism?

Barth had encountered many Lutherans. His studies had placed him in lecture halls and classrooms with Adolf von Harnack and Wilhelm Herrmann, neither of whom, having been formed in the school of Albrecht Ritschl convey an ethical-less Lutheranism. There are places – such as his address 'Jesus Christ and the Social Movement' – where Barth himself had contrasted the German Lutherans with Swiss Reformed over political and social reflection.¹⁷ Indeed, if anything, the Lutherans convey much more of a reduction to the ethical where it is centred and, too often, insufficiently rooted in a theological system. Eventually, Barth reacted to that *Kulturprotestantismus* when he observed its support for Kaiser Wilhelm's war programme. For all his invective, however, he had not yet taken to suggesting that Lutheranism is itself non-ethical or less ethical than Reformed theology.

His appointment as Honorary Professor of Reformed Doctrine at the University of Göttingen is crucial here. First, it is at this point that Barth's self-conception as a Reformed theologian comes into its own. Whereas his appointment was prompted by his commentary on Romans, he finds that he has to catch up for an astonishing lack of familiarity with his own Reformed tradition. Second, he is the lone Reformed voice amongst a land and faculty of Lutherans, so the pressure to be competent and to convey the unique value of Reformed theology is high. Third, Barth's busy attempt to get up to speed involves comparison – repeatedly in his correspondence – with another new professor, Emanuel Hirsch, who had returned to the university to take up a position as full professor of church history (having previously taught in the seminary a few years prior). The Lutheran Hirsch studied with Karl Holl and came far better equipped than Barth for his role in Göttingen. It is regularly noted how Hirsch served as a comparison point (we might say as a speedometer) for Barth's sense of how hard and fast a theologian must work – his letters to Thurneysen from this period regularly evince awe and wonder at his craft.¹⁸ I would suggest that Hirsch also served

¹⁵Ibid., p. 117.

¹⁶Martin Bucer, *Instruction in Christian Love*, ed. Paul T. Fuhrmann (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1952), p. 42.

¹⁷See Karl Barth, 'Jesus Christus und die Soziale Bewegung', in Karl Barth (ed.), *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1909–1914* (Zurich: TVZ, 1993), p. 405.

¹⁸See Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 295–6 for citations from and analysis of this element in his correspondence with Thurneysen. The relevant letters appear as early as December 11, 1921 and

as a compass, not so much for Barth's own theological direction as for his mapping of the Lutheran terrain in which he was serving as a double alien: a Swiss and a Reformed professor. It is during this time that, apart from any signs of formal study of Lutheranism in great detail and well beyond anything previously articulated, Barth happened to develop this comparative method of articulating the supremacy of Reformed over Lutheran theological ethics.

It was the burgeoning Luther Renaissance, which tended to treat the law-gospel distinction as a discrimen, or a principle that served as a methodological foundation for theological reflection. Hirsch's teacher Holl was the leading voice in this movement, and Hirsch himself already saw his own work as extending the research of Holl, as evidenced in a May 1917 letter to Adolf Schlatter.¹⁹ Whilst Göttingen was an overwhelmingly majority Lutheran school, Hirsch's voice was especially privileged in Barth's experience.²⁰ They both took part in a biweekly faculty discussion group together in those years, even as Lutheran colleagues otherwise often stood rather starkly against Barth's involvement in faculty business (as evidenced in their restricting his capacity to teach a course in Christian dogmatics unless it was specifically denoted as introducing Reformed dogmatics). When Barth's long-held belief that Lutheranism was far more homogeneously tied to its confessions is factored in alongside his reliance upon Hirsch as representative of the Lutheran position, a strong foil emerges. The cruciality of the distinction of law and gospel is a point to which Barth not only agrees, but also just as emphatically adds a second principle as a specifically Reformed emphasis: namely, that gospel leads invariably to law, too. Michael Beintker has shown that Barth's concern to order gospel to law was operative already in 1923.²¹ This gospel-law ordering constituted Barth's positive (Reformed) dogmatic correlate to his polemical judgment against Lutheranism and was likely the product of the need to define a specific Reformed identity within the heavily Lutheran environment of Göttingen.

What we can only speculate about is whether or not Barth was also influenced by Hirsch's political stands to make such a judgment about Lutheranism as a whole. It is plain that Hirsch was one of those in Göttingen whom Barth felt fostered a politically counterproductive environment. It is also evident from letters that Hirsch already intended his theological and historical research on Luther to have political consequence. Barth may not only have taken on Hirsch's description of Lutheranism, but also identified it himself as the source of Hirsch's focus upon the German *Volk*. Whether this was the case or not, Barth's negative read of Lutheranism plainly has much to do with Hirsch and the recent Luther Renaissance, particularly its recentring of justification and the forensic as the centre of Christianity. Barth's claims about Lutheran disinterest in or, better put, its decentring of ethical concerns thus seems to say far more about his own efforts at self-fashioning and his engagement of the Luther Renaissance in and through his colleague, Emanuel Hirsch, than it does about

run through the following year. See also Robert P. Erickson, *Theologians under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus, and Emanuel Hirsch* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).

¹⁹Jens Holger Schjorring, *Theologische Gewissensethik und politische Wirklichkeit: das Beispiel Eduard Geismars und Emanuel Hirschs* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1979). Cf. Erickson, *Theologians under Hitler*, p. 121, n. 2.

²⁰See Walter Buff, 'Karl Barth and Emanuel Hirsch: Anmerkungen zu einem Briefwechsel', in Hans Martin Müller (ed.), *Christliche Wahrheit und neuzeitliches Denken: Zu Emanuel Hirschs Leben und Werk* (Tübingen: Katzmann Verlag, 1984), pp. 15–26.

²¹Michael Beintker, 'Krisis und Gnade: Zur theologischen Deutung der Dialektik beim frühen Barth', *Evangelische Theologie* 46 (1986), p. 452.

Luther himself or Lutheranism more broadly. Without reducing every facet of his interpretation to secondary sources or to his colleague's influence, Barth's emerging views are plainly marked as much by the twentieth-century Lutheran reality as by the sixteenth-century Lutheran textual witness.

It might have been otherwise. Barth could have wrestled with Luther's *Treatise on Good Works*.²² Therein he would have found obedience to the Decalogue centred within the reformers' sketch of the Christian life. Further, he would have seen that this was written in the same year as his three great treatises on reform: *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, *Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German People*, and *The Freedom of the Christian*. It was also penned prior to the outbreak of the Peasants' Revolt. This was not a later Luther, turned conservative or bitter owing to revolutionary excess. This text represents his nascent Protestant thought, clearly demonstrating its ethical concern. And its ethical impulse is further confirmed if one reads across the totality of his much more well-known treatise on *The Freedom of the Christian*.²³ Yes, the Christian is 'perfectly free', but that is for the sake of being a 'servant of all', bound to love of neighbour. The rhetoric of *Freedom of the Christian* lacks the exegetical texture of the *Treatise on Good Works*, which focuses systematically on the Decalogue, but its theological and ethical impulses cohere and confirm that set of ethical commitments, which, again, are present even his most feisty of phases and not merely in his later years after he has done battled with waves of antinomian challenge. Unfortunately, it plays no discernible role in Barth's conception, which seems to suffer the bondage of the denominational polemics and bear the ill effects of the late modern captivity of the Lutheran historiography.

What do we make of the complexities in Barth's articulation of Reformed theology's place alongside Lutheranism?

A comparison may help to answer this last question. As already noted, in recent years Barth's approach to Catholicism has been brought into greater focus. Barth is particularly well known for his outsized statements about the *analogia entis*, the purported 'invention of Antichrist'.²⁴ Keith Johnson and others have examined Barth's *analogia fidei* and sought to compare and contrast it to classic Thomist accounts of the *analogia entis*.²⁵ In so doing, Johnson has shown that while Barth's invective may not strike Thomas squarely, it does make all the sense in the world when you compare Barth's thought to that of his contemporaries, Erik Peterson and Eric Przywara.²⁶ If one considers their definitions of the *analogia entis*, then Barth's reaction no longer seems a misperceived overreaction in quite the same way. I hope to have suggested that Barth's approach to the superiority of Reformed over against Lutheran theology with respect to its ethical bent can be understood in similar terms; that is, Barth's claims for such superiority may make little sense if one looks at Luther's writings from the

²²Martin Luther, *Treatise on Good Works*, in vol. 44 of *Luther's Works* [hereafter LW], American edn., eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1966), pp. 15–114.

²³Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, in LW 34, pp. 327–78.

²⁴Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), p. xiii.

²⁵Keith L. Johnson, *Karl Barth and the Analogia Entis* (New York: T & T Clark, 2010), p. 70.

²⁶Eric Peterson, *Theological Tractates*, ed. Michael J. Hollerich (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011); Erich Przywara, *Analogia Entis: Metaphysics, Original Structure and Universal Rhythm*, eds. John R. Bentz and David Bentley Hart (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2014).

1520s, but makes considerably more sense if one considers the more proximate context within which Barth was writing. In this case Barth reacts to the so-called Lutheran renaissance as mediated by colleagues such as Hirsch.

By way of conclusion, Barth himself may have hinted at this reality in a brief, seemingly throwaway comment. In his 1923 *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, in the process of summarising Zwingli's contribution to the positive doctrine of Christianity that ought to be proclaimed, he returned to his claim Zwingli's was an attempt to ground ethics upon grace rather than law. Instead of a Lutheran focus on faith, Barth maintained, Zwingli turned to Romans 6, on dying and rising with Christ and becoming a slave to righteousness. It is here that Barth offers a judgment not found elsewhere: 'It is more than likely that this attempt moves in the direction of the most original motives in Luther's theology (K. Holl), and to that extent Reformed theology is nothing other than the strong development of a Lutheran line that later faded.'²⁷ Barth cites essays of Holl's from 1921 and 1922 here, and he gestures at the reality that the later Lutheranism doesn't match that tradition's earliest roots – which are far more like the development of Reformed theology's ethical impulse.

There was a time when Barth's theology was perceived as lacking ethical force. Nigel Biggar could say in 1993 that the 'English-speaking world has not been generous with the attention it has paid to the ethical thought of Karl Barth.'²⁸ Shortly thereafter things changed, not only owing to Biggar's work but also to that of John Webster, David Clough, Paul Nimmo, and others. Now we realise that Barth's approach to ethics is distinctive and even iconoclastic at certain points, to be sure, but well developed and systematically in play. Perhaps this engagement with his comparative comments regarding Reformed theological ethics and their relationship to Lutheranism will likewise enable us to hear him (especially his more blunt, hyperbolic contrasts) with further nuance. Perhaps we, too – even the Reformed amongst us, and even this side of the German church's failures – can be more generous with the attention we give to the early Lutheran theological ethics, rather than perceiving it through the lenses of the later Luther Renaissance or, worse, through the cultural failings of the Lutheran state church in the early twentieth century.

²⁷Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, p. 87.

²⁸Nigel Biggar, *The Hastening that Waits: Karl Barth's Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 1.

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