

The Influence of Karl Barth in the Making of a New  
North American Evangelicalism

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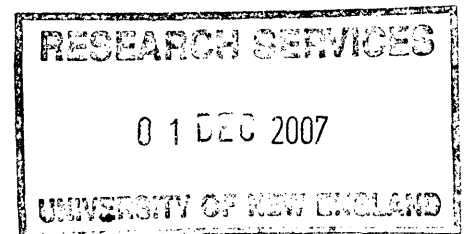
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I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already  
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I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis,  
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In this thesis I seek to address a number of issues that help describe the theological approach of a group of evangelicals who were influenced by Karl Barth. This group is referred to as the ‘new evangelicals’. I will uncover why these theologians sought for Barth’s *influence* in the approach of their theologies, examine the nature of these influences, the way in which Barth was used as a *source* in their writings, the *motifs* that resulted, the theological *agendas* they pursued, and the *common agenda* they shared. In the conclusion I will draw together my observations in a list of comparisons that will present my argument that the new evangelicals, having been influenced by Barth, constitute a distinct theological sub-group within North American evangelicalism.

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## Preface

Theological approach is a component of all theological systems, whether they are Roman Catholic, Anglican, Protestant, conservative, or liberal. Each has its own particular characteristics. Evangelical approaches to theology are particularly influenced by the theology of the Reformation, and those subsequent movements that have carried its heritage. The emphasis is on the exegesis of particular texts, and the use of historical sources that stand in the Reformation tradition. Usually, philosophical constructs are avoided in preference to what is regarded to be ‘a straight reading of the text.’ This view has often led to simplistic theological outcomes, that appear to be unaware of the actual influences and sources that have contributed to the construction of their discourses. In the past few years there have been a small number of attempts to address this issue. However, a number of theologians have agreed that there remains a scarcity of work dedicated to this important area. This thesis seeks to address this concern.

The aim of this thesis is to produce a study of the effect that the influence of Karl Barth has had in the theological structures of new evangelicals. While previous works have done well in describing Barth’s influence in various theologies, none have made a comprehensive *study* of their works. This thesis, therefore, is chiefly concerned with an investigation of those theologians who made an appreciative response to Barth. The *form* the analysis of this thesis takes is also new. Never before has Barth’s influence in North American evangelicalism been studied in terms of *how* Barth came to be an *influence* in the theologian’s thinking, before discussing the results of this influence.

The approach taken by this thesis will be in considering: (1) the *influences* that have come to bear on these theologians, which subsequently led to Barth becoming a *source* in their theologies; (2) the *motifs* that emerged as a result of the influence of Barth; (3) the theological *agendas* which arose; and (4) the *common agenda* they all shared.

## *Style*

This thesis follows the 'Style Guide' of the University of New England and their footnoting system has been used throughout. As the 'Style Guide' has stipulated personal communication has been noted in the footnotes but not in the bibliography. Capitalization has also been minimized. The terms 'evangelical', 'fundamentalist', and 'liberal', together with their variants, have all been written in small case, since this is the style used by the majority of literature quoted in this thesis.

## *Published articles*

Review of D. Bloesch, 'The Church: Sacraments, Worship, Ministry, Mission', Illinois, InterVarsity, 2002, in *Reformation and Revival*, Vol. 12, No. 2, Spring, 2003, pp 163-167

'The Influence of Karl Barth on the Theology of Geoffrey Bromiley', in *Colloquium*, 35/2, 2003, pp. 131-147.

'Ephesians 1:3-14. Doing Theology Through The Gates of Heaven', in *Evangelical Review of Theology*, Vol. 28, No. 4, Oct, 2004, pp 363-368.

'The Formative Influence of Karl Barth in the Theology of Ray Anderson', in *Colloquium*, 37/1, 2005, pp. 27-44.

'Farewell Gerasenes: A Bible Study on Mark 5:1-20', *Evangelical Review of Theology*, 30:3, July, 2006, pp 264-270.

Review of K. A. Richardson, 'Reading Karl Barth: New Directions for North American Theology', Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2004, in *Evangelical Review of Theology*, July, 2006, 30:3, pp 272-273.

## Statement of the Method

The study of theological approaches is an important undertaking since every theologian has an approach, whether consciously or unconsciously, that determines the final shape of his or her theological concepts. As Clark Pinnock has put it theologians are like cooks, they use ingredients in a certain manner, follow procedures, appeal to sources, place them in order and weigh their importance.<sup>1</sup> However, theology can no longer be said to amount to the rightful ordering of knowledge. In recent times there has occurred a necessity for theologians, as indeed for all social scientists, to reflect more upon the methods they employ in the pursuit of their discipline. Indeed, there has been a shift in thinking from modernism to postmodernism that has resulted in the need for theologians to approach theology differently.

What was known as modernism followed a rationally based approach that usually culminated in a series of objective propositional statements. The postmodernist approach, however, is more attuned to the reality that many of our assertions are subjective and that, consequently, experience and narrative are preferred contexts in which theology is to be understood and written.<sup>2</sup> It is for these reasons postmodernism has been a significant influence among some feminist theologians, who often write explicitly out of their personal experience. Suzanne Paul contends that postmodernism has offered feminism ‘some useful ideas about method’ since it recognises that ‘objectivity and reason have reflected the values of masculinity at a particular point in history’. Lisa Isherwood and Dorothea McEwan concurred that experience is central to theology. Indeed, they contended that how ‘we experience our reality must dictate how we make our theology’.<sup>3</sup> It is not

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<sup>1</sup> C. Pinnock, ‘New Directions in Theological Method’, in D.S. Dockery, ed. *New Dimensions in Evangelical Thought*, InterVarsity Press, 1998, p. 197.

<sup>2</sup> See S.J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, Eerdmans, Michigan, 1995; S. Hicks, *Explaining Postmodernism: Scepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault*, Scholargy Publishing, Arizona, 2004; M.B. Penner, *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views*, Brazos Press, Grand Rapids, 2005; D. Shepherd and K. Arisian, (eds) *Humanism and Postmodernism: Essays from the Humanist Institute*, KIMM Printing, Minneapolis, 1994; G. Ward, (ed) *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> L. Isherwood, D. McEwan, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, 2001, p. 83.

surprising therefore, that many feminists have come to view postmodernism as an ally.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, we believe that lessons are to be learnt from their leadership as postmodernism establishes itself among the various contenders to be taken seriously as a world view.

Because of the experiential nature of postmodernism this thesis will examine the biography of the theologian as the key to unlocking the meaning of his or her writings, and a valuable tool for a thorough investigation of their work. This thesis will focus on the biography of Karl Barth and how this relates to his theological writings. Attention will then be turned on a group of North American theologians and analyse how Barth's theology has influenced their personal experiences and corresponding theologies. Biography fits well into our current intellectual climate for a number of important reasons.

The personal experience of the theologian provides the background to the theological judgements she or he makes, and therefore provides valuable insight into what they have written. John Macquarrie, Emeritus Professor of Divinity in the University of Oxford, gave sound direction when he pointed out that 'some experience of the life of faith precedes theology and may indeed be said to motivate it.'<sup>5</sup> This 'life of faith' constitutes a formative context from which theology is written. It determines the reason that the theology stands as it does, with its particular motifs, approach and issues that are explored and discussed. Experiences in the theologian's life determine how he or she forms and communicates the ideas that the experiences have given rise to. Just as a grieving parent may write on the dynamics of grief from his or her own experiences and therefore connect dynamically and profoundly with the reader, so do theologians profoundly connect with readers as they write theology as an expression of their experiences of faith. It is this process that this thesis seeks to study and analyse.

Theological communities also encounter formative experiences that guide, direct, form, and define their characteristics, shared beliefs and common sense of identity and vision. In the context of postmodernism the emerging theologies of

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<sup>4</sup> S. Paul, 'Feminism/Postmodernism', *Humanism and Postmodernism*, KIMM Printing, Minneapolis, 1994, pp. 105-110; Also see, R. Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God*, Crossroad Publishing, 1991; M. Confroy, and D.A. Lee, (eds) *Freedom and Entrapment: Women Thinking Theology*, Dove, Publication, North Blackburn, 1995; D. Elam, *Romancing the Postmodern*, Routledge, Lond., 1992; L. Nicholson, *Feminism/Postmodernism (Thinking Gender)*, Routledge, Lond., 1990.

<sup>5</sup> J. Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, SCM Press, London, 1966, p. 5.



these individuals and communities are to be seen as transient and conditional on one's environment, instead of stagnant, subservient to reason alone, and unconcerned with its human origins. Indeed, a biographical approach considers the subjective nature of knowledge and belief. One must also note the postmodern emphasis on the journey to understanding as being the key to one's personal truth, as distinct from modernism's belief in a final and definitive objective truth. Therefore this thesis contends that there is a necessary connection that is to be made between the theologian as a person and the theology that emerges out of her or his unique biographies. Indeed, it will be argued that theology is born out of the lived encounters of the theologian that develop into the kind of personal convictions, passions, concerns, questions and a motivation to connect with others, that is evident in their writings. Consequently, theology and theologian are inseparable. Indeed, theology is written in the context of a church tradition that upholds certain assumptions, a society that has a unique culture, and a faith community that perpetuates norms and traditions. Added to all this is the separate family environments that contain their own unique histories, personalities, thoughts and beliefs. Therefore an approach to reading theology in the context of the author and the particular influences that shaped her or his thinking is both reasonable and necessary. We will seek to uncover the precise nature of these experiences and show how these contributed to the theology produced. Indeed, our new contextual world-view would have us comprehend theology as a subjective expression of the religious self. As Macquarrie points out, 'the personal quality of such expressions vary widely' and amount to what has been called the 'varieties of religious experience.'<sup>6</sup> Dermot Lane wisely adds to this argument by asserting that we 'do not come into the world with a ready-made self. Rather we enter life with a capacity to become which is shaped by our experiences of reality... especially the reality of the human community composed of other selves.'<sup>7</sup>

Previously the study of a theologian's work was carried out within the terms of a single philosophical paradigm; seen in Donald Bloesch's description of his own

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> D. Lane, 'Experience, God and Theology', in *The Experience of God: an invitation to do theology*, Veritas Publications, Dublin, 1981, p. 10.

theology as ‘Fideistic Revelationism’.<sup>8</sup> Such a method, however, appears to the postmodernist mind as being far too prescriptive and inflexible. A single approach based on a philosophical theory can only serve to compress a body of work into a tight conceptual framework that distorts its true meaning. However, theology that is read in the context of the biography of the author, and that takes account of factors such as personalities, experiences, sources, motifs and agendas, will deliver richer insights and appear, to the post-modern mind, to have greater depth as it rightly presents a theology as an expression of the life the author. Indeed, it changes as people and societies do by taking on new forms in response to changing circumstances. This is a subject that has attracted few investigations. In addition to the examples found among many Feminists there are three works that point in this new direction; those being James McClendon’s groundbreaking work: *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today’s Theology*<sup>9</sup>, Bernhard Lohse’s, *Martin Luther’s Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*<sup>10</sup> and Scott Hendrix’s essay, ‘Luther’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology*.<sup>11</sup>

McClendon made deliberate and penetrating connections between the theology of Martin Luther King and his biography. The author pointed to ‘King’s boyhood, his upbringing in which church and home were virtually indistinguishable, his calling to the ministry and his decision for graduate studies in theology, his choice of the Black Baptist church in the South and his enduring commitment to that church after fame had opened other options.’<sup>12</sup> These influences, some determined by the circumstances of birth and others according to personal choice, formed the context in which King’s theology developed and took shape. These formative influences found in his biography also gave rise to his approach to political activism that followed after the pattern of his Black Southern church meetings, with their ‘revivalist and Spirit-filled’ fervour and passionate illusions to biblical imagery of freedom and liberation. Furthermore King, in his famous ‘I have a dream’ speech,

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<sup>8</sup> S. Grenz, ‘Fideistic Revelationism’ in E.M Colyer, (ed) *Evangelical Theology in Transition*, InterVarsity Press, Illinois, 1999, p. 35.

<sup>9</sup> J. McClendon, *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today’s Theology*, Trinity Press Philadelphia, 1990.

<sup>10</sup> B. Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, R.A. Harrisville (trans), Tandt Clark, Edinborough, 1999.

<sup>11</sup> S. Hendrix, ‘Luther’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology*, (eds) D. Bagchi and D. Steimetz, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, pp 39-56.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p. 55.

rallied the consciousness of a nation in a declaration that was primarily influenced by his Black Southern religion. McClendon concluded that it was the influence of numerous sermons, camp meetings, prayer groups and Scripture readings that shaped King's approach, language and agenda. This is clearly seen as King drew upon the language of the prophet Isaiah for the imagery of 'freedom from every hill', and the lines of the old Negro spiritual, 'free at last', to advocate for civil liberties. From McClendon's work one can rightly assert that King's beliefs were a product of the influences that shaped him as a person and became a valuable storehouse of sources that served his motifs of liberation and freedom, together with his agenda to bring justice via civil rights to the forefront of the American psyche. Indeed, McClendon believed that it 'would require a high order of cynicism to suppose that the man who so eloquently spoke and so profoundly moved his hearers was not speaking from the depth wells of his own being, was not then truly declaring his own dream, his own faith.'<sup>13</sup>

Bernhard Lohse has also significantly contributed to this discussion in his review of Luther's biography and its contribution to the study of his theological development. In a chapter entitled 'Luther's Personal Development' Lohse discussed the guiding influences in Luther's life that shaped him into the person and theologian he became. Lohse pointed to Luther's parental home, particularly the influence of his father, his student years, where he became indebted to 'the philosophical orientation of the School of Arts in late medieval Occamism',<sup>14</sup> his crisis in a storm during which he vowed to enter monastic life, and his challenges in the cloister. It was the influence of Occamism, Lohse contended, that intensified Luther's inner conflict and produced his search for a gracious God, and which ultimately led to his personal crisis.<sup>15</sup> Without these influences Luther would not have become the man he was, and the theological revolutionary who changed world history.

Scott Hendrix adds to this discussion by providing a detailed outline of the dominant influences in Martin Luther's early life that contributed to the formation of his theology. Hendrix made the important link between biography and theology as he observed that 'Luther was subject to a number of influences, which can be

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<sup>13</sup> op.cit, McClendon., p. 58.

<sup>14</sup> op. cit, Lohse, p. 32.

<sup>15</sup> ibid., p 33.

identified in his writings.<sup>16</sup> In developing this theme Hendrix cites Luther's personal reflections on his experiences and how these contributed to the pursuit of his theological writings. In addition to the influence of personal experience Hendrix also noted Luther's acknowledgement of literary influences, evident in his early work. Importantly, Hendrix noted Luther's reference to the influence of Augustine of Hippo (354-430), who became a significant source in Luther's writings, particularly in his lectures on the Book of Romans (1515-16).<sup>17</sup>

This thesis builds on the examples of some sections within Feminism and the work of McClendon, Lohse and Hendrix, by discussing the biographies of theologians who were ultimately influenced by a single source that predominated over a variety of other sources, and guided them in the writing of their works. The connection between influence and source will be an important part of our study. By analysing the theologian's writings links are to be made between the sources used and the influences in their lives that led to these sources being utilized in the way that they were. That is, if Barth is seen to be a significant source in a particular theological work the question must be asked as to the reason for its presence. As the author's biography is studied connections will be made between influences in life and the presence of the source in the extract under investigation. We will seek to uncover how Barth came to be such an important influence by identifying key moments in their lives. This will be determined by linking the author's biography with a study of the author's writings about Barth as a theologian of importance, studying their incorporation of Barth as a significant reference in their works, and identifying Barthian theological motifs they pursued. We will seek to discover what exactly took place when the influence of a single source was incorporated into the body of a distinct theological tradition. That is, we will seek to determine what kind of theology was produced when Barth's theology influenced North American evangelicalism. Therefore this thesis will seek to uncover what theological themes were explored as a result of Barth's influence and how the great Swiss scholar was used as a source to expound these themes. We contend that the study of theological approach from this perspective will promote a better understanding of how theology is written and will therefore enhance the significance of future contributions.

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<sup>16</sup> Hendrix, p. 41.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

In the writings of Donald Bloesch, for example, one can draw distinct lines of connection between his biography and the theology he produced. The process that will clearly define these connections is two-fold. Firstly, it will involve a detailed analysis of his work that will use his biography as the key that unlocks the connection between his writings and formative influences in his life. Secondly, comparisons will be made between Bloesch's theology and Barth's life and work. The approach used to analyse the connections between Bloesch, Barth and biography, will involve an *identification* of those aspects of Bloesch's theology that display indebtedness to Barth. Indebtedness will be identified by Bloesch's personal reflections, his positive references to Barth's work, and themes that bear his distinct influence. Also, a *discussion* of these theological extracts will determine the nature and extent of Barth's influence. Other influences in Bloesch's biography will need to be weighed up with the influence of Barth in order to determine the extent nature of the influence that was made. Therefore this thesis will seek to determine the context in which Bloesch interpreted Barth's theology and will analyse the kind of theology that ensued. These discussions will then follow a process of *assessment*. That is, we will seek to ask why Barth's influence has given meaning to Bloesch's theology, in what manner he has appealed to Barth, and how this has contributed to his theological arguments.

Throughout it will become evident that theology can be studied carefully, precisely and accurately from this new perspective. Indeed, the approach undertaken here is intended to provide helpful guidance to others seeking to understand the works of theologians and will thereby contribute to more thoughtful, honest and introspective work in the future. The implications for the future study of theological approaches among evangelicals in North America are significant. As the rationalism of the modernist era fades in significance, and dominant new thought patterns of the post-modern age create a new environment with its own set of assumptions, models for future work will need to be established, defined and promoted if moderate evangelicalism is to avoid the designation: 'relic of the past.' Indeed, the emergence of a new evangelicalism indebted to Barth may well be seen to be a survival mechanism that allows this theological culture to re-cast itself so as to find its place in the new order. While the older modernist mind set was dominated by the need for reasoned propositions the post-modern mind seeks to engage with narratives and

explore the experiences that unfold within them. This thesis, therefore, intends not only to contribute to the study of theological approaches but also to provide an example for future theological work as writers explore the self and determine the path that has led to their current convictions. As the general theological community reflects on its own biographies, in the manner that some feminist theologians often do as a matter of course, they will gain a sharpened perception of the influences in their lives that have stimulated the motifs they write about and agendas they pursue. These insights will result in theology more attuned to its own reason to exist, more open to future changes, more sensitive to the changes in society and more able to connect profoundly with readers as they gain insight and connection with the author. Indeed, biographies will increasingly become the context in which theology is both understood and written.