

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Swimming against the theological and pedagogical stream: Lessons from Karl Barth on teaching within the theological disciplines

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Abstract

Karl Barth's deeply rooted theological convictions directly shaped his pedagogical practice. These convictions continue to merit reflection today. Barth's theological pedagogy is dedicated to his convictions pertaining to: 1) the particularity of theology's subject matter; 2) the necessary embodiment of theology's practice in an ecclesial and confessional tradition; 3) an open and charitable reading of the church's past; and 4) a principled rejection of ideology. These four convictions are explored in this essay with an eye to their relevance and importance for the teaching of theology and contemporary challenges. The essay concludes with a brief account of the dispositions that should accompany these convictions.

Keywords: Karl Barth; ideology; pedagogy; teaching theology; theological encyclopedia; theology

One hundred years ago, Karl Barth began his teaching career in theology. Having served for a short time as an associate pastor in Geneva and for a decade as a pastor in the small village of Safenwil in Switzerland, in 1921 he accepted an invitation to become a professor of Reformed theology at the University of Göttingen in Germany. For a number of reasons he was at a distinct disadvantage in comparison to other academic appointees as he took up and occupied this new post.

First, he became a professor while possessing no earned doctorate (something almost unheard of in German academic practice, and a source of some condescension by a few faculty colleagues, accompanied by both veiled and open dismissiveness for his identity as a Swiss rather than a German). Second, he had been in the pastorate and involved in trade union activities for a decade and was in no way at the centre of academic life, though his writings and lectures, such as his famous Tambach lecture of 1919 and the Romans commentary of the same year, had attracted shared theological partisanship among a small cadre of young pastors and theologians on one side, and the wariness of the old theological guard, such as his former teacher Adolf von Harnack, on the other. Third, he was taking a chair in Reformed theology within what was a distinctly Lutheran faculty, and this in a predominantly Lutheran region. As the holder of a chair in Reformed theology that was created more by donor wishes than faculty support, there was in truth little interest among the other faculty about his standing within the

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department, except insofar as they forbade him to teach dogmatics. That honour was reserved for the resident Lutheran theologians – and there was a bit of consternation about his well-attended exegetical lectures, sometimes derisively dismissed as his *Bibelstunden* (Bible study meetings).¹

Yet in spite of such disadvantages and challenges, Barth thrived as a teacher. His lectures and seminar courses were well attended and appreciated at each of his succeeding academic appointments – at Göttingen (1921–5), Münster (1925–30), Bonn (1930–4) and finally in Basel upon his return to Switzerland, a story unto itself. Some students even followed him from one university to the next when his teaching appointments changed.²

It would be easy to attribute this success as a teacher to Barth's inimitable talent – he became, by almost any account, one of the most accomplished and famous theologians of the twentieth century. Yet it would be unfortunate to dismiss him as an exemplar for this reason. First, such dismissal would fail to appreciate that his success as a teacher was not simply due to innate gifts but to the tenacity and energy with which he approached his teaching responsibilities from the start. As he described the beginning of his teaching career: 'Now I was happily resolved to get down to theological research and teaching – in grim earnest, in my own way and in my own style.'³ This took tremendous dedication, attention and effort: 'I was studying night and day, going to and fro with books old and new until I had at least some skill in mounting the academic donkey (I could hardly call it a horse) and riding it to the university.' As he further explained, 'More than once, the lecture which I gave at seven o'clock in the morning had only been finished between three and five.'⁴ Barth's accomplishment was the product of very difficult preparatory work and not only a unique native intelligence.

The second and more significant reason that Barth should not be dismissed as an exemplar for teaching is that, regardless of his successes or failures in the classroom and the strengths or weaknesses of his teaching practices, he had distinct convictions about theology and teaching that are worthy of continued consideration and reflection. These convictions were more important than Barth's actual methods as a teacher, for his classroom pedagogy should not be romanticised. While he was a beloved teacher marked by many strengths, he did have weaknesses, witnessed in the fact that he frequently struggled with the pacing of a course, either failing to cover much of the material planned for inclusion or giving it but a cursory overview.⁵ In this essay I will focus not on his actual practices but the more important underlying convictions that

¹On 18 November 1921, during his first semester of teaching in Göttingen, Barth wrote to his friend Eduard Thurneysen that he had 'some fifty to sixty students' in his Ephesians lecture course and fifteen in his lectures on the Heidelberg Catechism, numbers he found respectable in comparison to his colleague Emanuel Hirsch and in a theological student body of 180, of whom only ten were Reformed. See Karl Barth, *Karl Barth–Eduard Thurneysen Briefwechsel*, vol. 2, 1921–1930, ed. Eduard Thurneysen (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1974), p. 11; ET: *Revolutionary Theology in the Making: Barth–Thurneysen Correspondence, 1915–1925*, trans. James D. Smart (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1964), p. 77.

²See Christiane Tietz, *Karl Barth: A Life in Conflict*, trans. Victoria J. Barnett (Oxford: OUP, 2021), pp. 159, 270. Tietz notes that in Münster 'Barth's lectures and seminars met with lively interest, although only in Bonn would it come to overfilled events' (p. 160; cf. p. 199).

³Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), p. 127.

⁴*Ibid.*; see also Tietz, *Karl Barth*, pp. 104, 158–9.

⁵Tietz, *Karl Barth*, pp. 103, 162. Such difficulties in pacing are evident, for example, in a number of his earliest courses, such as that on Calvin (1922) and that on the Reformed confessions (1923).

informed his overarching approach to teaching theology, even if they can only be discussed briefly due to restrictions of space.

First and foremost, Barth was singularly dedicated to the *content* of theology rather than to the *methods* of its communication – the first, he averred, was what truly mattered; the second could be approached with both flexibility and innovation. Closer to Aristotle in this respect than the logical positivists of his own time, Barth held from the very beginning that what determined the integrity of a course of study was not a predetermined method but rather the subject itself under investigation; the subject in turn determined the method that must be taken in both its study and communication. Allegiance to a method must therefore give way to sustained and rapt attention to the subject matter. Even as a pastor Barth had been critical of the modern church's infatuation with methods rather than the content of preaching,⁶ so it is not surprising that the same held true when he was a professor. Such flexibility regarding method was evident in that he did not rigidly adhere to the standard scientific protocols of contemporary historical criticism of the day, and therefore while lecturing on New Testament books in his popular exegetical courses he asked questions of the text that did not treat its content and concerns simply as relics of the first century. Similarly, his courses on Reformed paragons such as Zwingli and Calvin treated them as harbingers of truth and fellow compatriots on a theological journey rather than as subjects of purely historical interest. Barth approached both scripture and the figures of the church's past as witnesses who pointed beyond themselves to the divine revelation and truth that confronted not only them but all who attended to their witness.⁷ In this, the proper response first to the biblical canon and in turn to the work of its interpreters was not simply intellectual discrimination but decision regarding the truth to which they pointed.⁸

In this regard, Barth never forgot that the ultimate subject matter of theology was, in Aquinas' terms, God and all things in relation to God, if with a distinct emphasis upon the distinction between the Creator and the creature that befitted his evangelical convictions, such that theology was concerned with the knowledge of God in Christ which illumined a knowledge of ourselves and all creation. To say today that the theological disciplines should be pedagogically oriented to the knowledge of God is both a seemingly banal truism and yet a revolutionary statement when theology is increasingly subsumed or translated into its attendant historical, sociological and ethnographic examinations. It is questionable if theology (whether in its traditional biblical, dogmatic or practical forms) can long survive if in the end it is reducible to historical and social scientific study without remainder.

Barth saw such inevitable dissolution of the theological disciplines in the trajectory of Ernst Troeltsch, whose status as the distinctive voice of what remained of theology in the history of religions school made his theological programme a particular foil over against which Barth developed his own. For Troeltsch, the scientific discipline of history and dogmatic theology were ultimately irreconcilable, and to his mind the mediating theology of Schleiermacher and of the later liberal tradition were doomed to failure.⁹

⁶Busch, *Karl Barth*, p. 124.

⁷Kimlyn J. Bender, *Reflections on Reformational Theology: Studies in the Theology of the Reformation, Karl Barth, and the Evangelical Tradition* (London: T&T Clark, 2022), pp. 55–75.

⁸See e.g. Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian Religion*, ed. Hannelotte Reiffen, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. V/1 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), p. 254.

⁹Troeltsch, in turn, sided with 'a fully free historical research that knows no specifically Christian pre-supposition' over attempts at harmonious mediation between history and dogmatics such as those of

Troeltsch lost confidence in dogmatics predicated on the Christian claim of the uniqueness of God's revelation in Christ and followed his conclusions to their logical vocational end, moving from a theology position in Heidelberg to a philosophical appointment in Berlin that he found liberating and more in accordance with his own convictions and understanding of theology as defined by philosophy of religion rather than confessional dogmatics.¹⁰ Watching all of this, Barth perceived in Troeltsch the end of dogmatic theology and a path he could not follow.¹¹ His starkly different convictions to those of Troeltsch shaped not only his theological but his pedagogical practice.

In contrast to the underlying principles of the history of religions school (which continue to be carried forth in the contemporary discipline of religious studies), Barth maintained that theological pedagogy was incoherent if there was no God who had been singularly revealed in Christ and singularly attested in holy scripture and the witness of the church. In short, the scandal and particularity of the gospel was, for Barth, constitutive and fundamental for theology as a discipline. Just how striking Barth could be in this regard at a time in which *Wissenschaft* ruled supreme and the relativity of historicism encroached upon all absolute claims of theological truth can be witnessed in a personal conversation he had with Heinrich Scholz. Scholz had firm opinions about what made a discipline scientific, and theology akin to that of Barth did not fare well according to Scholz's standards. It could be added that since the time of D. F. Strauss to be *wissenschaftlich*, or scientific, was predicated on the rejection of all that had the whiff of the miraculous and in turn the scandal of particularity.¹² This was the academic field on which the theological game of that day was played. Yet Barth was undaunted and simply rejected the narrow rules of the game, and he made this clear to Scholz in conversation. Academic theology, Barth asserted to Scholz, is predicated and grounded on the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Barth recounted Scholz's own response to this: 'He looked at me earnestly and said: "That goes against all the laws of physics, mathematics and chemistry, but now I understand what you mean."¹³

This incident illustrates that Barth never wavered in his conviction that theology was ultimately about God and God's revelation attested in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He was convinced that if theology lost *this* conviction, no pedagogical creativity was

Schleiermacher and Ritchel. See Ernst Troeltsch, 'Half a Century of Theology: A Review', in *Ernst Troeltsch: Writings on Theology and Religion*, trans. and ed. Robert Morgan and Michael Pye (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1990), p. 67; cf. p. 68.

¹⁰Troeltsch's move should not be simplistically interpreted as a move from theology to philosophy, but one that allowed the full embrace of a theological programme grounded in the philosophy of religion and therefore free from the constraints of dogmatic theology and of church politics. See Hans-George Drescher, *Ernst Troeltsch: His Life and Work*, trans. John Bowden (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993), pp. 126–7.

¹¹See e.g. Busch, *Karl Barth*, p. 50. One key difference can be illustrated succinctly in noting that, for Troeltsch, Christianity must be understood by placing it within 'the history of religions with reference to a philosophy of history'. See Ernst Troeltsch, *The Christian Faith*, ed. Gertrud von le Fort, trans. Garrett E. Paul (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1991), p. 9; cf. Bender, *Reformational Theology*, pp. 88–9, n. 20; p. 111, n. 64. Barth, in contrast, abandoned 'any attempt to integrate the specific truth claims of Christian theology into a general philosophical and historical framework'. See Johannes Zschhuber, *Theology as Science in Nineteenth-Century Germany: From F. C. Baur to Ernst Troeltsch* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), p. 292.

¹²Zschhuber, *Theology as Science*, esp. pp. 75–80.

¹³Busch, *Karl Barth*, p. 207; also Karl Barth, *Barth in Conversation*, vol. 3, 1964–1968, ed. Eberhard Busch, trans. Darrell L. Guder, Matthias Gockel, et al. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2019), p. 30.

going to save it. Should this central conviction become forfeit, then the elimination of theological departments by universities is not to be regretted but attributed to academic and thus pedagogic honesty. Barth presents us with a question of pedagogical integrity that has to precede all syllabus construction and course planning, to wit: if theologians no longer believe in the triune God that Christian theology confesses and the singular revelation of God in the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ, then the teaching of theology has itself lost its subject and should be abandoned. There is neither tragic nobility nor elite sophistication in the practice of a discipline for which its practitioners have lost faith in the subject matter. In contrast, Barth always taught his students as if there was a God who was present in the classroom and in such a way that teaching was an avenue of gratitude and obedience to that God. In short, Barth, in the words of John Webster, knew that we ‘can’t talk about God behind his back’.¹⁴ Correspondingly, he knew there is no use of talking as theologians at all in God’s absence. Thus for Barth the first act of the exercise of dogmatics and the teaching of theology was prayer, a practice of invocation for the purpose of divine illumination.¹⁵ In this respect, the abandonment of prayer at the beginning of theological instruction is not to be commended as a sign of academic seriousness but is a sign that theology is succumbing to historicism and losing its necessary ecclesial moorings.

The second pedagogical conviction may initially seem to contradict the first. For the truth of the matter is that Barth was in fact not naïve in regard to the historical complexities of the Christian tradition. He knew the twists and turns of its historical development, including the messy history of canon formation and the winding roads of doctrinal elaboration over time. He knew that neither the canon nor dogma fell *in toto* from heaven or arose *de novo* out of history. He also knew that theological reflection cannot be extracted from its historical tributaries that follow the branching river beds of church divisions, nor can it ignore such diversity in its practice. Theological study and teaching could not be conducted with a view from nowhere but required embracing – and in turn critically examining – a theological and indeed ecclesial tradition. For Barth, this meant identifying himself with a confessional heritage. When he arrived in Göttingen to assume a chair in Reformed theology, he had remarkably to that point never engaged Reformed theology with any seriousness and did not even possess a copy of the Reformed confessions.¹⁶ He quickly remedied these deficiencies. He embraced his identity as a Reformed theologian and read from the entire Christian tradition through the twofold lens of scripture and evangelical (i.e. Protestant, and specifically, Reformed) convictions. He thus had a hermeneutical stance from which to approach and interpret the vast array of church history as a whole. The particularity of confession thus mirrored the particularity of the gospel and led not to an insular confessionalism but an expansive engagement with a broad scope of the church’s tradition past and present (though Barth’s engagement with Eastern Orthodoxy and some non-magisterial Protestant traditions was admittedly marginal). What made Barth’s

¹⁴Tyler Wittman, ‘John Webster (1955–2016): Reflections from One of his Students’, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/john-webster-reflections-from-one-of-his-students/>; accessed 8 June 2022.

¹⁵Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), pp. 23–4.

¹⁶Busch, *Karl Barth*, p. 129. By his own later admission, it was only with this turn to teaching in 1921 that Barth came to engage the Reformed tradition with seriousness. See Karl Barth, *Gespräche 1964–1968*, ed. Eberhard Busch (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1996), p. 151; ET: Barth, *Barth in Conversation*, vol. 3, 1964–68, p. 97.

theological teaching powerful was that he began with the particular to move towards the universal, and thus he was firmly set within a theological tradition that could with seriousness engage other ones. Precisely because he embraced and worked to master a particular confession in dialogue with others, his theological work and teaching were not predicated, as often today, upon the whims of academic fashion, a narrow or reductionistic aperture of investigation, or the parochial and sometimes feverish concerns of a theological school of thought.

In fact, one could state that it was precisely Barth's ability to free himself from the determinative orbits of the old and new liberals of neo-Protestantism that allowed him to become a truly catholic theologian. He was engaged with the entire Christian tradition in a way that did not fall into an arbitrary eclecticism precisely because he used a critical and confessional Protestant frame to approach it. In his engagements with figures like Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, as well as modern Catholic theologians such as Matthias Joseph Scheeben, Johann Möhler and Karl Adam, Barth knew where he stood and what could and could not be conceded and appropriated. This was the case because he astutely recognised what was at stake in theological questions and what the central tenets of the Protestant tradition entailed. He approached the church's patristic, medieval and modern theological heritage with both critical engagement and appreciation and could do so because he worked hard to know what it meant to be *evangelical* (and this in a Reformed key).

Such judgements shaped his theological pedagogy. His classroom seminars were stimulating for his students because he was tremendously interested in other theological traditions while firmly rooted in his own – demonstrated in his invitations to the Roman Catholic theologians Erich Przywara and Hans Urs von Balthasar to visit his classroom and address his students. But what made those classes scintillating was that they were not flaccid presentations of different viewpoints for the sake of an amorphous notion of diversity masking indifference, but civil exercises in what Alasdair MacIntyre has called 'constrained disagreement', here in rival versions of theological inquiry. Barth thus gave all interlocutors the compliment of treating them not as representatives of religious heterogeneity but fellow seekers after the same divine truth.¹⁷

¹⁷See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy and Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), p. 234. It is difficult not to concede that the pluralism of academic theological studies in the present, much of it marked by a repudiation of the scandal of the gospel and guided only by the noble but insufficient goal of redressing past forms of exclusion and the less noble one of exploiting academic freedom for the purpose of the novel, has led, in MacIntyre's description of the general humanities, to 'unconstrained and limitless absence of agreement', such that 'what is observable is change of fashion rather than progress in inquiry' (p. 225). As MacIntyre rightly notes, such unlimited tolerance without any serious search for theological and moral truth in the university can only in the end undermine the very claims of theology itself (p. 225). In contrast, by inviting Catholic interlocutors into his seminars when such was not a common practice, Barth was attempting to initiate his students into a form of conflict which pays one's partner respect as a person embodying a tradition and argument worthy of serious consideration and engagement in a common search for truth and faithful confession. Barth himself in this way exemplified what MacIntyre describes as the proper double role of an educator in a university of constrained disagreement: first, to act as a protagonist and participant within a specific point of view (i.e. tradition) with a view to its advancement (in Barth's case, that of evangelical theology and the Reformed tradition specifically); and second, to act as a participant in dialogue and controversy with other traditions in order to correct and test the other tradition and one's own (see pp. 230–1). The tradition which occupied Barth in his early work was that of modern Protestantism as

Therefore, precisely because he believed truth was to be sought and was at stake, Barth taught the Reformed confessions and Protestant figures from the past with a sense of urgency and vibrancy, as if examining them was an act of real consequence – not only a matter of historical interest, but itself a pedagogical (and theological) conviction of inestimable importance. He taught believing that he was teaching *about* something, that this something had *significance*, and that there was a *movement through time* in thinking theologically, as the church sought to confess what had been revealed in God's self-disclosure to the world in Christ. This movement was not understood simplistically as either irreversible degeneration or inevitable progress (though in truth, Barth appears more prone to describing the recent past in terms of theological deterioration than advancement in reflecting on the theology of modern Protestantism). Nevertheless, he discerned movement in the theological disciplines and his own confessional heritage and those of others, and he was not averse to making judgements about such movement. His own project was, in the end, an attempt to narrate the entire Christian faith amid the reality of a conflict of traditions, a goal explicitly articulated in the opening sections of the *Church Dogmatics*, which itself began as lectures to students. Admittedly, some of Barth's theological judgements could miss the mark, while others suffered from overgeneralisation and idiosyncrasy. But that he taught from a tradition openly assumed and espoused in critical conversation with itself and others in view of scripture remains most in line with a commendable theological perspectivalism that embraces humility and fallibility while taking a firm stand on central convictions in a way that rejects both theological relativism and a false objectivity which seeks to stand apart from and over all traditions.¹⁸

This stance embracing both commitment to and criticism of the Reformed tradition in the light of scripture is a significant part of what it means to say that Barth was a confessional theologian who was not hamstrung by a narrow confessionalism.¹⁹ Pedagogically, this meant that he set his theological and confessional cards on the

found in the liberal tradition. In time, however, he maintained that the only serious alternative to his own evangelical tradition was that of Catholicism. See e.g. Karl Barth, *Offene Briefe 1909–1935*, ed. Diether Koch (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2001), pp. 227–8; cf. Barth, 'Roman Catholicism: A Question to the Protestant Church', in *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings 1920–1928*, trans. Louis P. Smith (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 314, n. 1.

¹⁸For one such articulation of a theological method marked by humility and fallibility while rejecting relativism, see James Wm. McClendon, Jr. and James M. Smith, *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism*, rev. edn (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994).

¹⁹Barth had no interest in reading persons from the past for the purpose of mere mimicry, thinking that this involved neither learning from nor honouring them. So while he warned that contemporary theologians should not 'play truant from the school of Luther and Calvin' (*Church Dogmatics* I/2, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), p. 612), he also advised that his students not be 'prisoners of their work'. See Barth, *Gespräche 1964–1968*, ed. Eberhard Busch (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1996), p. 199 (my trans.); cf. p. 571; ET: Barth, *Barth in Conversation*, vol. 3, 1964–1968, pp. 131–2. Barth stated that Luther and Calvin were not 'museum directors' of ancient artefacts and he had no interest in being one either; see Barth, 'Was bedeutet uns Barmen heute?', 1954', in *Der Götze wackelt: Zeitkritische Aufsätze, Reden und Briefe von 1930 bis 1960*, ed. Karl Kupisch (Berlin: Käthe Vogt Verlag, 1961), p. 163. Barth treated the Reformed confessions in the same way. Indeed, this was how he treated his own theology. He had no desire for those after him simply to mimic his conclusions, nor did he like his theology being treated as a finished system or a school of thought. When told that some had named such a school after him, his response was curt but unequivocal: 'I am not guilty, absolutely not guilty. For I have never been a Barthian.' As he stated later that same year, 'I have never demanded that someone should parrot me. It is not about me, but about the truth, the truth in love. "Barthianism"

table. In this open embrace of a confessional identity, Barth stands in contrast to the critical detachment advocated by much of the modern academic project. Yet, as Robert Wilken noted in his presidential address to the American Academy of Religion, that project of convictional detachment is itself but another tradition. As he rightly observed, ‘No thinking is wholly detached from its object; all thought stands in the midst of things seeking to correct or change course.’²⁰ Barth would agree and thought the project of exegesis apart from all presuppositions ‘comical’.²¹ Pedagogically, it is simply more honest to oneself and others to acknowledge one’s stance than to think that we transcend them all in absolute objectivity or dispassion, even as we are indeed to strive for fairness and an appropriate impartiality as well as an openness to correction of those presuppositions themselves in both our exegetical and theological labours and the classroom itself. Such an acknowledgement need not devolve into either unquestioned dogma and indoctrination or the relativism of different individual or group experiences or viewpoints, so long as the transcendence of the subject matter of theology is affirmed. Most important is a disposition of openness to correction, both from a new address from scripture and from other participants in the theological task past and present, a pedagogical stance informed by a larger theological humility.

The third pedagogical conviction that Barth exhibits concerns how to view the past itself. He was in fact very critical of a number of developments in the theology of prior centuries, yet in his lectures on Protestant theology in the nineteenth century he set forth the way that theologians of the past should be considered.²² At times he had difficulty balancing the harsh judgements he felt needed to be made with regard to the theological positions of his predecessors with the charity he believed was due them. Yet in light of the criticisms of some modern commentators who simply dismissed those of the past as mistaken or irrelevant, he tilted the scales towards generosity and stated in the foreword to his lectures: ‘I would be very pleased if they were ... to show a little more love towards those who have gone before us, despite the degree of alienation they feel from them.’ He continued:

We need openness towards and interest in particular figures with their individual characteristics, an understanding of the circumstances in which they worked, much patience and also much humour in the face of their obvious limitations and weaknesses, a little grace in expressing even the most profound criticism and finally, even in the worst cases, a certain tranquil delight that they were as they were.²³

One might of course reasonably offer some resistance here – some things of the past require a more serious response than humour, and there may be a justified reservation towards Barth’s easy delight that all those of the past ‘were as they were’. Yet it is worthwhile to consider if a principle of gracious charity in reading the past might not be

does not interest me.’ See Barth, *Barth in Conversation*, vol. 2, 1963, ed. Eberhard Busch, trans. Karlfried Froehlich et al. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2018), pp. 13, 19; cf. pp. 140–1.

²⁰Robert Wilkin, ‘Who will Speak for the Religious Traditions?’ in *Remembering the Christian Past* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), p. 6.

²¹See Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/1*, p. 469.

²²Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1973).

²³*Ibid.*, p. 12.

appropriate for Christian scholars who still believe that we must ask God to forgive us our theological and intellectual debts and transgressions even as we forgive the debts and transgressions of those who preceded us. Barth insisted that these predecessors deserve a response of charity and not only criticism insofar as they are not dead but alive and, like us, stand under the determination of divine judgement and grace. Theology is therefore more defined by the fact that its participants share in the church and its task than by the fact that they participate in a common academic discipline. As he states:

The Church does not stand in a vacuum. Beginning from the beginning, however necessary, cannot be a matter of beginning off one's own bat. We have to remember the communion of saints, bearing and being borne by each other, asking and being asked, having to take mutual responsibility for and among the sinners gathered together in Christ. As regards theology, also, we cannot be in the Church without taking as much responsibility for the theology of the past as for the theology of our present. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Schleiermacher and all the rest are not dead, but living. They still speak and demand a hearing as living voices, as surely as we know that they and we belong together in the Church. They made in their time the same contribution to the task of the Church that is required of us today. As we make our contribution, they join in with theirs, and we cannot play our part today without allowing them to play theirs. Our responsibility is not only to God, to ourselves, to the men of today, to other living theologians, but to them. There is no past in the Church, so there is no past in theology.²⁴

This last line is a much more hopeful alternative than William Faulkner's similar 'The past is never dead. It's not even past.'²⁵ For Barth, in contrast to Faulkner, the past was not a tragic fate that ever hung over Southern skies such that the present was ever captive to the past; it was, rather, the inheritance of a shared grace, and grace meant not only the acknowledgement of past faithfulness and failures but also the freedom divinely granted to move beyond the latter to a more faithful contemporary confession and obedience. In pedagogy, this entails that the past must be treated with more charity, understanding, respect, but also freedom, than is often done. It also means that the teaching of Christian theology is not only founded upon the resurrection of Christ, but confesses the hope for the future resurrection of the theologian. Such teaching does not ignore the need for evaluative judgements of the past but it leaves final judgements to a God who stands above both history and ourselves. In the end, it acknowledges our theological ancestors as the recipients of a grace which we hope for ourselves, for the hope which we hold for our own teaching and work is that we will receive the same grace – not only from our students and the judgements of those who follow us in time, but from the Judge of all the earth who does right (cf. Gen 18:25). Our prayer for ourselves is that our transgressions in our teaching might be forgiven us as we forgive the transgressions of our theological ancestors, and that we might be found faithful in our vocation as teachers held to high account (Jas 3:1).

Such a frame of mind makes it very difficult to teach with casual dismissal the works of those who share with us in the promises of God and the resurrection of the dead. We are, as Barth reminded his students, to remember that judgement upon our forebears is

²⁴Ibid., p. 17; see also *Church Dogmatics I/2*, pp. 588–90.

²⁵William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2011), p. 73.

not ultimately a matter of the world's judgement or even our own but of an eschatological one. Such does not absolve us, he acknowledged, from the need to render our own judgements and to pronounce a 'yes' or a 'no' on things from the past. Yet our ultimate responsibility is not to pronounce judgement upon the past but upon ourselves. As he declared:

We hear the voices of the ancients in order to give an answer by our own attitude and decision. But we do that for or against ourselves, not for or against them. With our own personal decisions we cannot associate judgments upon our forefathers, whether it is a case of pronouncing canonizations or settling accounts and carrying out funerals.²⁶

Thus the charity we are called to show our theological forebears limits what we may do – we are not in a position to be rendering final verdicts and burying them in graves that will never be opened. We cannot stand upon a mountain of righteous superiority by which to judge the past without recognising that Mount Zion lies before us and the future from there will look back with its own judgement upon the hills on which we now stand and make our theological and moral pronouncements. Pedagogy that is not founded upon an epistemic, theological and moral humility and charity (and these are of course not the same as scepticism, relativism or moral indifference) is not a pedagogy that Christians can embrace.

And this brings us to the fourth and final pedagogical conviction to be gleaned from Barth. It is rooted in a profound respect for the freedom of revelation and a refusal to contribute to its domestication. The freedom of God thus stands as the warrant for why theology must be a free science opposed to all ideological adherence and explains why Barth refused to hitch his theological wagon unquestionably and irrevocably to any particular methodological or philosophical horse. This conviction regarding the freedom of theology shielded him not only from the temptations of instantaneous relevance and grasping too quickly upon contemporary tools as the most germane way to achieve gospel understanding and translation, but it also protected him from any ideological allegiance that would instrumentalise theology and the church for political or cultural ends. He simply did not think that the gospel could be mapped directly or easily upon philosophical, political, economic or cultural programmes, and thus while he could make relative judgments between such programmes, he resisted captivity to any one of them or to the ideologies of his age.²⁷ He could not, for example, become an ideological socialist even as he maintained firm support for the trade unions in his local work in Safenwil, and he had no time for communism either as a philosophy or in its Soviet instantiation, even as he remained wary and critical of unfettered capitalism and triumphalism in the West.²⁸

²⁶Barth, *Protestant Theology*, p. 23.

²⁷As Barth stated in Princeton in 1962: 'The gospel deals not with systems of any kind, neither with an intellectual system nor with a moral system nor with an aesthetic system nor with a political system. And we are always in error if we think that the gospel is identical with this or that system of thought. Now in the political realm we have the different systems, the isms, and indeed they are important and interesting and we must deal with them, but not identify the gospel with any of these subjects.' See Barth, *Barth in Conversation*, vol. 1, 1959–1962, ed. Eberhard Busch, trans. Karlfried Froehlich et al. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017) p. 204; cf. 214; see also Barth, *Barth in Conversation*, vol. 2, 1963, pp. 132–41, 216.

²⁸For a brief discussion of Barth's anti-ideology with regard to both philosophy as well as political and economic theory, see Bender, *Reflections on Reformational Theology*, pp. 119–23. Shelley Baranowski

Most famously, he was never tempted by the totalitarian claims and ambitions of German national socialism.²⁹ Though it may appear that such observations stray away from the topic of pedagogy, the relevance is in fact apparent upon reflection. Teaching theology does not serve students well when wedded to philosophical or political frames of reference that can never be questioned or that are taken as truisms. This is the case not only for the blatant insidious ideologies of an age upon which history has now rendered its verdict but also for those presently judged more or less benign or even beneficial, ideologies adopted in the name of justice or benevolence and thereby taken to be self-evident.

Barth's greatest pedagogical contribution for today may in fact be this anti-ideological stance. In his Gifford lectures he stated that 'human ideologies and mythologies, philosophies and religions' are set up as human forms of self-assertion that can have at best limited usefulness but may in fact require Christian opposition. Such points of view have their own 'scientific, ethical and aesthetic' axioms, as well as 'self-evident truths social and political, certainties conservative and revolutionary. They exercise so real a dominion and they bear so definitely the character of gods and godheads, that not infrequently devotion to them actually crystallizes into mythologies and religions.' And, Barth continued, 'Universities are the temples of these religions.'³⁰ Such systems that attempt to provide an overarching worldview or explanatory matrix can be explicitly stated or, more often, are implicitly presupposed and unquestioned. But in an increasingly ideological age, Barth's anti-ideological commitment is yet another expression of the transcendence of the gospel and the inalienability of its freedom over all attempts to read reality through a settled political, sociological or economic grid or reduce the search for theological truth to the critical discernment and redistribution

contends that 'Barth avoided programmatic socialist platforms beyond the goals of peace and justice. No ideology, be it Marxism, pacifism, reformist socialism or the like could become the norm for Christian political behavior.' See Baranowski, 'The Primacy of Theology: Karl Barth and Socialism', *Studies in Religion* 10 (1981), pp. 451–61 (p. 455). Paul Chung adds that, during his time in Safenwil as a pastor, 'Barth had less interest in Marxist principles and ideology as a worldview than in practical social questions associated with the life of workers.' See Chung, *Karl Barth: God's Word in Action* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2008), p. 102. Such judgements are concordant with Barth's own reflections on his early socialist activity – see Barth, *Barth in Conversation*, vol. 3, 1964–1968, pp. 340, 369–70. Barth also walked a fine line between acknowledging the abuses of the communist countries of the East and criticising the sins of the West closer to home. In general, Barth always began critical reflection with that which was closer to his own orbit – and thus he was more concerned with the sins of the church than with secular atheism, and more vocal about the triumphalism of the West than the abuses of Soviet communism. He was roundly criticized, especially for his failure to criticise communism with the same vigour as that which he had earlier opposed national socialism in Germany. He fastidiously sought to reject the use of theology as an ally in an ideological conflict between the East or West during the Cold War. See Tietz, *Karl Barth*, pp. 324–30.

²⁹Barth had no interest in collapsing theology into politics, and he chastised Hirsch in 1932 for his nationalistic theology expressed in his 'newly made political confession of faith (*neue abgelegten politischen Glaubensbekenntnis*)' – see Barth, *Offene Briefe 1909–1935*, ed. Diether Koch (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2001), pp. 206–11 (p. 208). What is clear in Barth's letter is that he takes theology as that which stands over politics and critiques it; the two never to be joined in an unquestionable alliance. Barth wrote Thurneysen in June of 1933 warning the Swiss not to be so stupid as to play with the fire of fascism, and he decried such developments in Germany – see Barth, *Karl Barth–Eduard Thurneysen Briefwechsel*, vol. 3, 1930–1935, ed. Caren Algner (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2000), pp. 545–54 (pp. 550–2).

³⁰Karl Barth, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God According to the Teaching of the Reformation: Recalling the Scottish Confession of 1560*, trans. J. L. M. Haire and Ian Henderson (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005; orig. publ. Hodder & Stoughton, 1938), p. 40. For a discussion of this text, see Kimlyn J. Bender, *Confessing Christ for Church and World: Studies in Modern Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2014), pp. 331–43.

of power or wealth in a reactionary or revolutionary politics. In short, the freedom of the triune God entails a rejection of ideology of any kind.³¹ The freedom of theology is proven in turn by its ability to resist not only ideologies that appear in malevolent but benevolent forms.

These lessons are perhaps more philosophical in orientation than strictly pedagogical – but, again, they have direct practical implications. If such a stance is taken, then teaching theology must be a free practice as theology is a free science. Theology is not best served by teachers who see themselves as purveyors (or enforcers) of settled questions and unquestioned worldviews and modes of activism but by those who stand with loving attention and modesty before the subject matter and invite students with both humility and confidence to a shared endeavour of joyful discovery and to the pilgrimage of theological study and moral reflection that has long preceded them and that will continue after their demise. Theological educators, as Christian educators, are called to conduct their task with both a confident assurance and a principled fallibilism that eschews rigid dogmatism or ideological compliance.³² Theological pedagogy of this type treats the past neither with an uncritical obeisance nor with condescending denigration. It displays the constant struggle of balancing certainty and humility in its verdicts. At its best, it strives not to teach the same old material in the same old way, but to begin again and again at the beginning, respecting the past while knowing that theological work can only be done in the present and cannot exchange its own confession for that of a prior generation.

What comes across in Barth's written lectures is a sense of joyful discovery that rubbed off on his students as witnessed in their later testimonies.³³ As educators, to be enamoured with the subject matter of our study is something that enlivens our own students and keeps teaching fresh and new, and this should be true of theologians most of all. The greatest lessons of pedagogy are then that theology remain directed to the knowledge and love of God, that we know our own tradition before commencing with the evaluation of the positions of others and that the theological labourers of the past be read with charity in accordance with a hermeneutical golden rule to read

³¹Barth's rejection of ideology was consistently maintained to the end of his life, evident in his frequent recorded conversations. He rejected not only broad theological projects (i.e. 'Pietism', 'Calvinism', 'Lutheranism') but any attempt to constrict theology through the adoption of a philosophical, political or any other ideological system or worldview. See e.g. Barth, *Barth in Conversation*, vol. 1, 1959–1962, pp. 26–7, 34, 71, 167, 168–9, 196–7, 249; vol. 2, 1963, pp. 132–5, 137–8, 140–1, 157–8; vol. 3, 1964–1968, pp. 133, 334, 339, 368, 368–70. This did not mean that Barth held that thinking apart from all such systems possible, but they required constant and diligent exposure, identification, examination and criticism, so that in approaching God's revelation in scripture we might 'kindly remove these glasses for a moment and not desire to understand everything based on these presuppositions' (Barth, *Barth in Conversation*, vol. 2, 1963, pp. 157–8, cf. 160). Yet Barth was under no illusions that this could be easily achieved. As he challenged his hearers in 1962: 'Reflect for a moment on what it means that all of us, no matter where we are – whether we are Africans or Asians or Europeans, or within Europe, English or German or Swiss – [that] all of us, as one says, stand under the power of certain ideas or ideologies that are simply there in our heads and govern us! And we can't think differently. Every day this ideology – with absolutely no need of the police, but simply through the newspaper – comes in drop by drop and governs us' (Barth, *Barth in Conversation*, vol. 1, 1959–1962, p. 241).

³²It is therefore clear why the sanctification of reason for service to dogmatics is accompanied not by ideological commitment but freedom from such compliance, for 'reason's transformation goes hand-in-hand with nonconformity' – see John Webster, *Holiness* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), p. 12.

³³See e.g. Tietz, *Karl Barth*, p. 108.

others as we would like to be read ourselves. Finally, those of the past should be heard and taught in light of the freedom of the children of God, a freedom that is marked by theological work that strives to take the object of its investigation with much more seriousness than the ideologies that vie for attention. Such freedom is displayed when the past, and the voices of the present, are respected but not given a final word such that open investigation is curtailed.

In the end, Barth reminds us that teaching is more about convictions and dispositions than methods. The convictions of note have been examined above; the dispositions can here be but briefly articulated. They are multiple but the following are theologically necessary and pedagogically determinative: first, reverence before the subject matter of theology as the revelation and reconciliation of the world divinely accomplished by the triune God; second, receptiveness in approaching scripture as a witness to a divine truth at the centre of its multiple witnesses rather than simply as a source of a pluralistic cacophony of historical voices contingently collected; third, diligence in the task of theological explication of what is found in scripture and secondarily attested in tradition, with an eye toward the practical implications and application of such discovery even if downriver from the prior task; fourth, humility in acknowledging the limitations of our judgements and knowledge, including an appreciation of the fact that clarity at the level of broad moral judgments may nevertheless require a recognition of pluralism at the level of tactical implementation and the reasonable divergence of opinion by people of good will; and finally, charity for all that have gone before us in these tasks marked by a qualified deference before the church's past judgements which retains the possibility of necessary dissent in the present. Barth's lectures provide the final words here:

history is made up of living men whose work is handed over defenceless to our understanding and appreciation upon their death. Precisely because of this, they have a claim on our courtesy, a claim that their own concerns should be heard and that they should not be used simply as a means to our ends. History is meant to bear witness to the truth of God, not to our achievement, so that we must avoid any thought that we already know what they have to say and be prepared to hear something new.³⁴

³⁴Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 22.