



*The Theology of Martin Luther: A Critical Assessment.* By Hans-Martin Barth. Translated by Linda Malony. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012.

✦ Since the advent of the Luther Renaissance over a century ago, numerous books have borne the title “The Theology of Martin Luther”

(or a close approximation thereof). Some among these have aimed at a more systematic presentation (notably the contributions of Theodosius Harnack, Paul Althaus, and Oswald Bayer), while others have mixed chronological and systematic approaches (notably Julius Köstlin and Bernhard Lohse). Nevertheless, all such treatments have generally focused on what they considered to be valuable about their subject and have attempted to highlight the Reformer’s positive contribution to theology.

Hans-Martin Barth’s presentation of Luther stands in both continuity and discontinuity with these studies. Although largely systematic in his presentation (much like the first group of scholars), Barth generally lacks sympathy for Luther’s overall approach as a theologian for reasons that will be discussed below.

Barth is a German theologian, now retired from Marburg University. During his student days, he studied under Paul Althaus at Erlangen and published a number of works on Luther’s theology. As of late, his scholarly focus has mainly been on ecumenism and dialogue with other world religions.

From the beginning of his book, one is impressed by the unusual love/hate relationship that the author has with the Reformer. On the one hand, Barth views Luther as a cultural ancestor of his politically left-leaning and progressive form of unionistic Protestantism. On the other hand, Barth finds Luther both unbearably intolerant, superstitious, and naïvely credulous regarding the claims of revealed religion. This approach has rarely been seen in the twentieth century, and in many respects echoes the smaller presentations one finds of Luther in the writings of Albrecht Ritschl and Ernst Troeltsch.

Barth begins the book with an extremely lengthy chapter charging Luther with a series of injustices and false beliefs (29–76). Throughout the introductory chapter, Barth is oddly

fixated on Luther's unfortunate (and extremely late) tirades against the Jews. He charges that other Luther scholars (notably Lohse and Bayer) have been negligent in their discussions of Luther's relationship to the Jews. Instead of mentioning these tirades in passing (Bayer) or making them into an appendix in a larger work on Luther's theology (Lohse), Barth believes that it should be treated as a more prevalent theme in the theology of the Reformer (29). Nevertheless, in light of the fact that the current Weimar edition of Luther's works runs to 130 volumes in length and the treatise *On the Jews and Their Lies* (monstrous though it may be!) comprises but a few pages of it, this reviewer remains far more sympathetic to the presentation of Lohse and Bayer than he does to Barth. Moreover, it is difficult to see how anything fundamental in Luther's theology is expressed in his late belief in the need for secular governments to persecute the Jews for their religion, along with other heretics. In fact, it could be argued (as it indeed has been) that this is a moment in which Luther, out of personal weakness, actually broke with the principles of his own theology. That being said, although it is of course impossible to analyze the author psychologically, one suspects that Barth's fixation on this theme might have more to do with the concerns of post-World War II Germany and its war-guilt, than with Luther and his theology.

Barth further complains that Luther scholars have tried to marginalize the Reformer's invectives regarding the Jews by characterizing this as an attitude of his later life and not a part of his early or middling years. Not so, claims Barth; Luther also made negative statements about Jews earlier in his life. Although he did not believe in or promote their persecution in his earlier writings, he nevertheless stated that Judaism was a religion of the law and that Jews could not be saved as long as they trusted in their works. Also, he claimed that Jews did not understand their own Scriptures because they did not see Christ as the fulfillment of them (30-34).

Of course, none of these criticisms has anything to do with a hatred of the Jews (racial or otherwise), or a belief that they should be persecuted by secular governments. In these statements, Luther merely reflects the teaching of the New Testament regarding the incredulity of the old Israel and also a basic recognition that there is no salvation apart from Christ. Indeed, what never seems to occur to Barth (as well as other so-called Christian Universalists) is that if salvation in Christ is optional, then atonement and the mission of the church are pointless. Theology like this might explain why both the European state churches and the American mainline churches are utterly falling apart. If the work of Christ and the mission of the church are in fact optional, why bother with them in the first place? Moreover, Luther's criticisms of the Jews in these regards do not single them out, and therefore does not suggest a kind of special hatred of the Jewish people. Rather they would equally apply to all man-made religion that focuses on salvation through works. Indeed, Luther's view of Judaism is no different than his view of Roman Catholic or Islamic works-righteousness.

Nevertheless, these last criticisms are very revealing for Barth because they represent the early stages of a general pattern of

critique present throughout the rest of the book. In criticizing Luther, Barth not only reveals a general contempt and deep-seated antipathy towards most of what the Reformer taught but also assumes his audience will automatically agree with him.

This comes out even more clearly in the sections of the introductory chapter in which Barth deals with Luther's attitude towards Islam, the Peasants' Revolt, and witches. Apparently, Barth's audience will automatically agree with him in his judgment that Luther was unkind and unfair to Islam in his charge that Muslims rely on their works for salvation and that Mohammed was an enthusiast (39-49). Implicit in most of this discussion is a belief that Islam (as well as all other faiths) leads in one way or another to God. The polemic that Barth launches here (and in other parts of the book) has to do with what he characterizes as Luther's supposedly "limited Trinitarianism," which focuses exclusively on the person of the Son. In other words, if Luther were more Trinitarian in his thinking, he would see that people of other faiths have access to God by means other than the Son, presumably through nature (the Father?) and non-Christian religious experience (the Spirit?). Not only is this the very definition of enthusiasm, but it would seem to break the unity of the Trinity into three distinct entities that can be dealt with apart from one another. In light of the recent trend in Protestant dogmatics towards "social Trinitarianism" (Moltmann, Grenz, etc.), perhaps this is what Barth intends. Nevertheless, such an approach cannot seriously be entertained as either biblical, confessional, or even broadly catholic.

Barth also assumes that his readers will agree with his judgment that Luther should have been more favorable towards democracy (which he could have gleaned, according to the author, from the example of the Swiss confederation) and supported the peasants (in spite of their mad rampage of burning and killing). Barth apparently believes that minus a free and developed press, universal literacy, and a sufficiently developed wealthy and educated middle class, some form of modern European social democracy would nevertheless have worked as a system of governance in the sixteenth century.

On one level, to accept any of these judgments one must ignore many salient facts about the nature of non-Christian faiths, the law of noncontradiction (all religions cannot be right), and the vast array of historical data that tells us under what conditions some form of democratic government has a chance of working. More importantly, theologically speaking, one must largely buy into the values of so-called progressive and unionistic European Protestantism, or mainline Protestantism of the American variety. In these sections of the modern church and in these sections alone is there an assumption that social democracy, ecumenism, and religious universalism are self-authenticating goods present. And so also from this perspective, Luther was a force for good to the extent that he took positions that would later move modern liberal Christians in the direction of these values and conversely a source of evil to the extent that he hindered the adoption of these values. In light of this, Barth makes clear within the first chapter that his

book will be of limited value to confessional Lutherans or other Christians who do not share his assumptions.

The one theological judgment that modern confessional Lutherans might find themselves in sympathy with is Barth's condemnation of Luther's belief in the need to torture and execute witches (57–66). Although the Bible certainly teaches that there are such things as witches (and self-identified witches obviously do exist even in the modern world), there is little justification to be found in Scripture for Luther's belief that witches exercise any actual supernatural power. In fact, the most famous witch in the Bible, the witch of Endor, seems genuinely surprised that her necromancy has actually worked in calling up Samuel from the dead! Moreover, though the Old Testament certainly mandates the killing of witches, Luther (who properly understood the Mosaic law as "Sachenspiegel for the Jews") should not have attempted to import this aspect of Israel's law into the public law of secular governments. All things considered, though, Barth is wrong to assert that Luther's beliefs in witchcraft negatively affected the witch trials that had already been underway since the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In contrast to Roman Catholic and Reformed Europe, Lutherans of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were unique in their refusal to execute witches. Neither is it possible to believe that either Reformed or Roman Catholic Christians ended up burning any more witches than they normally would have because of the negative statements of the Reformer.

The rest of Barth's treatment of Luther's theology compares very unfavorably to that of key Luther scholars of the past few decades, notably Oswald Bayer. Luther's theology covers a variety of topics and his writings tend to be occasional in nature. It is for this reason that finding a central theme around which to organize one's treatment of the Reformer's thought generally should be regarded as ill conceived, much like Alexander Schweizer's attempt in the mid-nineteenth century to reduce all differences between the respective Protestant confessions to a "central dogma." That being said, there are, one might say, certain "entry points" into Luther's theology that might properly serve the purpose of organizing the Reformer's various theological projects. Some of these entry points are undoubtedly better than others. Bayer's entry point was the doctrine of the orders of creation, which he considers to be central to how the Reformer understood human life and the triune God's sustaining and redeeming activity in relationship to it. Bayer's entry point made his work superior to many other treatments in that it resulted in a deeper understanding of the importance of the doctrine of creation (echoing in some respect Wingren), the sacramentality of the word, and the Tri-unity of God, something frequently missing in various assessments of Luther's theology. It also helps him guard against the existentializing tendencies present in many twentieth-century Luther scholars (notably Gerhard Ebeling and Wilfred Joest), by focusing on the embodied nature of human life and God's dealings with his creatures through created masks (*larvae Dei*).

In Barth's much inferior treatment, he feels that the theme of the "theology of cross" is the proper place of entry (77–96).

This is not an entirely incorrect approach, in that Luther's early theology of the cross does in point of fact (contrary to the recent claims of certain ecumenically oriented Luther scholars) crystallize a number of most important themes that persist in his later theology. Moreover, although Luther does not use the term *theology of the cross* much after the late 1510s, the dialectical nature of the divine relationship presented in the *Heidelberg Disputation* persists in his later writings and, in fact, become much deeper, particularly after his disputes with the enthusiasts and southern reformers.

There are nevertheless significant perils in making the theology of the cross one's entry point into Luther's thought—principally because the theology of the cross has been understood in a number of unhelpfully existentializing ways throughout the twentieth century. One way that this has taken place is through Karl Barth's post-Kantian and post-Schleiermacherian attempt to utilize it against the idea of natural theology (Thomism) and religious experience (Liberal Protestantism). According to this understanding of the *Heidelberg Disputation*, Luther is polemicizing against the idea of a natural theology based on human reason and initiative in favor of a theology where the cross is the singular event of revelation from which one is able to deduce all the articles of the faith. Hans-Martin Barth in his treatment of the disputation largely adopts the position of his namesake and therefore greatly distorts Luther's purpose. As is abundantly clear from the text itself, Luther does not have any difficulty with admitting the possibility of natural theology (as Protestant dogmatics after Kant indeed would!). That being the case, Luther holds that the natural theology available to fallen human beings has been used by them for corrupt purposes. Humans, in their state of sin, see their distance from God (both ontic and moral) and attempt to bridge the gap between themselves and the divine through their coming to correspond to the glorious attributes of God clearly made known to them through natural theology.

The rest of the work tends to alternate between readings and criticisms based on German dialectical theology of the previous century, and on progressive unionistic Protestant theology. Barth is endlessly concerned about the question of "relevance," as if human feelings or expectations necessarily set the bar for what God could or could not say.

It should be noted, as well, that Barth distorts Luther's theology in all the typical ways that twentieth-century scholars have. There is little originality here, but merely a repetition of old polemics against subsequent Lutheran orthodoxy and its supposed discontinuity with Luther. This occurs on a number of fronts. Barth distorts Luther's understanding of atonement by suggesting that he has little use for the motif of substitution, even though it is repeatedly used throughout his writings (169–70). At one point, Barth takes statements of Luther completely out of context and eliminates the portions that validate his high view of substitution (169). Similarly, the old claims that Luther essentially had the same doctrine of Scripture as Karl Barth (that is, Christ as the only revelation of God, to which the Scriptures in part bear witness) are repeated throughout

(443-46). We are told that Luther did not really hold to a high doctrine of inspiration (439-43), despite several recent studies that have shown otherwise.

When Barth turns to the question of ministry, the subject tends to be defined in a rather functionalist manner that blurs the line between the priesthood of all believers and ministry as a distinct office (291-96). Barth seems to be a great fan of the concept of the priesthood of all believers, precisely because he views it as pointing in the direction of a number of progressive stances, including women's ordination and democracy. At this point, he also takes out of context a number of statements that speak of women sharing the gospel with other Christians on an individual level and parlays it into a kind of anticipation of the ordination of women. According to Barth, although this is the case, Luther remained unenlightened on this point and did not understand the full implications of his position on the priesthood of all believers. This is, interestingly enough, the rationale of the present Evangelical Lutheran Church in America for its position and of course, it presupposes the functionalist concept of ministry first propagated by late-seventeenth-century Pietism. Also, it should be noted that Barth's marginalization of the doctrine of the orders of creation helps him in this regard as well. The church as an order of creation is mentioned in passing in his chapter on the two kingdoms, and its status as such is treated as something of an anomaly within the Reformer's theology (328-30). Moreover, never does Barth highlight Luther's claim that Adam was the first minister of the word, while Eve was the first church. Such statements do, after all, militate against the functionalism he wishes to promote.

Overall, Barth's treatment is disappointing on a number of levels. His critique of Luther's theology only resonates with those who share his religious and political stances. His summary of Luther's theology is either unimaginative and uninspiring, or simply deceptive. For this reason, the work cannot be recommended.

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