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Review: Karl Barth, Biblical and Evangelical Theologian

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Oddly enough, given their assurance and conviction, the Independents, according to Mayfield, generally accepted (as the Presbyterians did not) the full weight of Luther and Calvin's shared pessimism concerning the spiritual possibilities of natural man. But then their assurance and conviction was a sign that in fact they were saved, part of the true or "invisible" Church that would reign victorious with Christ in the millennium. Thus their own standing in the state of grace, in combination with their utter scorn for merely natural man, allowed them to dismiss contemptuously those who opposed them, who were not, it seemed, among the saved or who at the least were astray and espousing the baseless wisdom of those predestined to eternal damnation.

While Mayfield's book gives us an in-depth, verging on tiresomely redundant, acquaintance with the various theoretical, theological issues that manifested the essential differences between Presbyterians and Independents, I still find myself skeptical concerning the reliability of his main thesis. The one figure among those Mayfield treats whose work I know well, J. Milton, does not fit the picture drawn by Mayfield. And the evidence drawn from Milton's works, while it does substantiate Mayfield's case at particular points, is selectively misleading concerning the overall shape of Milton's thought. And I suspect that this might be true in the case of others cited by Mayfield—for example J. Goodwin, who like Milton was an Arminian and consequently believed that even if natural men were utterly depraved every man enjoys the gift of enabling grace that allows for moral understanding. For them there was no such thing in reality as a "natural" man in the strict Calvinist or Lutheran sense.

The book has other problems. While it is scrupulously researched, the footnotes are excessive and too frequently are parade grounds for irrelevancies. This is especially regrettable inasmuch as one nevertheless feels obliged to cut through the thickets of pedantry because often they contain quite useful and pertinent information. Like the book's redundancy in argumentation and substantiation, the excesses of the footnotes are not solely the author's responsibility. Readers and editors are supposed to save authors, especially beginning authors arduously transforming admirable dissertations into books, the embarrassment of such problems. Mayfield himself is to be thanked for energetically pursuing a clear thesis concerning crucial and still misunderstood distinctions between Puritan factions in the 1640s and 1650s. Although I remain skeptical, I found myself persuaded on many points, learned a good deal about the crucial issues in the debates between Presbyterians and Independents, and would recommend the book to anyone who wishes to understand the logic of those who opposed and those who advocated the execution of Charles Stuart.

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Karl Barth: Biblical and Evangelical Theologian. By Thomas F. Torrance. Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1990, 256 pp., $31.95.

The title of this collection of essays and addresses reflects Torrance's concern that Karl Barth be properly understood and recognized as the one truly Biblical and evangelical (one could add "scientific") theologian of the modern era. Torrance, who is often called a Barthian and wants to build on the way opened by Barth, believes that Barth properly repositioned Christian theology back on its natural foundation in the objective movement of God's redemptive self-revelation in Jesus Christ.

Torrance roots Barth directly in classical Christian theology. Throughout the book Barth is cast as the modern Athanasius or Calvin and as one whose restorative and advancing insights must be kept in the forefront of the Church's task of thinking out the faith from the objective self-disclosure of God in Christ.

Torrance repeatedly pictures Barth as the theological champion of the Christian faith against all modern (post-Cartesian, post-Kantian, post-Newtonian) dualisms, as they distort the Church's thinking. Barth is said to have positively reestablished the Church's realist, objective thought out of a center in Christ, the Word made flesh.

Torrance supplies much interesting background and context for Barth's theology and its continuing significance. Many times, though, Torrance's apologetic for Barth becomes simultaneously vigorous, ardent and tenuous. In point of fact, the book is more about Torrance than about Barth. Torrance's modified Barthian thought will be recognized by anyone who has read other works by Torrance. This is not bad, for he is a mighty voice in contemporary British and European theology and has continued to contribute much. But Barth himself tends to fall into the background. Furthermore the essays are found elsewhere, one within at least two earlier published works. Also Torrance's understanding of so-called orthodoxy, fundamentalism and evangelicalism reveals a lack of understanding and humility such as he charges fundamentalism with. He also seems to hold a gnostic position—almost to the point of allowing redemption only to those who think/know as Barth does (cf. e.g. p. 238).

For all of this, however, Torrance has much to contribute to the Church's thinking, which must be Christocentric and trinitarian.

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Witness to Jesus Christ. Edited by John De Gruchy. London: Collins, 1988, 308 pp., $15.95. *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.* Edited by Geffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson. San Francisco: Harper, 1990, 579 pp., $32.95. *Worldly Preaching: Lectures on Homiletics by Dietrich Bonhoeffer.* Revised, translated, and edited with critical commentary by Clyde E. Fant. New York: Crossroad, 1991, 154 pp., $11.95.

Judging from recent publishing efforts, interest in the life and writings of Bonhoeffer is still strong. A major project now underway is the 16-volume English-language counterpart to the critical edition of Bonhoeffer works in German. More modest, but no less appreciated, are two new Bonhoeffer readers. De Gruchy's is skillfully arranged and introduced, drawing on writings from the full range of Bonhoeffer's life. He does not limit himself to sources like the final *Letters and Papers from Prison* or the middle period's *The Cost of Discipleship.* It is an excellent reader that could be effectively used in an undergraduate class, a congregational study, or by anyone wanting a general introduction to Bonhoeffer's thought.

It is difficult to say whether Kelly's and Nelson's reader, at twice the cost, is twice as good. It is, however, clearly superior. Like the Collins edition, the selection of texts covers all the periods in Bonhoeffer's life. But it does so with far greater comprehensiveness and depth, and it uses a greater variety of sources.

A 43-page introduction provides helpful commentary on each stage of Bonhoeffer's life, from his early academic years to his death at the hands of the Nazi gestapo. It refers to writings in each period but stresses his life, his participation in the Church struggle, and his conspiratorial activity more than his developing theological ideas. The initial biographical material builds from the best available Bonhoeffer scholarship, which has corrected earlier misconceptions.