Question 12

Why do present scholars of the history of ideas call Karl Barth – the strongest intellectual voice in Europe against Nazism – Interwar Europe’s ‘theological revolutionary’?

“If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you will be saved.” So reads Romans 9:9. It is a simple statement about Christian beliefs, yet the implications of this verse have a profound impact on Christian lives. This verse makes it clear that for Christians, belief and actions are linked. The fact that Christians call Jesus ‘Lord’ means that they will read the Bible, where God reveals himself, interpret it and apply it to their lives, shaping the way they act in the key turning-points in history but also in their ordinary lives.¹ Over 2000 years of Christian history, many have done this, but in the twentieth century, one who stands out is Karl Barth. He has been hailed as one of the most prolific and influential Christian thinkers of the twentieth century and for his work has been called a ‘theological revolutionary’.² This essay will take a loosely chronological look at Barth’s major works in the Interwar period: The Epistle to the Romans [Der Römerbrief] (hereafter, Romans), The Barmen Declaration and Church Dogmatics: Volume I [Kirchliche Dogmatik]. Interspersed with these three texts, this essay will examine three spheres to understand why Barth was a revolutionary: the scholarly sphere on the nature of revolutions, the theological sphere of Christian belief and the Barthian sphere of his

writings and legacy. Ultimately this essay will show that because of his writings and methodologies Barth was a ‘traditional’ revolutionary, introducing new ideas, and a ‘restorationist’ revolutionary, returning to old ones, with a significant impact on theology and for this reason has earned the title of ‘theological revolutionary’.³

Before we can determine why present scholars consider Karl Barth a ‘theological revolutionary’ we must first define the term. The word ‘theological’ means “relating to the study of the nature of God and religious belief”.⁴ For Barth, this study was on the basis of God’s self-revelation, the Bible.⁵ A ‘revolutionary’ is “a person who advocates or engages in revolution”.⁶ However, revolution is a difficult term to define and has had many different definitions.⁷ Although much has been written about specific revolutions, they tend to focus on violent social change that results in a changed political structure.⁸ However, revolution can be non-violent and is about more than political change.⁹ Instead, revolution is all about a shift that challenges and changes the current ways of thinking and acting.¹⁰ To understand why Barth was a ‘theological revolutionary’, we must examine his writings to understand.

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¹⁰ Yoder, “Current Definitions,” 433, 440.
how he challenged existing ideas about the nature of God and belief in his context of German Protestantism throughout the Interwar period.

In Barth’s *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* [*Die Protestantische Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert*], a reprint of his 1932–1933 lectures, he makes it clear that to understand a theologian, one must examine the theologians and philosophers who have preceded them.\(^{11}\) Barth had grown up in the Reformed tradition and returned to it in the 1930s.\(^ {12}\) However, whilst studying at university (1904–1908) he was exposed to liberal theology which impacted his early ministry.\(^ {13}\) As a result, many theologians with diverse views impacted Barth across his life, from fourth century Augustine to sixteenth century Reformers like Luther and Calvin.\(^ {14}\) However, at the beginning of the Interwar period, there are two philosophers, from the eighteenth century Enlightenment, as well as two theologians, one from the nineteenth and the other from the twentieth century, who significantly influenced Barth. Throughout the Enlightenment came an increasing belief in rationality, so philosophers like Kant restricted knowledge of God to what was experienced in practice.\(^ {15}\) Barth would later reject these ideas in favour of knowledge of God through biblical self-revelation. The other Enlightenment philosopher who impacted Barth was Hegel, who taught that theology was about defining truth of God, yet that knowledge could be contradictory.\(^ {16}\) From Hegel, Barth also learnt dialectics, two contradictory ideas held together.\(^ {17}\) However, Barth rejected Hegel’s idea that


\(^{16}\) Barth, *From Rousseau to Ritschl*, 299–300.

\(^{17}\) Barth, *From Rousseau to Ritschl*, 283–284.
it leads to synthesis, and argued instead for the co-existence of the two ideas.\textsuperscript{18} In reaction to the Enlightenment’s focus on reason, came nineteenth century Romanticism, focused on feelings. In response to this ideological shift, Friedrich Schleiermacher argued that feeling was the essence of Christian religion.\textsuperscript{19} This idea became the foundation of liberal theology which Barth initially embraced before rejecting it in the aftermath of the First World War.\textsuperscript{20} The writings of Søren Kierkegaard impacted Barth and heralded a new age of theology.\textsuperscript{21} They emphasised the otherness of God as well as practical commitment in the life of Christians.\textsuperscript{22} These ideas were included in Barth’s writings for the rest of his life.\textsuperscript{23} No theologian writes without being influenced by others, and although Barth later rejected many of their ideas, it is worth considering the philosophers and theologians who impacted Barth’s life to understand how the ideas that he suggested were revolutionary.

Having considered the people who influenced Barth’s early life, it is important to consider the main ideas and methodologies of liberalism, before considering how he rejects them in Romans. Liberalism was popular in Europe throughout the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{24} As stated earlier it grew out of both Christianity and the Enlightenment, borrowing elements from each.\textsuperscript{25} Liberalism emphasised feelings and freedom, had an optimistic view of humanity and progress, and a weak view of sin.\textsuperscript{26} It used methods such as biblical criticism, arguing that the Bible was not authoritative, and so eliminated the supernatural elements of the Bible, and searched for the real historical Jesus.\textsuperscript{27} Ultimately biblical criticism reached the conclusion

\textsuperscript{18} Xu, “Herman Bavinck’s ‘Yes’,” 335, 341.
\textsuperscript{19} Elwell, Dictionary of Theology, 982.
\textsuperscript{20} Jee, “Overview of Karl Barth’s Theology,” 39.
\textsuperscript{21} Dowley, History of Christianity, 612.
\textsuperscript{22} Dowley, History of Christianity, 614–615.
\textsuperscript{23} Dowley, History of Christianity, 614–615.
\textsuperscript{24} Atkinson and Field, New Dictionary, 552.
\textsuperscript{25} Dowley, History of Christianity, 584.
\textsuperscript{26} Dowley, History of Christianity, 584; Atkinson and Field, New Dictionary, 552.
\textsuperscript{27} Dowley, History of Christianity, 529, 555.
that Jesus was nothing more than an engaging moral teacher.\textsuperscript{28} Those who adhered to liberalism believed in a so-called ‘natural theology’: moral guidance came from an internal moral law and rather than being revealed through the Bible, God could be found in every aspect of creation (that is in a general revelation).\textsuperscript{29} Barth’s break with liberalism coincided with the First World War. He believed that natural theology ultimately led to nationalism and imperialism, which in turn led to the First World War which challenged the idea of humanity’s progression.\textsuperscript{30} Instead, Barth turned to the Bible, and his role as a ‘theological revolutionary’ was about to begin.\textsuperscript{31}

Whether scholars consider it the foundation of a new movement or the reflection of an older one, the publication of Romans, both the first edition in 1919 and the reworked second edition in 1922, was revolutionary.\textsuperscript{32} It was Barth’s first major work and reflects themes that would follow him for the rest of his life.\textsuperscript{33} In it, Barth rejects liberal theology (although later in life he returns to parts of it).\textsuperscript{34} His work is Christological, putting Jesus, fully God and fully man, at the centre of the Bible and human history.\textsuperscript{35} He argues that God is transcendent, existing outside of the human plane.\textsuperscript{36} He claims that the law written on the heart of Gentiles (Romans

\textsuperscript{28} Atkinson and Field, \textit{New Dictionary}, 552; Dowley, \textit{History of Christianity}, 555.
\textsuperscript{29} Liisi Keedus, “‘The New World’ of Karl Barth: Rethinking the Philosophical and Political Legacies of a Theologian,” in \textit{The European Legacy} 25, no. 2 (2020): 172; Elwell, \textit{Dictionary of Theology}, 752.
\textsuperscript{30} Keedus, “‘The New World’,” 168; Cairns, \textit{Christianity Through the Centuries}, 462.
\textsuperscript{31} Jee, “Overview of Karl Barth’s Theology,” 38.
2:15) was only for those who had been saved, discarding the idea of general revelation held in natural theology.\textsuperscript{37} Romans heralded a new movement within Christianity, neo-orthodoxy. It focused on interpreting the Bible and regularly incorporated the dialectical theology that Barth utilises throughout his commentary.\textsuperscript{38} Finally, within Romans, Barth argues for a practical Christianity, one which was even involved in the work of the state.\textsuperscript{39} Romans was the work of a ‘theological revolutionary’. In interpreting God’s word, Barth reintroduces old ideas, the centrality of the Bible and the deity of Jesus, challenging the values of the prominent liberal theology. Romans also foreshadowed that Barth’s theology would make him a political revolutionary.

Romans marked a turning point in Barth’s life. After its publication, he was invited to a university position in Göttingen.\textsuperscript{40} Whilst there he began his shift into dogmatic theology, that is studying what is true and distinctive about God.\textsuperscript{41} On the surface, it is a highly theoretical pursuit, but for Barth dogmatics and ethics were inseparable, and he encouraged others to see that as well.\textsuperscript{42} Barth’s theology and ethics were worked out through political action, and he could easily be considered a political revolutionary.\textsuperscript{43} As a pastor in Safenwil (1911–1921), he spoke out in favour of socialism.\textsuperscript{44} Throughout the Second World War, in

\textsuperscript{37} Barth, Romans, 67.
\textsuperscript{38} Elwell, Dictionary of Theology, 756; Gorringe, Karl Barth, 108.
\textsuperscript{40} Gorringe, Karl Barth, 73.
\textsuperscript{41} Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics: I.1 and I.2 The Doctrine of the Word of God, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley, G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight (London: T & T Clark, 2009), 1:10.
\textsuperscript{42} Bruce L. McCormack, Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 283.
\textsuperscript{43} John Deschner, “Karl Barth as Political Activist,” in Union Seminary Quarterly Review 28, no. 1 (Fall 1972): 55.
\textsuperscript{44} Keedus, “‘The New World’,” 170.
neutral Switzerland, he spoke in favour of Allies. During the Cold War, he supported disarmament.\(^{45}\) In the Interwar period, as a university lecturer in 1933, he considered his work as a theologian as opposing Hitler.\(^{46}\) He also opposed the Nazi regime in other ways (though these would ultimately prove insufficient).\(^{47}\) To understand Barth as a ‘theological revolutionary’ it is imperative to understand that his theology and his politics were inseparable. In his response to theology he was a political revolutionary, and in his response to politics he was a ‘theological revolutionary’.

The rise of Nazism and Hitler’s attempt to merge all Protestant churches into one denomination impacted Protestant churches in Germany.\(^{48}\) Submission to authorities was deeply ingrained for these churches, yet even more so was their commitment to the Bible.\(^{49}\) As a result, church leaders protested in Barmen and released the *Barmen Declaration*. This was mostly written by Barth and further cemented him as a ‘theological revolutionary’.\(^{50}\) Whilst it is a statement reflecting what unified the many denominations of German Protestants, it also reflects Barth’s theology.\(^{51}\) The first statement places the biblical Jesus, revealer of God, at the centre.\(^{52}\) It opposes revelation outside the Bible.\(^{53}\) Finally, it touches at the fringe of political revolution. In relating to the State, Barth chose to focus on 1 Peter 2:17

\(^{46}\) Gorringe, *Karl Barth*, 20.
\(^{47}\) Dorrien, *Barthian Revolt*, 143.
\(^{50}\) Gorringe, *Karl Barth*, 128.
\(^{52}\) Barth, *The Barmen Confession*, 8.11.
which tells Christians to honour authorities rather than the submission of Romans 13:1. In Germany, this was a theologically revolutionary way of interpreting the Bible and living it out. Ultimately though, the Protestant churches failed to do much more to oppose the Nazi regime. Barth later regretted not including a statement opposing the Nazi’s treatment of Jews. However, the Barmen Declaration helps in understanding Barth as a ‘theological revolutionary’, highlighting his belief that politics and theology were always related.

As a university lecturer in the Interwar period, both in Germany and Switzerland, Barth’s ideas and methodologies continued to develop. It has been claimed that he only finished thinking with his death. Yet Barth’s work expresses consistencies in what he believed. His major work Church Dogmatics is all about interpreting the Bible and applying it in theory and in praxis. By then however, he had learnt all he could from dialectics and had removed it from his methodologies. Within the first volume of Church Dogmatics, written in the Interwar period, Barth’s revolutionary nature comes to the forefront. There is very little in Church Dogmatics that is new in Christian belief, instead Barth is best understood as a ‘restorationist’ revolutionary, seeking to remind Christians the theoretical, how they can know God, and the practical, how they should live their lives in response. He considered that ethics and dogmatics written hand-in-hand was the logical outflow of his Reformed descent. Within Church Dogmatics Barth displayed some influence by liberal theology. However, the ideas he rebelled against in Romans do not make an appearance. He still

55 Busch, Karl Barth, 247–248.
57 Beintker, “Karl Barth,” 188.
58 Gorringe, Karl Barth, 8–9.
60 Balthasar, The Theology of Karl Barth, 185.
61 Barth, Church Dogmatics, 6:44.
62 Gorringe, Karl Barth, 28.
believed that Jesus is the centre of Christianity and that God is unknowable without his own revelation. He also played a key part in restoring the Trinity (one God with three divine, equal, coeternal, consubstantial persons) to prominence in Protestant circles, which for Barth was key to understanding God’s revelation. As a ‘restorationist’, Karl Barth is a ‘theological revolutionary’. He brought about a change in ideas, but the ideas were not his own. Instead, he re-introduced the ideas of Reformers into the twentieth century Protestant church, ideas about God, his revelation and human response.

In Barth’s lectures on theology he notes that “we do not know whether the age of Hegel is in fact entirely past”. Barth argues that we cannot know whether Hegel’s impact on theology has finished or not. The same can be said in the twenty-first century of Barth. Revolutionaries seek a new beginning, and desire to bring about change. However, they are not always successful in this. As a result, historians of revolution have debated the importance of success of a revolution compared to merely attempting a revolution in defining the term revolution. Although the age of Barth may not yet be over, there is some distance from the Interwar period that has enabled scholars to debate his ideas and see his influence. In order to fully understand Barth as a ‘theological revolutionary’, it is important to consider his legacy.

Barth’s works have been translated into many languages and contexts. As a result, his influence has slowly grown.

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65 Barth, *From Rousseau to Ritschl*, 274.
69 Jee, “Overview of Karl Barth’s Theology,” 40.
most recent scholarship focuses on his legacy.\textsuperscript{70} Analysis of his legacy is hampered by a language barrier and time constraints, and to read everything relevant would be impossible.\textsuperscript{71} Although Balthasar makes a case for Barth’s impact on Catholic theology, this essay focuses on his legacy in Protestant theology.\textsuperscript{72} It is helpful to consider this legacy in two parts: interpreting the Bible and living it out. In terms of interpreting the Bible neo-orthodoxy (including dialectical theology) has been significant, regardless of whether Barth deliberately meant this movement to bring a new way of thinking (as Dorrien argues) or not (as Dempsey argues).\textsuperscript{73} Barth impacted his contemporary theologians through his rebellion against liberalism (although he never broke completely free).\textsuperscript{74} In terms of living out the Bible, Barth’s writings (and their translations) are approachable and engaging, inspiring the church to action through the relationship of dogmatics and ethics.\textsuperscript{75} Although Barth’s most impactful shorter works were written in a specific cultural context, his larger works were revolutionary and created a legacy beyond the context in which he wrote them.\textsuperscript{76}

Barth was a ‘theological revolutionary’, especially throughout the Interwar period. His three major works in the era, \textit{The Epistle to the Romans}, \textit{The Barmen Declaration} and \textit{Church Dogmatics: Volume I}, are evidence that he interpreted the Bible and put it in to practise. He challenged the liberal beliefs he had been taught, both by introducing new ideas and returning

\textsuperscript{70} Gorringe, \textit{Karl Barth}, 152; Kooi, “Barth and Contemporary Protestant Theology,” 655.
\textsuperscript{71} Gorringe, \textit{Karl Barth}, ix.
\textsuperscript{74} Dowley, \textit{History of Christianity}, 613; Chalamet, “Barth and Liberal Protestantism,” 132.
\textsuperscript{75} Kooi, “Barth and Contemporary Protestant Theology,” 657; Deschner, “Karl Barth,” 65; McCormack, \textit{Orthodox and Modern}, 283.
to old ones. And his works continue to spark debate in scholarship. Because of his introduction of ideas which replaced the status quo and his enduring impact on Christian theology and practise, Barth has earned the title of ‘theological revolutionary’ from present scholars of the history of ideas.
Bibliography

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Part 1. Question 12. 75. are seen depends on two things, viz., the perspicacity of the intellect and the reflection of the divine brightness in the renewed corporeal things. Reply to objection 3: God’s essence is not seen in an imaginative vision. Rather, a form that represents God in some manner of likeness is effected in the imagination—just as in the divine Scriptures divine things are described metaphorically through sensible things. Article 4. Can a created intellect see God’s essence by its own natural powers? (Continuation of Question 12/12 - Operational aspects of telecommunication network service quality). Motivation It is essential to specify network service quality parameters to enable telecommunication services to be offered to customers/users in order to satisfy customers'/users' quality of service expectations. Network providers must plan, dimension and operate their networks to parameters which will ensure that services offered to customers/users meet the latter’s quality of service expectations. Question 2. The Olympic symbol uses five colors for its rings. Which color is missing: Red, Blue, Green, Yellow, and __? Answer: Question 3. Which character below does not belong with the rest? Answer: Question 4. What is the name of the artist known for street art like this—often making commentary on society? Banksy. Andy Warhol. Answer: Question 12. Which part of the human cell is being pointed to in the image? Ribosome.