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Martin Luther in Dialectical Theology

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Summary and Keywords

Following the deep and unsettling questions raised about the legacy of German Protestant theology as a result of the Great War (1914–1918), a new interest emerged in returning to the *fons et origo* of Protestant theology in the writings of Martin Luther and other reformers. This was given additional impetus through the work of Karl Holl, who is widely credited with shaping the “Luther Renaissance” of 1919–1921. Dialectical theology was a movement focused on Karl Barth that arose within German-speaking Protestantism in the aftermath of the Great War. The reception of Luther within the dialectical theology movement is complex and not easily reduced to simple categorizations. The diverse theological and confessional commitments within the movement led to various readings of Luther, generally mediated through secondary sources or channels. The movement portrayed itself in terms of a theocentric new reformation, breaking free from the cultural compromises and entanglements of German liberal theology in the first two decades of the twentieth century, particularly in relation to anthropology, Christology, and the understanding of sin. The movement presented itself as both the heir and reinterpreter of the theological legacy of the Reformation, particularly the theology of Martin Luther, most notably its emphasis on divine revelation. Yet its leading representatives—Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Rudolf Bultmann, and Friedrich Gogarten—understood Luther in somewhat different manners. It is therefore important to consider the use made of Luther by each of these figures individually, rather than try to collapse them into a single generic approach which is held to be representative of dialectical theology. The high profile these four writers accorded to Luther unquestionably stimulated Luther studies in the postwar period and contributed significantly to the current appreciation of Luther in contemporary theological debate.

Keywords: anthropology, Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Rudolf Bultmann, Christology, dialectical theology, Friedrich Gogarten, Martin Luther, revelation, sin

What is “Dialectical Theology”?

The origins of the “Dialectical Theology” movement lie in the cultural and intellectual trauma which followed the defeat of Germany in the Great War (1914–1918). Although the growing mistrust of the received theological wisdom of Wilhelmine theology was perhaps most obvious in Germany itself, theologians in German-speaking Switzerland shared in the mounting conviction that some fundamental theological reorientation was necessary in light of the challenges of this new situation. The Great War precipitated a crisis of confidence within German-speaking Protestantism, which both provoked and legitimated radical theological reflection and reconstruction. Dialectical theology was one of a number of movements which sought to respond to this crisis, initially through a radical deconstructive critique of the existing theological consensus, and subsequently through the gradual development of more positive and constructive theological proposals.

The Swiss Reformed pastors Karl Barth and Eduard Thurneysen both considered that the catastrophe of the Great War represented a moment of crisis, passing judgment on a complacent collusion between Christian theology and culture, and issuing a challenge to rediscover the core themes of the Christian faith.¹ Thurneysen and Barth had studied theology together at the University of Marburg in 1909 and were convinced that the war had exposed fundamental, if not fatal, flaws in prevailing understandings of the grounds and tasks of Christian theology. Their friendship was consolidated when they served as Reformed pastors in the neighboring villages of Safenwil and Leutwil in the Aargau region of Switzerland in the late 1910s and early 1920s. Both Barth and Thurneysen saw a historical precedent for their emerging program of critical and radical theological restructuring as lying in the Reformation of the 16th century, spearheaded by Martin Luther. Yet this rhetorical alignment with Luther did not initially rest on a solid understanding or close reading of Luther’s works. Luther was appropriated more as a theological figurehead (perhaps even a totem), rather than as a theological resource.

As Barth and Thurneysen consolidated their attempts to formulate a new theological approach in the late 1910s and early 1920s, others were drawn into their circle. The first such addition to the group was Emil Brunner, a Swiss Protestant pastor then ministering in the village of Obstalten in the canton of Glarus. Brunner was invited to join Barth and Thurneysen in delivering a series of public lectures at Leutwil from February 4–6, 1917, which were intended to act as a manifesto for a new vision of theology. It was a shaky start to their collaboration, in that Brunner’s concept of the “word of God” turned out to be rather less radical than his potential colleagues would have liked. Brunner distrusted what he saw as the purely negative and critical approach of Barth and Thurneysen. Surely, it was possible to affirm as well as criticize aspects of the theological legacy of the past?

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There was never any doubt that Barth was the theological lodestar of this group, and Thurneysen his closest ally. The movement initially had no name and gradually came to be referred to both as “dialectical theology” (on account of its insistence on the fundamental divergence of divine revelation and human culture) and “a theology of crisis” (the term preferred and popularized by Emil Brunner). The term “dialectical theology” is to be preferred, however, as it encapsulates a core theme of the movement at this time—what Barth termed the “infinite qualitative distinction between time and eternity.”² Yet it should be noted that Barth found this distinction primarily in Kierkegaard, rather than in Luther.

Most scholars regard the public emergence of “dialectical theology” to date from the publication of Barth’s Romans commentary. The first edition of this work (1919) attracted much attention, not least because of its strongly eschatological orientation. The old world-order was declared to be in its death throes and would be overcome and replaced by the Kingdom of God. Barth’s work attracted the attention of the German Lutheran theologian Friedrich Gogarten, who admired its negative and iconoclastic approach to culture. For both Barth and Gogarten, God’s revelation negated the significance of human culture, experience, and history. Where Brunner found Barth’s iconoclasm problematic, Gogarten found it compelling.³ Gogarten’s association with the group during the 1920s introduced a new and somewhat complicating dynamic into its emerging theological program.⁴ Whereas Barth, Thurneysen, and Brunner shared a common national and confessional identity (all were Swiss Reformed pastors), Gogarten was a German Lutheran.

This potential cause of tension became more significant as a result of the association of Rudolf Bultmann with the group in the early 1920s. Although Bultmann’s relation to the group seemed to some to be slightly tangential, he was clearly sympathetic to at least some of its concerns and aims. Like Gogarten, Bultmann was also a German Lutheran and would incorporate aspects of his Lutheran heritage into his reflections on the contemporary interpretation and application of the New Testament.

It is important to appreciate from the outset that “dialectical theology” did not see itself as needing to undertake a precise historical assessment of the development of Luther’s theology. The movement’s focus was not intellectual history, but contemporary theological debate. The issue was primarily a concern for contemporary theological utility, rather than historical precision.

So how did this emerging “dialectical theology” movement interpret and appropriate Luther? This is not an easy question to answer, for two main reasons. First, there was no shared consensus on the theological significance of Luther within the movement; its individual members developed their own distinct (and at times divergent) approaches. Second, those approaches changed over time. This is particularly clear in the case of Karl Barth, whose growing familiarity with Luther’s writings in the late 1920s and 1930s shaped his positive and constructive articulation of his theology in his later period, by

which stage the term “dialectical theology” was no longer helpful as a form of theological categorization.

This article covers the reception of Luther within dialectical theology during the period 1919–1934. During this fifteen-year period, “dialectical theology” initially coalesced before beginning to collapse, partly due to long-standing tensions and unresolved disagreements. Of the five leading members of the group, Thurneysen is best seen as playing a supportive role, and contributes little to the overall discussion of the theological significance of Luther, despite a promising early essay on the link between the doctrine of justification and pastoral care, in which Luther’s ideas are considered.⁵ Therefore, only the four remaining members of the group will be considered individually, so that their distinctive readings and assessments of Luther can be more clearly appreciated. Nevertheless, to gain a proper appreciation of both the distinct manner in which dialectical theology appropriated Luther, and the impact of the movement on the subsequent reception of Luther, we need to consider how Luther was perceived and received in the first two decades of the 20th century.

The Background: German Luther Reception, 1900–1920

Dialectical theology emerged within a specific historical and theological context, which shaped its ideas and approaches. It is widely suggested that there was a “Luther Renaissance” in German theology during the period 1919–1921, as Protestant theologians from a variety of perspectives positioned themselves as heirs to his heritage, at a time when it was imperative to undertake theological reconstruction.⁶ One outcome of the crisis in confidence in existing Protestant paradigms—such as the forms of liberal Protestantism associated with F. D. E. Schleiermacher and A. B. Ritschl—was a sense of the need to break with the past and begin theological reflection from ground zero. Some saw this as entailing a direct return to the “strange world of the Bible”; some to the theological heritage of the Reformation, particularly that of Luther; others to a judicious amalgam of both these options.

Traditionally, German Protestant Lutheran reception was orientated around an essentially theological metanarrative that envisaged a fundamental link between Paul, Augustine of Hippo, and Luther. This narrative invited those in later periods to align themselves with these channels of Christian authenticity as a means of ensuring theological continuity with these benchmarks of faith. Liberal Protestant writers such as Ritschl and Adolf von Harnack preferred to eliminate Augustine as a link in this chain, holding that primitive Christianity had ceased to exist by the end of the second century. Others, however, proposed a metanarrative that was more cultural than theological, seeing continuity with Luther as a means of preserving German national and religious identity.

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Luther was seen as a uniquely and distinctively German voice within the Christian tradition, who was both adaptable to the needs and concerns of the 20th century, while at the same time offering access to the core themes of the authentic faith of the New Testament. Perhaps for this reason, Ernst Troeltsch's *Significance of Protestantism for the Beginning of the Modern World* (1911) provoked irritation and concern, not least because it seemed to weaken the links between Luther and modern Protestantism, and partly because it relativized his significance, presenting him as a representative of an older form of Protestantism that had essentially outlived its usefulness.

Reacting against such trends immediately after the Great War, Karl Holl reasserted the importance of Luther for German Protestant religion and theology.⁷ Holl's reformulation of Luther's significance was based on a solid research base, developed during the period 1914–1918, which found mature expression in his substantial postwar collection of essays on Luther (1921). For Holl, the Reformation was to be understood as a retrieval and renewal of the primitive Christian outlook, a means of safeguarding insights that were too easily lost or distorted. Perhaps most important, Holl's essay on "What Luther Understood by Religion" argued that Luther understood religion in strongly theocentric terms. Although religion engaged and connected with human individuality and subjectivity, it remained fundamentally focused on God, rather than human nature.⁸ Luther's concept of God was thus seen to differ radically from the culturally accommodated deity of liberal Protestantism.

Holl portrays Luther as breaking with the religious traditions of the Middle Ages to formulate a conception of religion which adapted to the needs of the postwar generation in Germany.⁹ Holl's hints that prewar theology had failed to read Luther properly, or lacked the will to embrace his fundamental theological vision, positioned Luther as a critical and constructive resource for postwar German theology. Not surprisingly, many were ready to rise to his challenge—including some within dialectical theology, particularly Karl Barth and Friedrich Gogarten.

Karl Barth

As noted earlier, Barth is the central and most significant figure within the "dialectical theology" movement. His moment of breakthrough came in his 1919 Romans commentary, which propelled him to significance and secured his calling to the chair of Reformed theology at Göttingen in 1921, as well as laying the foundations for his theological alliance with Gogarten. Yet this landmark work owed little to Luther and is arguably more influenced by political and philosophical motifs which were woven into an essentially eschatological reading of history—something Luther generally tended to avoid, on account of its associations with some of the more radical Protestant movements of his day (the *Schwärmer*).¹⁰ After his arrival at Göttingen, Barth revised this work substantially and published a new edition in 1922. Here, the notion of the absolute

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separation of God from humanity becomes a controlling theme of his exposition of Pauline theology.

If I have any system, it is restricted to bearing in mind, as much as possible, what Kierkegaard called the “infinite qualitative distinction” between time and eternity, in its negative and positive aspects. “God is in heaven, and you are on earth.” For me, the relation of this God and this person, the relation of this person and this God, is, in a nutshell, the theme of the Bible and the totality of philosophy.¹¹

Although this motif is certainly present in Luther, it is carefully nuanced in terms of an incarnational bridging of the gap between God and humanity. Barth’s formulation of the epistemic tragedy of humanity ultimately rests more on his reading of Kierkegaard than of Luther. Indeed, there are few indications that Barth finds anything of theological significance in Luther’s writings at this very early stage. In delineating his theological lineage at this time, Barth suggests that his “ancestral line” runs from Kierkegaard back to Paul and Jeremiah. Barth makes it clear that this trajectory includes Luther and Calvin; yet Luther is not identified as a core landmark in this theological family history.

Barth identifies Luther and Calvin alike as insisting that “man is made to serve God, not God to serve man.”¹² This is, of course, a valid insight; yet it is not an insight that distinguishes Luther. At this early stage, Barth tends to elide Luther and Calvin as “Reformers,” framing their fundamental theological insight in terms of accepting that God was God.

[The Reformers] made the discovery that theology had to do with *God*. They made the great, shattering discovery of the *object* of all theology. Their secret was simply that they took the character of this object *seriously*. They called God *God*; they let God be *God*, the object that could not possibly be made to become merely one object among others through human manipulation, speculation, or encroachment.¹³

It is, of course, difficult to reduce the theological significance of Luther—or Calvin—to a single principle. Yet it is questionable whether this is an acceptable account of Luther’s theological breakthrough, or the fundamental principle on which he based his reforming program at Wittenberg and beyond. Luther’s preferred summary of his theological concerns was formulated in terms of the *articulus iustificationis*, the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*, which certainly affirmed the maxim *Deus dixit*, but framed this specifically in terms of *Deus iustificans*, disclosed and embodied in Jesus Christ, who transformed the situation of *homo peccator*.¹⁴

This raises the important question of whether the specific cultural and theological anxieties and agendas of dialectical theology led the movement to be inattentive to Luther’s focus on the *articulus iustificationis*. An emphasis on the proper knowledge of God, and the means by which this is to be attained, seems to displace any concern with Luther’s existential wrestling with the question of finding a gracious God. Where his liberal opponents saw this as a trajectory of discovery, moving from humanity to God,

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Barth represents it as a trajectory of disclosure, moving from God to humanity. Yet while the direction of theological travel has been inverted, the fundamental parameters remain unchanged. At this stage, Barth's focus is on the proper knowledge of God, not the transformation of the human situation through redemption. Luther does indeed contrast modes of knowing God based on human reasoning with those derived from divine revelation; yet this is part of a broader picture, enfolded within the justification of sinful humanity.

Deeply embedded within Barth's interpretation of the significance of Luther is an implicit understanding of his historical significance, clearly echoing Holl's analysis of Luther. Luther and the first generation of Reformation thinkers mark a discontinuity with the medieval church, especially the theology of scholasticism, which offered a comprehensive and stable vision of reality, in which reason was perfected by revelation. For Barth, Luther's theological protest was fundamentally a work of demolition, razing this edifice to the ground in order that it might be rebuilt on the basis of the word of God. Barth framed this historical narrative in terms borrowed from Luther's 1517 Heidelberg Disputation: medieval scholasticism represented a false "theology of glory," which Luther and his colleagues sought to replace with a true "theology of the cross."¹⁵

One of Luther's core themes, which arises out of his theology of justification, concerns the dialectic between the law and gospel. While Barth's position on this question was formally set out in his tract *Evangelium und Gesetz* (Gospel and law) in 1935, hints of it can be seen earlier. For Luther, the dialectic between law and gospel is fundamental to a right understanding of the relation of Old and New Testaments, as well as to the dispensation of salvation. Luther's views were institutionalized in Lutheran confessions and often formulated in terms of the Law condemning humanity, while the Gospel saves humanity. The law brought knowledge of sin; the gospel the means by which sin might be forgiven. Barth reversed the traditional law–gospel order on the basis of his radical new understanding of both the law and the gospel. In doing so, he clearly distanced himself from both the historical Luther and contemporary Lutheranism.

As Barth's theological project developed, both his approach and use of Luther altered.¹⁶ The importance of Luther to the later Barth can hardly be overstated. No theologian is referenced as often in the *Church Dogmatics* as Luther; Calvin comes a relatively close second. There are a number of themes in Barth's mature theology that clearly reflect Luther's influence, including the following.¹⁷

- 1.** Barth's mature vision of theology is strongly Christocentric, both revelationally and soteriologically. Jesus Christ is not the basis of a salvation that is something other than himself. The salvation that Christ bears and makes possible is not an alien salvation, but himself.

2. In his later period, Barth consolidated his interest in Luther's theology of the cross, now seeing this as far more than a framework for distinguishing the theologies of the medieval and Reformation eras. For Barth, the theology of the cross now discloses the suffering love of God—the "passion of God himself." At this point, Barth is clearly much closer to Luther than to Calvin. Although both Reformation theologians maintain the "dual nature" of Christ, Calvin insisted on the impassability of the divine nature, whereas Luther affirmed the suffering of God in Christ.

3. Although Barth's emphasis upon the primacy of the "word of God" emerged at an early stage in his thinking, his mature formulation of this notion shows clear signs of the influence of Luther. Christ is not disclosed in any other way than through the Word, and cannot be grasped any other way than through faith.

4. In the late 1920s, Barth became increasingly critical of soteriological gradualism—the notion that the act of justification is followed by a process of sanctification, in which a process of salvation takes place within us by degrees. Barth came to align himself with Luther's soteriological framework, best known in the slogan *simul iustus et peccator* ("at one and the same time a righteous person and a sinner"). Human beings remain sinners throughout their lives and are not partially sanctified over time.

Emil Brunner

Brunner consciously identified himself as standing within the Reformed theological tradition, paying due respect to both the Zurich reformer Huldrych Zwingli and his later Genevan counterpart, John Calvin.¹⁸ Yet Brunner's works of the early 1920s show a willingness to engage a broader vision of Protestantism, including the appropriation of some core themes of the theology of Martin Luther, particularly his dialectic between "law" and "gospel," and his notion of the "orders of creation."¹⁹ Brunner's appropriation of these notions within an essentially Reformed theological framework raised some eyebrows at Zurich. At several points, Brunner seemed to be more aligned with leading Lutheran theologians of this period (such as Paul Althaus) than with his Reformed counterparts.²⁰ Yet Luther's idea of "orders of creation" resonated with Brunner's emerging theology of revelation, which held that the divine creation of the world and humanity entailed some form of created correspondence between the structures of the created order—including human consciousness—and God. Revelationally, this could be articulated in terms of the "point of contact"; ethically, it could naturally be expressed in terms of the "orders of creation."

One especially important manner in which Brunner appropriates Luther relates to his criticism of the regnant understandings of the Bible within Protestant Orthodoxy, whether Lutheran or Reformed. In 1927, Brunner argued that Orthodoxy had improperly identified the Bible with the "word of God" and failed to nuance its relation with human words, on the one hand, and the "Word incarnate," on the other. Brunner clinched his argument that earlier forms of Protestantism were more sensitive to these issues by citing Luther's well-known maxim that "Scripture is the cradle in which Christ is laid," Brunner insists that this cradle is to be distinguished—though not separated from—Jesus Christ. "The Bible is a human witness to God, yet it is also something human through which God reveals himself."²¹ On the other hand, Brunner cites Luther in his early criticism of mysticism, which seemed to him to risk reducing theology to "psychologism" or subjective feelings.²²

Brunner also picks up on Luther's notion of the *larvae Dei*, which expresses the belief that there could be no unmediated relationship between God and humanity. In order to shield human beings from the unapproachable light of divine glory, Luther argues, God always remains partially hidden behind a mask (*larva*). God's unaccommodated radiant majesty can never be pursued or perceived directly but is both disclosed and hidden under the form of such "masks." God thus envelops and reveals himself under and through created forms—such as in the incarnation or in the sacraments. Brunner interprets Luther to speak of "revelation through veiling," one of the more characteristic features of Brunner's theology in his landmark work *Der Mittler* (The mediator), now regarded as one of the most important 20th-century works of Christian anthropology.²³

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Brunner is perhaps best known for initiating a critique in 1934 of Barth's somewhat dismissive assessment of natural theology and cognate notions, such as a natural knowledge of God.²⁴ Brunner believed that both notions could be defended in the face of Barth's concerns that they subverted the place of divine revelation, and cited Luther in support of this contention. Brunner found his own views echoed in Ernst Wolf's assessment of Luther, published in that same year,²⁵ and was baffled by Barth's hostility toward the notion. Given the increasingly important place that Luther was coming to play in the positive formulation of Barth's own theology at this time, why was Barth so hostile to what Brunner considered to be one of Luther's core insights?

One particularly important point at which Brunner appropriates and develops Luther's thinking concerns the articulation of a genuinely theological anthropology. Barth was opposed to any such development, believing that it would ultimately reduce theology to anthropology. Brunner, however, believed that the Christian faith provided an intellectual framework which offered a rigorously theological account of human nature. In doing so, he picked up on some themes developed by Luther, especially his *totus homo* anthropology, which refused to treat sin and righteousness as different aspects or components of human nature.²⁶ For Luther, sin is not merely something within human nature that is corrupt; rather, it is the corruption of human nature in its totality.

Brunner echoes these themes. Sin affects the whole of human existence and cannot be isolated in some hermetically sealed compartment. It is not one part of human nature that is sinful and requires redemption. Humanity, as a totality, is sinful and stands in need of radical transformation through Christ. Brunner perhaps articulates this point most clearly in his 1948 Robertson Lectures at the University of Glasgow: "It is not a part of a human being which is guilty of sin but the whole human being . . . We could express it like this: we not only commit sins, but we are sinners."²⁷ Brunner's commitment to developing a theologically informed and grounded anthropology (which incorporated some key themes from Luther's approach) dates from the late 1920s. Although Gogarten had also stressed the importance of constructing such an anthropology,²⁸ this was decidedly a minority opinion within dialectical theology at this time and is known to have irritated Barth.

Friedrich Gogarten

Gogarten became associated with the dialectical theology movement from around 1919, when he was drawn to the radical eschatological vision that he found set out in the first edition of Barth's commentary on Romans. Gogarten was educated at Berlin, Jena, and Heidelberg and taught at the Universities of Breslau (1931–1935) and Göttingen (1935–1955). Gogarten shared the sense that German theology was in a state of crisis following the trauma of the Great War and that its fate depended entirely on the choices it made at this critical juncture. Theology stood "between the eras" (*zwischen den Zeiten*, a term later adopted as the name of the journal dedicated to the promotion of the ideas and

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agendas of dialectical theology). “It is the fate of our generation that we stand between two eras. We never belonged to the period which is ending today.”²⁹

Gogarten thus mounted a full frontal assault on any theologies which seemed to him to be dependent on cultural assumptions or values. These were locked into the ideas and values of a passing age. God was totally removed from the ideas and values of this world, and was revealed in the negation of human ideas, values, and history. Everything that human beings produce has both an origin and an ending. It is not of permanent significance but is transient and contingent.

Gogarten appears to have seen Luther as embodying this radical and iconoclastic attitude, and developed his own distinct interpretation of Luther as a prophetic voice in this period of chaos and uncertainty.³⁰ Yet Gogarten’s reading of Luther is idiosyncratic and seems to be driven by the need to find a plausible figurehead for his own theological and cultural agenda. Gogarten’s Luther is actually an Anabaptist, hoping for divine renewal in the midst of the chaos and destruction of the settled social order. Yet this is precisely the charge that Gogarten laid against Ernst Troeltsch—that he was essentially *unreformatory*, having aligned himself with the Anabaptists and humanists of the Reformation period.³¹ This extravagant judgment may be historically unreliable, but it is indicative of the totemic significance of Luther in particular (and the Reformation in general) to Gogarten’s vision of the radical revision of Christian theology that he believed was necessary in light of the cultural crisis of the postwar era in Germany.

Rudolf Bultmann

Although Bultmann is often regarded primarily as a New Testament scholar, it is important to appreciate that his fundamental concerns were ultimately theological. Bultmann’s relationship with the dialectical theology movement began in the early 1920s, when he found himself engaged by some of the ideas then being developed by Barth.³² Bultmann is often regarded as having subsequently defected from the movement, with his 1941 lecture on the “demythologization of the New Testament” being seen as indicative of some lapse into some form of theological liberalism. However, this is a problematic reading of Bultmann’s intentions and agendas.

It is clearly possible to position Bultmann’s theological concerns of the early 1940s alongside those of the dialectical theology movement during the 1920s.³³ For example, Eberhard Jüngel has suggested that Bultmann’s theological program should be understood primarily as an attempt to speak of God appropriately (and in doing so, also speaking appropriately about humanity). This program demands that God is not to be objectified and represented as an “It.” Where Barth develops this insight primarily in terms of his doctrine of the Trinity, Bultmann frames it in terms of articulating God as You (*Du*) rather than an “It.”³⁴ Jüngel’s reading of Bultmann thus locates him firmly within the

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dialectical theology movement, suggesting that Bultmann's complex notion of demythologization performs essentially the same theological function as Barth's doctrine of the Trinity.³⁵

So how does Luther fit into Bultmann's theological concerns? A good case can be made for suggesting that Luther's doctrine of justification by faith is the defining theological framework around which Bultmann's notions of the *kerygma* and demythologization are developed.³⁶ Bultmann himself emphasized the parallels between his notion of demythologization and Luther's doctrine of justification. The significance of Jesus Christ for humanity does not lie in some neutral and objective assessment of his historical identity, but in a fiduciary embrace of his existential significance.³⁷ Bultmann develops an essentially Lutheran reading of Paul, which is correlated with the existential analysis of the human situation developed by his Marburg colleague, Martin Heidegger.³⁸

Bultmann, as a confessional Lutheran, had little difficulty in reading the New Testament in light of the law-gospel dialectic and seeing the doctrine of justification as a core theme of the Pauline corpus.³⁹ For Bultmann, as for Luther, theology must give an account of the full significance of Jesus Christ *pro nobis*. Any substantive Christology must focus on the impact of the proclaimed Christ upon the believer, rather than the "Jesus of history."⁴⁰ Faith is fundamentally a cognitive and existential trust in the Christ of the New Testament *kerygma*.⁴¹ Like Luther, Bultmann considered it essential to break free from historical details and discover the theological treasure which they enfolded.

The Barmen Declaration (1934): A Dialectical Distancing from Luther

The Barmen Declaration—more strictly, the *Barmer Theologische Erklärung*—of 1934 is often seen as one of the most important politico-theological documents of its age⁴² and is of importance in understanding some of the theological anxieties about Luther's political theology that surfaced around this time. Although Karl Barth was one of its leading architects, the Barmen Declaration cannot strictly be regarded as representative of the "dialectical theology" movement, not least because Barth himself by then had moved beyond its original emphases and agendas. Nevertheless, it merits discussion here, in that Barth's position in this document can reasonably be seen as representing an extension of some of his earlier "dialectical" reflections. The leading Lutheran theologian Paul Althaus (1888–1966), for example, saw Barmen as an outworking of Barth's "revelational monism," which he believed was not properly integrated with authentically Lutheran motifs.⁴³

The Barmen Declaration was intended to offer a theological foundation for opposing the process of the Nazification and cultural assimilation (*Gleichschaltung*) of the German churches which followed Adolf Hitler's seizure of power in 1933. No political or ideological authority can be allowed to take precedence over the Word of God, as this is revealed in Jesus Christ. Yet it proved difficult to formulate this point without compromising or reworking traditional interpretations of Luther's doctrine of the "Two Kingdoms," which seemed to some to allow the Nazi State excessive cultural (*völkisch*) and ecclesial privileges.⁴⁴

Barth's approach owed little to Luther at this point and is best seen as reflecting a Reformed construal of the relation of law and gospel.⁴⁵ The ensuing fifth article of the Barmen Declaration set out an understanding of the relation of church and state which Barth considered to represent an effective bulwark against the totalitarian claims of the Nazi state,⁴⁶ yet which was seen by conservative Lutherans as abandoning a core element of traditional confessional Lutheranism.⁴⁷ As the Lutheran representative Thomas Breit remarked, it seemed as if the Lutherans had fallen asleep during this critical discussion, during which their Reformed counterparts had remained wide awake.⁴⁸ Although some leading German Lutherans were prepared to collude with the document, given the political expediencies of the situation, others found themselves alienated from Barth's less than subtle reformulation of the Lutheran position.

It was not difficult for the opponents of Barmen within the "German Christian" movement to present its statements as tantamount to a renunciation (or even betrayal) of Luther. For the German Christians, Luther was a defining representative of German nationalism and Teutonic religious virtue.⁴⁹ Many within the "German Christian" (*Deutsche Christen*)

movement of this period regarded Luther as an icon of a distinctively German form of Christianity and valued his dialectic between law and gospel as a critique of Judaism.

Despite its iconic significance for some, it is too easy to overstate the importance of the Barmen Theological Declaration. It was not a full-frontal assault against Nazism, as some have suggested. It is significant that the Declaration contains no quotations from the Old Testament; that it makes no attempt to connect the church with the history of Israel, nor does it reassert the Jewishness of Jesus of Nazareth. Barmen is best seen as a declaration of ideological independence on the part of the churches rather than as an explicit rejection of Nazi ideology. Nor did the Declaration prove helpful in the process of theological reconstruction which followed the end of the Second World War, or in resolving the conflicts over the relation of church and state which re-emerged in the immediate postwar period.⁵⁰ Lutherans were generally suspicious of allowing Barmen to be seen as a mediating Protestant Confession of Faith on account of what they considered to be its deficient formulation of a classic Lutheran theme.

The Impact of Dialectical Theology on Luther Reception

The manner in which Luther was received by the leading representatives of the dialectical theology movement confirms his totemic importance for the movement, while at the same time highlighting their diverse (and possibly divergent) theological agendas. Dialectical theology sought to position itself as a new reformation, offering a fresh vision of the nature and tasks of theology in the aftermath of the Great War. Their appeal to Luther as a figurehead was initially at least as much about creating a perception of historical location as about the appropriation of his theological ideas.

Yet as the movement consolidated, it found Luther's theological ideas offered a significant theological resource and engaged with them in increasing depth. The importance of Luther for Barth in particular led to a growing interest in the proper interpretation of Luther in the 1930s and beyond.⁵¹ Although this new focus on the reception of Luther in German-language theology was motivated by a number of factors, including tensions between conservative confessional Lutherans and theological revisionists, there is no doubt that this interest led to some of the finest works of Luther scholarship.⁵² Walther von Loewenich's 1929 study of Luther's theology of the cross (published by Kaiser Verlag in Munich, by then the semi-official publisher of the dialectical theology movement) reflects this renewed interest in Luther within the movement,⁵³ which continues to this day. Whether leading dialectical theologians interpreted Luther rightly or wrongly, they helped position Luther as a core figure and resource in contemporary theological debates, giving a new impetus to the historical exploration of the emergence of his distinct ideas, and their importance in contemporary theological debates.

Review of the Literature

The reception of Luther within the dialectical theology movement as a whole has not been the subject of detailed study. Early accounts of the diverse interpretations of Luther within the theological movements of the 1920s lacked the critical distance necessary to make reliable assessments and often betrayed skewed understandings of the motivations and agendas of dialectical theology.⁵⁴ Yet there was an early recognition of the importance of Luther for the movement. Walther Köhler, for example, suggested in 1933 that Luther's appeal to dialectical theology lay particularly in his concept of revelation, including the notion of a "hidden God."⁵⁵ Yet although some general surveys of the reception of Luther in German-speaking Protestantism and beyond make reference to dialectical theology,⁵⁶ the level of engagement is not generally adequate to clarify the distinctive (and often divergent) manners in which the leading representatives of the movement understood and appropriated Luther.

More recent studies have focused on the individual reception of Luther on the part of the four leading representatives of the dialectical theology movement: Barth, Brunner, Bultmann, and Gogarten.⁵⁷ Others have focused on German interpretations of Luther during the period of the emergence of dialectical theology, generally concentrating on Barth and Gogarten.⁵⁸ Such approaches, however, do not allow a comparative evaluation of these individual approaches to Luther, which requires that they are set alongside those adopted by their colleagues within the dialectical theology movement. This article therefore aims to explore and correlate the way in which Barth, Brunner, Bultmann, and Gogarten appropriated and interpreted Luther, allowing the question of the focus and coherence of the reception of Luther within the movement to be more thoroughly appreciated.

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(2.) For the nuances of this term, see Michael Beintker, *Die Dialektik in der "Dialektischen Theologie" Karl Barths* (Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1987); Dietrich Korsch, "Ein großes Mißverständnis: Die Rezeptionsgeschichte der eigentlichen 'Dialektischen Theologie' Karl Barths," in *Karl Barth im Europäischen Zeitgeschehen (1935–1950): Widerstand—*

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(3.) Peter Lange, *Konkrete Theologie? Karl Barth und Friedrich Gogarten "Zwischen den Zeiten" (1922–1933): Eine Theologiegeschichtlich-systematische Untersuchung im Blick auf die Praxis theologischen Verhaltens* (Zurich, Switzerland: Theologischer Verlag, 1972).

(4.) Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, "Friedrich Gogartens Deutung der Moderne: Ein theologiegeschichtlicher Rückblick," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 100 (1989): 169–230; Stefan Holtmann, *Karl Barth als Theologe der Neuzeit: Studien zur kritischen Deutung seiner Theologie* (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 159–172.

(5.) Eduard Thurneysen, "Rechtfertigung und Seelsorge," *Zwischen den Zeiten* 6 (1928): 197–218.

(6.) James M. Stayer, *Martin Luther, German Saviour: German Evangelical Theological Factions and the Interpretation of Luther, 1917–1933* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000), 3–17; Christian Albrecht, "Zwischen Kriegstheologie und Krisentheologie: Zur Lutherrezeption im Reformationsjubiläum 1917," in *Luther zwischen den Kulturen: Zeitgenossenschaft—Weltwirkung*, ed. Hans Medick and Peer Schmidt (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 482–499; Assel, "Die Lutherrenaissance in Deutschland von 1900 bis 1960."

(7.) Stayer, *Martin Luther*, 18–47; Christine Svinth-Voerge Pöder, "Gewissen oder Gebet: Die Rezeption der Römerbriefvorlesung Luthers bei Karl Holl und Rudolf Hermann," in *Lutherrenaissance Past and Present*, ed. Christine Helmer and Bo Kristian Holm (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 54–73.

(8.) Karl Holl, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte*, 3 vols. (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr, 1921–1928).

(9.) Peter Grove, "Adolf von Harnack and Karl Holl on Luther at the Origins of Modernity," in *Lutherrenaissance Past and Present*, ed. Christine Helmer and Bo Kristian Holm (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 106–124.

(10.) James M. Stayer, "'Luther und die Schwärmer': Karl Holl und das abenteuerliche Leben eines Textes," in *Außenseiter zwischen Mittelalter und Neuzeit. Festschrift für Hans-Jürgen Goertz*, ed. Norbert Fischer and Marion Kobelt-Groc (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1997), 169–188.

(11.) Karl Barth, *Römerbrief*, 8th ed. (Zurich, Switzerland: Zollikon, 1947), xiii.

(12.) For a more detailed exploration of such themes, see Andreas Siemens, "Karl Barth der Vollender der lutherischer Reformation?," *Theologische Beiträge* 8 (1977): 31–35; Albrecht Peters, "Karl Barth gegen Martin Luther?," in *Rechenschaft des Glaubens*:

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(13.) Karl Barth, *Die Theologie Calvins* (Zurich, Switzerland: Theologischer Verlag, 1993), 22.

(14.) Ernst Wolf, “Die Rechtfertigungslehre als Mitte und Grenze reformatorischer Theologie,” *Evangelische Theologie* 9 (1949–1950): 298–308. For discussion of Wolf’s point, see Alister E. McGrath, “Karl Barth and the *Articulus Iustificationis*: The Significance of His Critique of Ernst Wolf within the Context of his Theological Method,” *Theologische Zeitschrift* 39 (1983): 349–361.

(15.) Edgar Thaidigsmann, *Identitätsverlangen und Widerspruch: Kreuzestheologie bei Luther, Hegel und Barth* (Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1983).

(16.) Stayer, *Martin Luther*, 48–67; Busch, *Barth: Ein Porträt in Dialogen von Luther bis Benedict XVI*, 13–37.

(17.) George Hunsinger, “What Karl Barth Learned from Martin Luther,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 13.2 (1999): 125–155.

(18.) Walter J. Hollenweger, “Wurzeln der Theologie Emil Brunners: Aus Brunners theologischer Entwicklung von ca. 1913 bis 1919,” *Reformatio* 13.12 (1963): 579–587.

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(21.) Emil Brunner, *Religionsphilosophie evangelischer Theologie* (Munich: Leibniz Verlag, 1948), 79.

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(24.) Alister E. McGrath, *Emil Brunner: A Reappraisal* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 90–132.

(25.) Ernst Wolf, *Martin Luther, das Evangelium und die Religion* (Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1934), 9–13.

(26.) Bengt Hägglund, “Luthers Anthropologie,” in *Leben und Werk Martin Luthers von 1526 bis 1546: Festgabe zu seinem 500. Geburtstag*, ed. Helmar Junghans (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983), 63–76.

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- (28.) Friedrich Gogarten, "Das Problem einer theologischen Anthropologie," *Zwischen den Zeiten* 7 (1929): 493–511.
- (29.) Friedrich Gogarten, "Zwischen den Zeiten," *Christliche Welt* 34.24 (1920): 374–378; quote at p. 374.
- (30.) Friedrich Duensing, *Gesetz als Gericht: Eine luthersche Kategorie in der Theologie Werner Elerts und Friedrich Gogartens* (Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1970); Mathias Schmoeckel, *Das Recht der Reformation: Die epistemologische Revolution der Wissenschaft und die Spaltung der Rechtsordnung in der frühen Neuzeit* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 295–297.
- (31.) Friedrich Gogarten, "Protestantismus und Wirklichkeit," in *Anfänge der dialektischen Theologie*, ed. Jürgen Moltmann (Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1967), 191–218.
- (32.) Konrad Hammann, *Rudolf Bultmann: Eine Biographie*, 3d ed. (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 134–147.
- (33.) Hinrich Stoevesandt, "Basel–Marburg: Ein (un)erledigter Konflikt?," in *Bibel und Mythos: Fünfzig Jahre nach Rudolf Bultmanns Entmythologisierungsprogramm*, ed. Bernd Jaspert (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 91–113.
- (34.) Eberhard Jüngel, *Gottes Sein ist im Werden: Verantwortliche Rede vom Sein Gottes bei Karl Barth: Ein Paraphrase*, 4th ed. (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr, 1986), 33–34. See further Eberhard Jüngel, "Glauben und Verstehen: Zum Theologiebegriff Rudolf Bultmanns," in *Wertlose Wahrheit. Zur Identität und Relevanz des christlichen Glaubens. Theologische Erörterungen III*, ed. Eberhard Jüngel (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2003, 16–77).
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- (36.) Congdon, *The Mission of Demythologizing*, 496–499.
- (37.) Rudolf Bultmann, "Die Krisis des Glaubens," in *Glauben und Verstehen: Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr, 1965), 2:1–19.
- (38.) Gerhard Gloege, *Mythologie und Luthertum: Recht und Grenze der Entmythologisierung*, 3d ed. (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963).

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(40.) Amy Marga, “Jesus Christ and the Modern Sinner: Karl Barth’s Retrieval of Luther’s Substantive Christology,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 34.4 (2007): 260–270.

(41.) Hartmut von Sass, “*Assensus Fiduciae*: Glauben als vertrauen bei Rudolf Bultmann,” *Kerygma und Dogma* 57.3 (2011): 243–268.

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(43.) Paul Althaus, *Die christliche Wahrheit: Lehrbuch der Dogmatik*, 2 vols. (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1947), 1:60.

(44.) For discussion of this point, see Andreas Stegmann, “Die Geschichte der Erforschung von Martin Luthers Ethik,” *Lutherjahrbuch* 79 (2012): 211–303, esp. 266–275.

(45.) For Barth’s position on this matter, see esp. his article “Evangelium und Gesetz,” in *Rechtfertigung und Recht/Christengemeinde und Bürgergemeinde/Evangelium und Gesetz*, ed. Karl Barth (Zurich, Switzerland: TVZ, 1998), 81–109. The criticisms directed by Ernst Wolf against Luther (which clearly reflect the concerns of 1934) should be noted here: Ernst Wolf, “Luthers Erbe?,” *Evangelische Theologie* 6 (1946–1947): 82–114.

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(48.) Nicolaisen, *Der Weg nach Barmen*, 29–31.

(49.) See esp. Wolf Meyer-Erlach, *Verrat an Luther* (Weimar: Verlag Deutsche Christen, 1936); Hans Michael Müller, *Die Verleugnung Luthers im heutigen Protestantismus* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1936).

(50.) See the careful analysis in Clemens Vollnhals, *Evangelische Kirche und Entnazifizierung 1945–1949: Die Last der nationalsozialistischen Vergangenheit* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1989).

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(51.) Stayer, *Martin Luther*, 79–124.

(52.) Wolf, *Martin Luther, das Evangelium und die Religion*.

(53.) Walter von Loewenich, *Luthers theologia crucis* (Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1929).

(54.) A good example is Otto Wolff, *Die Haupttypen der neueren Lutherdeutung* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1938).

(55.) Walther Köhler, *Luther und das Luthertum in ihrer weltgeschichtlichen Auswirkung* (Leipzig: Heinsius Nachfolger, 1933). See further Jan Rohls, *Protestantische Theologie der Neuzeit*, 2 vols. (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 2:492–496.

(56.) For example, see Walter von Loewenich, *Luther und der Neuprotestantismus* (Witten: Luther-Verlag, 1963); Notger Slenczka and Walter Sparn, eds., *Luthers Erben: Studien zur Rezeptionsgeschichte der reformatorischen Theologie Luthers* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2005); Christian Danz and Rochus Leonhardt, eds., *Erinnerte Reformation: Studien zur Luther-Rezeption von der Aufklärung bis zum 20. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008); Heinrich Assel, “Die Lutherrenaissance in Deutschland von 1900 bis 1960: Herausforderung und Inspiration,” in *Lutherrenaissance: Past and Present*, ed. Christine Helmer and Bo Kristian Holm (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 23–53.

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