

Kurt Anders Richardson, *Reading Karl Barth: New Directions for North American Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004; pages 246; price ?

When I came to an embattled Southeastern in 1989, Kurt Richardson was here to welcome me and to serve as a perceptive and insightful colleague and counselor. We shared a good friendship and a common vision for seeing Southeastern become a center of evangelical academic scholarship. I have followed his career with interest and have rejoiced at seeing his emergence as a thoughtful theologian, though I have not always found myself on the same side of every issue. His interest and theological style are well represented in this book. It is difficult to read because his thought process are (as always) complex and intricate. It is hard work to read this book.

The title, I thought at first, was odd. Barth surely is not the source for “new direction.” My student days were the days of Barth’s great influence in Baptist life, and I did not find the neo-orthodoxy of my teachers to be productive for church life. Richardson, however, has found a way to read Barth that does not ignore that neo-orthodox characteristic but that calls attention to other more productive emphases. In fact, throughout the book, Richardson specializes in pointing out how many standard treatments of Barth have deliberately overlooked and at times misrepresented essential elements of Barth’s theology.

Surprisingly, Richardson defends Barth at almost every point. I had not realized how barthian Richardson had become, but it is also the case that Richardson is selective rather than comprehensive in his treatment of Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*. He spends little time on Barth’s view of election, there is almost no treatment of *CD III* on Creation, and he only skims the central issue of total and comprehensive biblical truthfulness. All of these and more were sources of much controversy in my student days. Richardson, however, in Chapter Six examines at length Barth’s view of baptism (which to my surprise is very close to the position I have defended for years, though Barth’s reasoning was new to me, profound, and very persuasive). Richardson also calls attention to Barth’s clear defense of marriage and definitive reasoning in opposition to all forms of homosexual behavior (pp. 220-223).

In the early chapters, Richardson provides a critical analysis not of Barth but of several of Barth’s main commentators. Richardson’s own analysis of Barth comes only in the second half of the book. The first three chapters focuses on the various “readings” of Barth by others. He offers insightful comments on George Lindbeck, Eberhard Jüngel, Thomas Torrance, Graham Ward, and Bruce McCormack. Moreover, Eugene Roberts and John Webster come in for devastating critiques (well deserved, but devastating).

Richardson includes a dismissal of Van Til and Clark’s reasons for their rejection of Barth, and surprisingly D. A. Carson is accused of “inadequate theological argumentation” in his *Gagging of God*. Among evangelicals, only Carl Henry gets a positive nod, but that is unrelated to Barth. Richardson stands alone in his critique of all the “great names” in Barthian scholarship. It is a presumptuous position, but if one has the patience and concentration to follow the details, there is much to be learned here.

Richardson has given Barth every benefit of the doubt and has made him sound far more like an evangelical than I would have ever expected. Richardson even defends him for using the category of “saga” for some of the earliest biblical narratives. It is quite a rehabilitation effort.

Barth’s Christocentrism preserves an important truth, but it too easily falls into the unfortunate “no creed but Christ” slogan, or the more subtle one: “The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ.” We have clear evidence of where that leads.

The writing style is difficult, but there are numerous nuggets of truth to mine as you travel through the volume. Richardson’s suggestion is that one must be a pilgrim theologian and always be open to change. He also advocates reading Barth backward, as it were: beginning at the end and reading toward the beginning. My recommendation is that you read Richardson the same way. Read chapter seven first, then six, five, four, and so forth. I can assure you that you will enjoy the book far more that way.

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