



Dogmatics in Outline

By Karl Barth

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Barth stands before us as the greatest theologian of the twentieth century, yet the massive corpus of work which he left behind, the multi volume Church Dogmatics, can seem daunting and formidable to readers today. Fortunately his Dogmatics in Outline first published in English in 1949, contains in brilliantly concentrated form even in shorthand, the essential tenets of his thinking. Built around the assertions made in the Apostles Creed the book consists of a series of reflections on the foundation stones of Christian doctrine. Because Dogmatics in Outline derives from very particular circumstances namely the lectures Barth gave in war-shattered Germany in 1946, it has an urgency and a compassion which lend the text a powerful simplicity. Despite its brevity the book makes a tremendous impact, which in this new edition will now be felt by a fresh generation of readers.

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Dogmatics in Outline By Karl Barth Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #107601 in Books
- Published on: 1959-09-02
- Released on: 1959-09-02
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.00" h x .36" w x 5.31" l, .29 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 155 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

"An excellent summary of and introduction to Barthian theology." -- "The Times (London) Literary Supplement" "This volume will bring [readers] into contact with a razor-edged mind grappling fearlessly with the profoundest questions of the human spirit." -- "The Christian World"

About the Author

Karl Barth (1886-1968) was Professor of Theology at the University of Basel, Switzerland. One of the greatest theologians and preachers of the twentieth century, he is best known for his monumental systematic theology, "Church Dogmatics".

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Chapter One The Task

Dogmatics is the science in which the Church, in accordance with the state of its knowledge at different times, takes account of the content of its proclamation critically, that is, by the standard of Holy Scripture and under the guidance of its Confessions.

Dogmatics is a science. What science really is has already been pondered, discussed and written about infinitely often and at all periods. We cannot develop this discussion even allusively here. I offer you a concept of science which is at any rate discussible and may serve as the basis for our expositions. I propose that by science we understand an attempt at comprehension and exposition, at investigation and instruction, which is related to a definite object and sphere of activity. No act of man can claim to be more than an attempt, not even science. By describing it as an attempt, we are simply stating its nature as preliminary and limited. Wherever science is taken in practice completely seriously, we are under no illusion that anything man can do can ever be an undertaking of supreme wisdom and final art, that there exists an absolute science, one that as it were has fallen from Heaven. Even Christian dogmatics is an attempt—an attempt to understand and an attempt to expound, an attempt to see, to hear and to state definite facts, to survey and co-ordinate these facts, to present them in the form of a doctrine. In every science an object is involved and a sphere of activity. In no science is it a matter of pure theory or pure practice; on the one hand, theory comes in, but also, on the other hand, practice guided by this theory. So by dogmatics, too, we understand this twofold activity of investigation and doctrine in relation to an object and a sphere of activity.

The subject of dogmatics is the Christian Church. The subject of a science can only be one in which the object and sphere of activity in question are present and familiar. Therefore it is no limitation and no vilification of the concept of dogmatics as a science to say that the subject of this science is the Church. It is the place, the community, charged with the object and the activity with which dogmatics is concerned—namely, the proclamation of the Gospel. By calling the Church the subject of dogmatics we mean that where dogmatics is pursued, whether by pupil or by teacher, we find ourselves in the sphere of the Church. The man who seeks to occupy himself with dogmatics and deliberately puts himself outside the Church would have to reckon with the fact that for him the object of dogmatics would be alien, and should not be surprised if after the first steps he could not find his bearings, or even did damage. Even in dogmatics familiarity with the subject must be there, and this really means familiarity with the life of the Church. This, of course, cannot mean that in dogmatics one would have to deal with what had been said in ancient or modern times by a Church authority, so that we should merely be repeating what it had prescribed. Not even Roman Catholic dogmatics has so interpreted its task. By calling the Church the subject of dogmatics, our only

thought is that whoever is occupied with this science, whether as pupil or as teacher, must take his stand in responsibility upon the basis of the Christian Church and its work. That is the *conditio sine qua non*. But please note that this involves a free participation in the Church's life; it involves the responsibility which the Christian has to shoulder in this matter also.

In the science of dogmatics the Church draws up its reckoning in accordance with the state of its knowledge at different times. It might be said that this is quite obvious, given the premised concept of science. But it is not so automatically obvious, according to certain ideas about dogmatics which many have in their heads. I repeat that dogmatics is not a thing which has fallen from Heaven to earth. And if someone were to say that it would be wonderful if there were such an absolute dogmatics fallen from Heaven, the only possible answer would be: 'Yes, if we were angels.' But, since by God's will we are not, it will be good for us to have just a human and earthly dogmatics. The Christian Church does not exist in Heaven, but on earth and in time. And although it is a gift of God, He has set it right amid earthly and human circumstances, and to that fact corresponds absolutely everything that happens in the Church. The Christian Church lives on earth and it lives in history, with the lofty good entrusted to it by God. In the possession and administration of this lofty good it passes on its way through history, in strength and in weakness, in faithfulness and in unfaithfulness, in obedience and in disobedience, in understanding and in misunderstanding of what is said to it. Amid the history unfolded upon earth, for example, that of nature and civilisation, of morals and religion, of art and science, of society and the State, there is also a history of the Church. It too is a human, earthly history; and so it is not quite indefensible for Goethe to say of it that in all periods it has been a hotch-potch of error and power. If we Christians are sincere, we have to concede that this holds no less of Church history than of world history. That being so, we have cause to speak modestly and humbly of what the Church is capable of, and therefore also of the Church work that we are doing here-namely, dogmatics. Dogmatics will always be able to fulfil its task only in accordance with the...

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