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## Letter from the Karl Barth-Archives

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### Some Reflections on Translating and Analyzing Barth's Ephesians Lectures

**Ross M. Wright**  
Ashland, Virginia

The Ephesians lectures are not easy to render in a smooth translation, because of what Barth is attempting to do, namely, to convey technical exegetical details, drawing on insights from a variety of commentators, ancient and modern. Before him are the Greek New Testament and a spate of commentators ranging from the critical Neutestamentler to J. T. Beck, and Calvin's Opera Selecta. He is seeking to find the straightforward way through all of this material to the correct



interpretation of the text. In style and expression, therefore, the lectures have more in common with the small print exegetical sections of CD than with the more straightforward dogmatic argument in the main sections. Consequently, the challenges to the translator here are different from those of the Romans commentaries, where Barth's extremely stylized language is difficult to render in English. In the case of the exegetical lectures, the primary difficulty is the density of the material.

The lectures must have been mesmerizing but difficult to follow, as Barth made great demands on his audience. For example, he moves from Greek to Latin to Calvin's Old French, often without pausing to translate. At the same time, they have the directness and rhetorical power of Barth's sermons and frequently express his concern to prepare students for ordained ministry, as in the comment: 'Think about it, you who wish to become pastors!' Accordingly, the translation attempts to convey the complexity as well and the rhetorical power of the lectures, in short, to enable the reader to 'hear'



The translation is designed to promote scholarly work on the lectures and is therefore thoroughly annotated. Barth's sources are identified and full bibliographical information provided, along with the standard English translation. Because Barth provides virtually no bibliographical information in the manuscript, this proved to be no small task but was made considerably easier by Jörg-Michael Bohnet's 'Apparat der von Barth verwendeten Literature,' prepared in April, 2000 for the present edition and brought to my attention by Hans-Anton Drewes. The translation was composed from a typescript of Barth's handwritten manuscript, produced under the direction of Hinrich Stoevesandt, former director of the archives. Stoevesandt knew Barth's work well and was therefore eminently qualified to proof the transcription of Barth's notoriously difficult handwriting.

As often happens in such a project, the nature of my questions about the lectures changed over time. Initially, I was interested in what the lectures reveal about the state of Barth's early dogmatic theology, particularly, his doctrine of scripture. However, I became convinced that, in 1921-22, he was struggling primarily with what it meant to be a church theologian, and particularly, with how to read and interpret scripture in order to equip people for ministry. Consequently, the initial dogmatic categories with which I approached the material gave way to the following questions, more consistent with Barth's concerns:

1. Formally, what sort of exegesis is Barth doing? How does he understand the task of biblical interpretation? At what points do his theological method and categories tend to obscure Paul's voice (the criticism of the Romans commentaries), and where is there evidence of development, such that he maintains greater traction with the text?

2. Materially, what catches Barth's eye when he reads? What does he think he has discovered in his reading of Ephesians?

I conclude that Barth made a material discovery in his study of Ephesians that fundamentally shaped his subsequent theology. He observes in Eph. 1:3-14 a train of thought which witnesses to God's action to the creature in Christ and the creature's subsequent movement to God. We have come from God, who has chosen us in eternal election, and we are moving toward the glory of God, our divinely appointed goal. The exposition's central theme is expressed in Barth's claim that 'the knowledge of God is the presupposition' and 'the goal' of human existence.

The demands of weekly sermon preparation first drew me and still attracts me to Barth's theology. If I had to identify a single way in which this project has changed my approach to exegesis and preaching, it would be Barth's confidence in scripture as the *viva vox dei*, the medium through which God makes his presence known, or to use technical expression, his confidence in the *Sache* of the text to establish contact with the listeners as opposed to something which the preacher must establish by personal anecdote or rhetorical flair. This confidence is what explains Barth's attention to the grammatical details of the text and his use of intra-textual allusions to create a web of biblical associations which re-express the meaning of the passage within the larger context of God's saving purposes. Studying Barth's lectures has given me greater confidence on the self-interpreting capacity of the word.