

# **The Notion of Mission in Karl Barth's Ecclesiology**

by

Wessel Bentley

PhD (Dogmatics and Christian Ethics)

Department: Systematic Theology and Christian Ethics  
Faculty Theology  
University of Pretoria

Supervisor: Prof C J Wethmar

## **Abstract.**

Title: The Notion of Mission in Karl Barth's Ecclesiology  
Author: Wessel Bentley  
Supervisor: Professor C.J. Wethmar  
Department: Systematic Theology and Christian Ethics  
Degree: Philosophiae Doctor

As the church is moving towards its 21<sup>st</sup> century of existence, it is confronted by challenges it has never known before. Globalization, the rise of different socio-political orders and a growing tendency towards a post-modern understanding of the world are but some of the issues. This changing world demands self-reflection from the church. It has to consider its place, identity and function, thereby giving rise to the exploration of its mission.

In this thesis, the ecclesiology of Karl Barth is explored. By considering Barth's understanding of the church's relationship with different parties such as God, other religions, those outside the Christian faith, the State and its own inner dynamics, the church will be reminded of its missionary function in the world.

The church's relationships are important for they direct the way in which it fits into the world. When it considers that it exists purely because of God's self-revelation, and that its own existence is an act of faith in response to this divine self-disclosure, it becomes aware of defined parameters within which the church can operate under the banner of mission.

Mission is therefore much bigger than the notion of evangelism, which is one part of the church's role. Where evangelism concerns the physical activity of the church's

proclamation, its mission describes its identity and function in bearing testimony to its Lord. Identity and function are not self-generated characteristics and neither is mission.

Karl Barth has given a tremendous gift by exploring the Christian faith, the God whom it serves, the church within which it operates, and the world that it exists in. It is the author's belief that no other work is as comprehensive and descriptive of the church's place, both in relation to God and the world.

This thesis explores this gift and searches for answers concerning the church's mission that will be helpful and relevant in today's world. This is necessary if the church seeks to be relevant and effective, speaking to new challenges, and a new world<sup>129</sup>.

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<sup>129</sup> 356 words.

## **Key Words.**

Christology

Church

Ecumenism

Election

Mission

Religion

Revelation

Salvation

State

Karl Barth

## **Summary.**

The world in which we live is not static. It develops and evolves rapidly. It offers new opportunities, dilemmas and questions to a church that has existed for centuries.

The church is itself ever changing. It has to do so in order to remain relevant and to share its witness effectively. As the world mutates and as the church dwells within it, the church has to consider its mission in relation to its different relationships.

This thesis explores the ecclesiology of Karl Barth, one of the most prominent theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Barth describes the church's divergent relationships and suggests ways in which the church can engage with the different relational partners.

This thesis, explores Barth's relationship with the church. Barth's relationship was riddled with questions as he tried to understand what it means to be the church while Christians, especially in Nazi Germany, were using the name of the church to advance their own political motives.

The church does not exist because of its own doing. From Barth's relationship with the church, the church's relationship with God is described. Before the church can engage in mission, which it claims is ordained by God, it needs to acknowledge its own relationship with its Maker.

As the church bears testimony, it also discovers that it is conveying different messages due to its own diverse denominational structure. If the Church is to have a unified mission, speaking with one voice, then part of its mission must be towards itself, working towards its own unity.

Furthermore, the church is not the only body claiming to be a divine witness. Its relationship with other religions must therefore also be taken into consideration. Here, the thesis investigates Barth's understanding of revelation and the way it shapes the Christian and other religious communities.

This thesis further explores the church's relationship with those "outside" its community. The church's mission is deduced considering the nature of election in Barth's soteriology. It asks the question whether the church is the only elect people and how it should see itself when engaging with those who do not associate themselves with the Christian church.

Lastly, this thesis describes Barth's understanding of the church's relationship with the State. In recognising that both the State and the church are instruments of God's salvific work, the church can speak with confidence when it both supports and criticises the State.

Considering all of these relationships, the nature of the church's mission can be refined and the church will be relevant in its mission. It can do so without considering itself to be in a position of power. It will be down the road of servanthood and

obedience. This thesis therefore takes seriously the church's relationships and proposes characteristics that the church should employ in its approach to mission<sup>130</sup>.

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<sup>130</sup> 465 words.

<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>3</b>
1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	4
2. RESEARCH PROBLEM AND OBJECTIVES.....	6
2.1. <i>Is nineteenth and early twentieth century Germany a valid era for comparison with the current Ecclesiastical dilemma?</i> .....	7
2.2. <i>How significant is Barth's contribution to the modern debate?</i> .....	8
3. <i>Research design.</i> .....	8
4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY.....	11
<b>CHAPTER 1.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>KARL BARTH AND THE CHURCH: A THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM. ....</b>	<b>13</b>
1. INTRODUCTION.....	13
2. <i>Who was Karl Barth?</i> .....	16
3. WHAT IS THE CHURCH?.....	21
3.1 <i>"The Church is at all events a people..." (Barth 1939:5).</i> .....	22
3.2 <i>"Furthermore, the Church is a continuation of Israel..." (Barth 1939:6).</i> .....	24
3.3 <i>"...finding comfort in the history of Jesus as her Lord." (Barth 1939:7).</i> .....	25
3.4 <i>"...and hoping for the consummation of the Kingdom of God." (Barth 1939:7).</i> .....	27
3.5 <i>"In order to achieve this, the Church is called to service" (Barth 1939:8).</i> .....	28
3.6 <i>"...through the Power of the Spirit" (Barth 1939:9).</i> .....	29
3.7 <i>Mission.</i> .....	32
4. BARTH'S PROBLEM WITH THE CHURCH.....	34
CONCLUSION.....	36
<b>CHAPTER 2.....</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>THE CHURCH AND GOD.....</b>	<b>38</b>
1. INTRODUCTION.....	38
2. THE GATHERING OF THE COMMUNITY.....	41
2.1 <i>It is God who speaks.</i> .....	41
2.2 <i>How does God speak?</i> .....	43
2.3 <i>What does God speak about?</i> .....	49
3. UPBUILDING THE COMMUNITY.....	53
3.1 <i>Identity</i> .....	53
4. SENDING THE COMMUNITY.....	58
<b>CHAPTER 3.....</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>ECUMENICAL MISSION: THE CHURCH'S MISSION TO ITSELF. ....</b>	<b>61</b>
1. INTRODUCTION.....	61
2. IS THERE A PLACE FOR DENOMINATIONS IN BARTH'S ECCLESIOLOGY?.....	62
3. ENGAGING WITH DIFFERENT CONFESSIONAL MOVEMENTS.....	67
3.1 <i>Catholicism and Protestantism</i> .....	71
3.2 <i>Analogia entis</i> .....	74
3.2.1 <i>How is Barth's reaction received?</i> .....	77
4. HOW DOES BARTH SEE THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT?.....	80
4.1 <i>Political ecumenism.</i> .....	81
4.2 <i>Inter-confessional dialogue.</i> .....	82
CONCLUSION.....	85
<b>CHAPTER 4.....</b>	<b>87</b>
<b>THE CHURCH AND RELIGION.....</b>	<b>87</b>
1. INTRODUCTION.....	87
2. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHRISTIANITY AND JUDAISM IN THE THEOLOGIES OF HANS KÜNG AND JÜRGEN MOLTMANN.....	89
2.1 <i>Hans Küng.</i> .....	89
2.2 <i>Jürgen Moltmann.</i> .....	92
3. THE CHURCH AND TRUTH.....	94
3.1 <i>What is religion?</i> .....	94



4. THE CHURCH AND REVELATION.....	100
4.1 <i>Truth and Revelation</i> .....	100
4.2 <i>Revelation and salvation</i> .....	107
5. THE EXPRESSION OF TRUTH.....	109
5.1 <i>The expression of salvation</i> .....	109
6. THE CHURCH AND ISRAEL: CHRISTIANITY AND JUDAISM.....	112
6.1 <i>Salvation</i> .....	114
7. JESUS CHRIST AND CHRISTIANITY.....	117
<b>CHAPTER 5.....</b>	<b>127</b>
<b>THE CHURCH’S MISSION TO THE “FAITHLESS”.....</b>	<b>127</b>
1. INTRODUCTION.....	127
2. ELECTION.....	129
3. THE PERSONAL NATURE OF THE INCARNATION.....	141
4. SALVATION.....	145
5. TEACHING ON THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM.....	148
6. UNIVERSALISM.....	153
<b>CHAPTER 6.....</b>	<b>157</b>
<b>BARTH’S DEFINITION OF CHURCH IN POLITICS AND CULTURE.....</b>	<b>157</b>
1. INTRODUCTION.....	157
2. KARL BARTH’S POLITICAL ACTIVITY AND THEOLOGY.....	158
2.1 <i>A Doctrinal argument</i> .....	159
2.2 <i>A Political argument</i> .....	163
3. POLITICS, ETHICS AND THEOLOGY.....	169
4. STATE-FOCUSSED MISSION IN SOUTH AFRICA.....	175
4.1 <i>A short history of the Belhar Confession</i> .....	178
CONCLUSION.....	184
<b>CHAPTER 7.....</b>	<b>186</b>
<b>THE END OF THE CHURCH OR THE CHURCH’S END?.....</b>	<b>186</b>
1. INTRODUCTION.....	186
2. WHAT DOES BARTH’S CHURCH LOOK LIKE?.....	188
2.1 <i>The Mission and Function of the Church</i> .....	188
2.1.1 <i>The Mission of the Church</i> .....	188
2.1.2 <i>The Function of Dogmatics in the Church</i> .....	192
2.2 <i>A church in relationship with God</i> .....	195
2.3 <i>A diverse response to God and the world</i> .....	199
2.4 <i>One faith among many</i> .....	207
2.5 <i>A community with a testimony concerning election</i> .....	211
2.6 <i>An instrument alongside the State</i> .....	215
3. WHAT CONCLUSIONS CAN BE DRAWN FROM THESE OBSERVATIONS?.....	218
3.1 <i>Outcomes of this research</i> .....	219
4. HOW DO THESE CONCLUSIONS COMPARE TO OTHER STUDIES?.....	220
6. QUESTIONS TO THE MODERN CHURCH.....	222
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY.....</b>	<b>227</b>
<b>ABSTRACT.....</b>	<b>237</b>
<b>KEY WORDS.....</b>	<b>239</b>
<b>SUMMARY.....</b>	<b>240</b>

## **Introduction.**

The Church<sup>1</sup> is entering its twenty-first century of existence. It has a history that tells the story of how time, politics, leadership and theological understanding have shaped the way in which it engaged with the world under the well-meaning banner of mission.

A great deal of both good and evil has come from this divinely instructed work. Testimony of the Church at work varies from it being an instrument of political and social liberation struggles to being the authority behind the slaughter of many, especially during the Middle Ages. The testimony of contradicting behaviour in the "universal church" is not over. In fact, the criticism of the church's inconsistency will only become harsher as secular society refuses to be intimidated by the church's claimed moral high ground.

I believe that one of the most relevant theological questions that should be asked of the church today be "What is mission?". What is the Church's mission? What is God calling the Church to be in the twenty-first century? Obviously we find many models emerging in the world today (specifically from so-called mega-churches<sup>2</sup>) attempting to make congregations bigger, stronger and more effective, but these may not answer the fundamental doctrinal questions relating to the Church's identity and its work.

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that in this text I use "church" to refer to the church as institution and "Church" to refer to the theological concept of the Body of Believers.

<sup>2</sup> By using this term I refer to churches that have a great numerical membership compared to that of the traditional main-line churches. These churches mostly gather in auditorium-type venues and emphasise the place of small-groups. In small-groups, members receive specific pastoral care, teaching and guidance. Examples of such churches in South Africa are Rhema Bible Church and Hatfield Christian Church.

We need to look at history and determine the Church's origins. More importantly, we should examine the relationship between the Church and the One who created and steers it.

This study aims to do exactly this. By investigating the identity and role of the Church, we may be able to present a clear understanding of what it means to be part of the church, the church at work and the church in mission.

### **1. Theoretical framework.**

It is difficult, if not impossible, to formulate an understanding of mission without an historical perspective. It would be irresponsible to do so, because the Church belongs to history and therefore has assumed certain definitions regarding its identity and role.

I have decided to focus on the ecclesiology of Karl Barth. I have chosen Barth, because it is my opinion that the ecclesiology Barth offers is one of the most relevant concerning the questions that are asked of the church today. During Barth's lifetime we find a dynamic understanding and implementation of different definitions of mission. The rise of the Reich in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, using its support of a significant section of German churches, tabled its agenda not merely as a political one, but as an agenda devoted to its obedience to God's will. Needless to say, all Christians did not accept this definition of mission and Church identity. So, German Christians found themselves divided in their faith, and practice of this faith in a world which was slowly breaking apart.

In search of unity, we find a monumental attempt to define the Church's role in society in the Barmen Declaration. This declaration was indeed the turning point in Church history as it was a consensus document between different denominations and paved the way for the Church's response to the historical-political era it was about to face (Busch 1976:236). Karl Barth undoubtedly played a major role in the formulation of the Barmen Declaration (Busch 1976:236)<sup>3</sup>. It was his opinion that the Church's sole responsibility was to be engaged in mission (Mebust 1981:15-17) and had a responsibility to find the true meaning of this concept.

The Barmen Declaration cannot be seen as a complete description or summary of Barth's theological mind, but it does give us an indication of a true and authentic struggle to make sense of the identity and role of the church. Barth wrote many papers and books, referring directly or partially to the mission that God has called the Church to, so this may show that this question was important in the formulation of his theological understanding. It is refreshing to see that Barth's theology was not born out of solely academic research, but that Barth's theology developed primarily as a response to real theological questions posed by both the Church and the world.

The twenty-first century holds many parallels with Barth's world. Superpowers in the world today, such as the United States of America, rely on the support of conservative, fundamentalist Christian understandings in order to push their agenda. Once again, the Church finds itself divided and does not portray unity in the

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<sup>3</sup> Krötke (2006:271) affirms this point. The Barmen Declaration, in his (Krötke 2006:271) opinion, also displays classic traits of Barth's theology. The way in which the Word is emphasised as the decisive form of God's self-disclosure, therefore downplaying the notion of Natural Theology, is a good example.

understanding of its identity and/or role on issues, such as the war in Iraq, stem-cell research or abortion on demand. The list goes on.

In this thesis, it is my quest to identify Mission-themes in Barth's ecclesiology, to describe the relevance in modern theological discussions and then to formulate an understanding of mission that would describe the church's identity and role in the times in which we live.

## **2. Research problem and objectives.**

The research problem is posed as: “Does Barth’s understanding of the church’s relationships propose a defined missionary focus?”

The hypothesis is therefore that Barth’s understanding of the Church’s relationships to different entities will give us clear guidelines in understanding the Church’s mission. It may seem as if it should be the other way around: that the church’s mission comes first and then shapes the nature of its relationships, but I suggest that this is not the case.

Although the argument follows Barth’s ecclesiological understanding from a very specific context, it would only be proper to question the validity of using Barth’s understanding to teach us something in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Here are questions and proposed answers:

## **2.1. Is nineteenth and early twentieth century Germany a valid era for comparison with the current Ecclesiastical dilemma?**

These two eras are almost a century apart. The historical-, social-, and political contexts vary greatly. From an objective perspective it hardly seems fair to compare these two contexts. Despite their differences, I aim to prove that the ecclesiological concepts Barth suggests are relevant to the church today. The gift of Dogmatics is that it aims to find truth. The greater the doctrinal contribution, the more one will find that glimpses of universal truth appear in their discussion.

It is therefore implied that there exists a difference between divine truth and truth perceived and expressed in creation. The assumption is that the former constitutes universal truth. Karl Barth is aware of this difference and therefore describes truth as being analogous (CD II/1:238). If the divine perspective acts as the *analogans* and the human perspective as the *analogate* (Hunsinger 2000b:218), then creation can at best reflect a truth that exists beyond itself, while not being able to lay claim to this truth as its own making. The more creation, and in this case Dogmatics, opens itself to receiving divine truth, the closer its expression of truth will be to that which is revealed.

Barth's theology has certainly stood the test of time, as one finds continuing research into his theology on an annual basis. It is my view that Barth's ecclesiological proposals will do the same, offering us new insights into the church's position before God and in the world. As stated in the hypothesis, the Church's relationships speak the loudest concerning the church's missionary function.

## **2.2. How significant is Barth's contribution to the modern debate?**

I believe that there is a resurgence in Barth's theology in modern theological debate. Although Barth was greatly influenced by the history that he formed part of, we find aspects of his theological understanding that are relevant to situations and contexts that differ from his own. It is the task of this thesis to identify these and to measure them against present theological thinking.

## **3. Research design.**

This thesis is a literary conceptual analysis as it studies the concepts conveyed in Barth's work on the Church. This thesis is divided into seven chapters, each of which will focus on a specific aspect of the church's relationship both with God and with different structures in the world.

By investigating Barth's description of each of these relationships, this thesis will then deduce the missionary responsibility of the church to each of these.

Chapter 1 serves as an introductory chapter, posing the question concerning the Church's role and identity. A brief description of Karl Barth will be given as well as reasons for the focus on his thinking. This chapter will also give a general structure for the rest of the thesis, so that the reader will be able to follow the progression in theological thinking towards formulating an understanding of mission.

Chapters 2 to 6 will individually focus on Barth's understanding of the relationship between the Church and its "partners". It is from these relationships that we will be able to establish an understanding of the Church's identity and role.

Chapter 2 will look at the relationship between the Church and God. The way in which the Church relates to God must determine the way in which it understands itself and implements its faith. We believe that God has called the Church into existence and therefore can be described as the author of the Church's identity. To neglect the Church's relationship to God would omit the foundational structure of both the Church's identity and its purpose.

Chapter 3 will focus on the relationships within the Church itself. To what extent is the Church universal and catholic? How does one find a common identity and role in a body with such diverse ideas and ideals? Barth's description of the ecumenical nature of the Church must therefore also give guidance for understanding the dynamics of mission-concepts in a denominationally diverse body.

Chapter 4 describes the relationship between the Church and other religions. Does the Church have the sole divine mandate to be God's instrument of revelation and salvation? In an increasingly secular world where post-modern philosophy seems to suggest that all different views carry equal weighting in terms of truth, the Church is challenged in finding its missionary purpose. Is the Church but one voice among many speaking the same truth, from divergent perspectives?

Barth's view in this regard is extremely valuable as history is important to him. He is anti-modern in a sense that he did not allow "...post-modern methodological criteria, or the content of any of the modern academic disciplines, to influence the substance of theology." (Hodgson 1989:25).



Chapter 5 focuses on the relationship between the Church and the "lost", or as are termed later, the "faithless". What is the Church's role in the lives of those who do not identify with the divine? Here aspects such as Barth's understanding of election and salvation are examined.

Chapter 6 searches for answers in the relationship between the Church and the State. Does the Church have a responsibility towards the State? What is the responsibility of the Church and what is the responsibility of the State? Perhaps the most important question lies in the nature in which God is in relationship with both the Church and the State.

Chapter 7 then serves as a concluding chapter, weighing all of the research above and formulating a description of the identity and role of the Church in mission in a meaningful way.

This thesis makes a unique contribution to the body of knowledge by researching the notion of mission in Barth's ecclesiology using Barth's understanding of the Church's relationships as a backdrop. By defining the relational character of Barth's ecclesiology, the way in which the church engages with its context becomes clear. This relational perspective gives insight, not only into the doctrinal understanding of mission, but also into the implications of mission when the church takes these relationships seriously.

#### **4. Research methodology.**

My primary source of input will come from theological books and journals. Barth wrote a substantial amount. Not only did he write academic theology, but his theology is a response to several philosophical, political and social contexts. The main source that I have used, written by Barth, is his Church Dogmatics<sup>4</sup>. Using Barth's Church Dogmatics as the main reference has an advantage. Church Dogmatics offers a very mature Barthian ecclesiology, an ecclesiology that is the result of inter-disciplinary and socio-political debates.

To use Barth's earlier works exclusively without referring to Church Dogmatics would have been confusing as Barth changed his theological opinion at least three times. There are thoughts that remained significantly consistent in his work and these are explored as far as possible. Where reference is made to Barth's understanding, if he had a change of mind, this will then be indicated in the text.

Because of the large volume of work, I have had to refer to numerous secondary sources that have focussed on specific aspects of Barth's ecclesiology. I have always verified claims made by secondary sources by referring to the primary texts and by comparing them to perspectives from other secondary sources. By dedicating myself to this project, I am also aware of the time constraints within which this project needs to be completed. It is therefore not possible to consult all the material pertaining to Barth's ecclesiology. The sources that I have consulted and the time I have dedicated to this project will, in my view, add to the body of knowledge concerning this topic.

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<sup>4</sup> Referred to as CD or KD. See bibliography.

Using these sources and the structure described in the previous section, I am convinced that a meaningful understanding of mission will emerge.

Lastly, it is necessary to note my own context as the writer. I am a South African, serving as an ordained minister in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. This has allowed me to be in conversation with lay-Christians and to hear their questions and frustrations concerning the church's role and identity. I am also a part-time lecturer in Systematic Theology at John Wesley College – Kilnerton. This privilege has given me the opportunity to reflect on and engage in academic theological conversations concerning these issues.

This thesis contributes to both these contexts. In the academic context, this thesis raises critical questions concerning the Church's dogmatic understanding of mission by suggesting that mission must be understood from the premise that the church exists within relationships and cannot speak about God without taking these seriously. This thesis also encourages the local congregation to understand its role as both a church in relationship and a church in mission. When the church understands its place in relationship with the world, then the church will be able to testify effectively concerning its Lord.

Effective communication is one of the prerequisites for the church to be relevant and accessible in the world. I believe that the model of mission proposed in this thesis will promote the church's awareness of its relationships, thereby improving the way it engages with different parties in the world.