

Karl Barth (1886 – 1968) was lauded as one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s most influential theologians. He challenged 19th-century liberal theology’s focus on human experience and reason, reasserting God’s radical transcendence and self-revelation in Jesus Christ.[1] Less known is that over a ten-year period (1954 – 1964), Karl Barth held 27-28 services at Basel Prison where he preached to inmates.[2]

## God’s Grace in Incarceration

In a Good Friday sermon based on Luke 23:33, *The Criminals with Him*, Barth contends that the two criminals crucified with Christ – because “they could not abandon him,” because “they were forced to watch with him . . . on the cross,” because “they could not escape his dangerous company,” because “they could not very well deny him, being publicly exposed as his companions” – constituted “the first Christian community.”[3] But not only that.

We should also remember Jesus’ words from the cross: “. . . today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). These words convey the promise of community with Christ at the center. Words which inspired and animated Karl Barth’s witness to the prisoners in Basel. Prisoners who, to him, were more than prisoners. Human beings. Siblings who, though arrested, were still adored by God. Siblings who, though found guilty, were not far from God’s grace. Siblings in whom this celebrated theologian and pastor saw himself.

## Bridging Geographical Isolation: Examples of Community with Christ

This promise of community with Christ at the center inspires ECF’s partnerships. These partnerships communicate that [God’s grace is not limited by circumstance](#). Partnerships with ministries like [New Hope House](#) which seeks to close the gap of geographical isolation between death-row inmates and their loved ones. With ministries like [El Refugio Ministry](#), a hospitality and advocacy organization in rural South Georgia, offering free lodging, meals, and support to families visiting loved ones detained at the nearby Stewart Detention Center, the nation’s largest immigration detention facility. Where we see community with Christ at the center; where we find grace in incarceration.

God’s mercy is not cancelled by sin. God’s love is not overpowered by evil. God’s life is not defeated by death. These partnerships convey grace, mercy, love, and life to inmates and their families, our siblings.

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[1] Most notable among Karl Barth’s seminal works are: [The Epistle to the Romans](#) (1919/1922), which launched Neo-Orthodoxy, a 20<sup>th</sup> century movement that sought to reclaim traditional Christian themes like God’s sovereignty and human sinfulness, while also incorporating modern critical methods of biblical study and emphasized a personal, existential encounter with God through scripture, rather than viewing the Bible as a text of objective, inerrant truth; his magnum opus, the multi-volume [Church Dogmatics](#) (1932-1967), a massive, unfinished systematic theology; and, his key, anti-Nazi document, [The Barmen Declaration](#) (1934).

[2] Basel Prison was in Barth’s hometown of Basel, Switzerland. These sermons were published in two collections, [Deliverance to the Captives](#) (1959 in German/1961 in English) and [Call for God: New Sermons from Basel Prison](#) (1967).

[3] Karl Barth, “The Criminals with Him,” in [Deliverance to the Captives](#) (Eugene: HarperCollins, 1978), 77-78.



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