

Árpád Ferencz

Research Profile · Systematic Theology and Ethics

For me, theology is a searching, responsible and dialogical discipline. It relates to a tradition that it does not wish to administer but to answer for, and it gains relevance for the present where it engages the theological, ecclesial and societal questions of its time. My work in systematic theology and ethics is shaped by this conviction.

Research Focus

My research moves in three interrelated fields: the theology of Karl Barth and its reception, the relationship between Spirit and Church, and Protestant ethics. What they share is the question of what Reformed theology can contribute to a church and a society that can no longer take their identity and their task for granted.

Karl Barth - reception and relevance. Barth is my most important interlocutor. I am interested in how his theology has been read, appropriated and also transformed in very different ecclesial contexts, above all in the Reformed churches of Romania and Hungary. This raises the question of whether, and in what way, this theology still holds today when read from an Eastern European perspective and under postmodern conditions. I also understand this work as a contribution to making sources accessible: I have edited and annotated correspondence, travel reports and texts on Barth's encounters with Hungary and Transylvania.

Pneumatology and ecclesiology. At the centre stands the doctrine of the Holy Spirit as Barth develops it in the *Church Dogmatics*. I ask whether one must speak of a "pneumatological deficit" in his work, and I arrive at a differentiated answer: a more independent doctrine of the Spirit would be desirable, yet the Spirit is clearly at work in the structure and argument of the Dogmatics. Systematically, I pursue the thesis that the Spirit not only secures God's unavailability but also constitutes and sustains the identity of believers. For ecclesiology, this yields an image of the church as a counter-space within society, one that lives from the prayer "Veni Creator Spiritus" and can fulfil its public task only in this way.

Church, religion and society. I examine the role of religion and church in postmodern society, in conversation with sociology and philosophy (Luhmann, Habermas, Badiou, Vattimo, Agamben) and with theological counter-voices such as Erik Peterson. Questions of religious identity, of the church as a space of freedom, of church and public life, and of the theology of the diaspora connect to this. The guiding image is an "honest society" in the sense of Avishai Margalit, to which the church can contribute credibly.

Protestant ethics. My ethical work ranges from fundamental questions of moral judgement to concrete topics. The Heidelberg Catechism is for me the foundation and guideline of Reformed ethics. In addition, I deal with questions at the limits of life, such as the theological assessment of suicide, the prohibition of killing, and bioethics, as well as with shame, creation and ecotheology, with money and usury, and with political, social and sexual ethics. In doing so, I seek answers that remain faithful to the biblical and confessional tradition and are at the same time usable in today's situations of decision.

Approach and Method

I work in a way that is both historical-genetic and systematic: texts are read in their development, for instance when in Barth emphases and even language shift from academic argument toward the language of prayer, and are then tested for their viability in the present. Philosophical and sociological interlocutors are not an addition but part of the method. My experience in university research as well as in parish ministry, in Eastern Europe as well as in Switzerland, sharpens my awareness that dogmatic statements have to prove themselves where church is actually lived. I have published in German, Hungarian and English and see myself as a mediator between these linguistic and theological cultures.

Teaching

For me, teaching is the place where research proves its comprehensibility. My teaching spans dogmatics, prolegomena, pneumatology and ecclesiology through to ethics in its general, Protestant, social, bio-, sexual and political forms. Seminars on Barth, Harnack and Miskotte, on Aristotle and Kant, and the joint reading of systematic-theological texts are meant to enable students to argue independently and with sound judgement.

Current Projects

- **Revision and publication of the habilitation thesis** on the pneumatology of Karl Barth (*The Holy Spirit – The Most Intimate Friend of Common Sense*), Verlag Exit, Cluj.
- **Hungarian translation** of K. H. Miskotte, *Wenn die Götter schweigen*, with commentary.
- **“Im Sachen Barths” unterwegs** (travelling on Barth’s business): exchange with the Reformed Theological University of Sárospatak (Hungary), journey on 19 November 2025.

Keywords

Karl Barth · Reformed theology · Pneumatology · Ecclesiology · Protestant ethics · Heidelberg Catechism · Church and society · Postmodernity · Theology of the diaspora · Central and Eastern Europe

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