



THE WILEY BLACKWELL COMPANION TO  
**KARL BARTH**  
Volume 2: Barth in Dialogue

Edited by  
Hunsinger  
Johnson

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COMPANION TO

**KARL BARTH**

Volume 2

WILEY  
Blackwell

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Volume 1

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Blackwell

THE WILEY BLACKWELL COMPANION TO  
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Volume 1: Barth and Dogmatics



Edited by  
George Hunsinger  
Keith L. Johnson

WILEY Blackwell



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Companion to  
Karl Barth

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Edited by George Hunsinger and Keith L. Johnson

# The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Karl Barth

Barth and Dogmatics

Volume I

*Edited by*

George Hunsinger and Keith L. Johnson

**WILEY** Blackwell

This edition first published 2020  
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John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

*Editorial Office*

The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data applied for*

9781119156567 (hardback)

Cover Design: Wiley

Cover Image: Grunewald Isenheim by Mathias Grunewald is licensed under CC BY-SA

Set in 10/12.5pt Photina by SPi Global, Pondicherry, India

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*To Eberhard Busch*



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# Preface

George Hunsinger and Keith L. Johnson

Readers of Karl Barth often find his work at once familiar and strange. The familiarity stems from the largely traditional subject matter of his theology. The questions, debates, and doctrines that Barth considers have been the currency of Christian theologians for centuries. He talks about recognizable topics like the triune God, Jesus Christ, the church, and the Christian life. He cites the Bible regularly, nearly 15 000 times in the *Church Dogmatics* alone, and he interacts with the work of well-known figures within the Christian tradition. All these things make Barth's theology appear accessible to new readers, as if they have found a theologian who speaks a language nearly everyone can understand. But one does not have to read very far in Barth's work before things become strange. Barth uses everyday language in new and surprising ways. He often places fairly simple claims in dialectical tension with one another to produce an unexpected and complex result. Major figures within the tradition might be cited approvingly on one page only to have central aspects of their work rejected and reconfigured a few pages later. Barth frequently produces innovative readings of Scripture that stretch the imagination. No one who reads Barth comes away without being challenged, provoked, and changed.

We edited this *Companion* with these readers of Barth in mind. Our goal was to help them better understand those parts of Barth's theology that seem strange so they can see the familiar aspects of his theology with new eyes. We sought to create a comprehensive resource that covers nearly every topic of interest related to Barth's life and work. The diverse set of scholars who participated are experts in their subject matter, and they brought great care to their work. Each chapter was composed with the aim of providing both clarity and depth to the topic. New readers of Barth should find that the chapters serve as a helpful introduction to the most important questions, themes, and ideas in Barth's work. Experienced readers should discover fresh insights and interpretations that will raise new questions and enrich their scholarship.

This *Companion* is divided into two volumes and four parts. Volume 1 explores "Barth and Dogmatics." Part I introduces "The Life of Karl Barth" through two timelines of Barth's life and a chapter-length survey of his historical and theological significance.

Part II examines “Barth on Doctrinal Theology.” The 33 chapters in this section explore Barth’s thought on key topics and questions in dogmatic theology as reflected both in Barth’s early work and his *Church Dogmatics*. Volume 2 turns attention to “Barth in Dialogue.” The 22 chapters in Part III place Barth into conversation with major figures in the history of Christian thought in order to capture a true, critical dialogue between them. Part IV explores “Barth on Major Themes.” Over the course of 21 chapters, Barth’s relationship to a variety of movements, traditions, religions, and events are explored with the goal of placing his thought in its theological, ecumenical, and historical context.

Projects of this size are the product of a community. We are grateful to editors and production team at Wiley-Blackwell both for inviting us to take on this project and for supporting our work along the way. Special recognition should be given to Rebecca Harkin, Joseph Catherine, Benjamin Elijah, Jake Opie, Richard Samson, and Sandra Kerka. They were gracious and professional at every turn. We also want to express our deep appreciation to each of our authors for their contribution to this project. Several of them put other tasks on hold, or worked on short time frames, in order to meet the deadlines associated with this project.

Special recognition should be given to Ty Kieser, who worked as an editorial assistant on this project while completing his doctoral studies at Wheaton College. Ty’s encyclopedic knowledge of this project proved to be invaluable time and again. His enthusiasm, work ethic, and joyful spirit kept this project from becoming overwhelming despite its size. In addition to bringing every chapter into conformity with the bibliographical requirements, he also raised good questions and contributed insights that made the work stronger. It was a privilege to work with such a fine theologian.

One of the best days we experienced over the course of this project was the day Eberhard Busch accepted our invitation to participate in it. The importance of Professor Busch’s contributions to Barth studies over the past 50 years can hardly be overstated. His keen mind, gracious spirit, and willingness to share his knowledge – not to mention his close personal acquaintance with Barth – have strengthened and enriched Barth’s legacy. In honor of his lifetime of work, we dedicate this *Companion* to him.

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# Primary Text Abbreviations

ALA	<i>Ad Limina Apostolorum</i>
ATS	<i>Against the Stream</i>
BAP	<i>The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism</i>
CD	<i>Church Dogmatics</i>
CL	<i>The Christian Life</i>
CRE	<i>Credo</i>
CSC	<i>Community, State, and Church</i>
DC	<i>Deliverance to the Captives</i>
DO	<i>Dogmatics in Outline</i>
EE	<i>Epistle to the Ephesians</i>
EP	<i>Epistle to the Philippians</i>
ESS	<i>Eine Schweizer Stimme</i>
ET	<i>Evangelical Theology</i>
ETH	<i>Ethics</i>
FI	“Fate and Idea in Theology”
FOC	<i>The Faith of the Church</i>
FT	<i>Final Testimonies</i>
FQI	<i>Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum</i>
GA	Karl Barth Gesamtausgabe
GD	<i>Göttingen Dogmatics</i>
HCT	<i>The Heidelberg Catechism for Today</i>
HG	“The Humanity of God”
HIC	<i>How I Changed My Mind</i>
HOM	<i>Homiletics</i>
HSCL	<i>The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life</i>
KBA	Karl Barth Archiv
KD	<i>Kirchliche Dogmatik</i>
KGSG	<i>The Knowledge of God and the Service of God</i>
PRA	<i>Prayer</i>
PTNC	<i>Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century</i>
RI	<i>The Epistle to the Romans</i> , first edition
RII	<i>The Epistle to the Romans</i> , second edition

ROD	<i>The Resurrection of the Dead</i>
RSC	<i>A Shorter Commentary on Romans</i>
TC	<i>Theology and Church</i>
TET	<i>Theological Existence Today!: A Plea for Theological Freedom</i>
TJC	<i>Theology of John Calvin</i>
TRC	<i>Theology of Reformed Confessions</i>
TS	<i>Theology of Schleiermacher</i>
WGT	<i>The Word of God and Theology</i>
WTW	<i>Witness to the Word: A Commentary on John 1</i>

Part I

# The Life of Karl Barth



# Karl Barth Professional Timeline

1886 – Born 10 May in Basel, Switzerland.

1904–1908 – Studies at the Universities of Bern, Berlin, Tübingen, and Marburg.

1908–1909 – Editorial Assistant for *Christliche Welt*.

1909 – Ordained 4 November by his father in the cathedral in Bern.

1909 – Assistant pastor in Geneva.

**1911–1921 – Reformed pastor in Safenwil, a small industrial city in Switzerland.**

1914 – In August Barth is shocked to read a manifesto supporting the Kaiser's war efforts signed by almost all of his theology professors.

1918–1919 – First edition of Barth's *The Epistle to the Romans*. Barth likens himself to a man climbing a dark bell tower who, reaching out to steady himself with the rail, grabs a bell rope by mistake, thus sounding an alarm that rings through the whole town.

He writes: "The Gospel proclaims a God wholly other from humankind," a God who dwells in "another plane that is unknown."

1919 – Tambach Lecture delivered at a conference of religious socialists. Barth's break with religious socialism. He protests against "secularizing Christ for the umpteenth time, e.g. today for the sake of democracy, or pacifism, or the youth movement, or something of the sort – as yesterday it would have been for the sake of liberal culture or our countries, Switzerland or Germany."

1921–1922 – Second edition of Barth’s *The Epistle to the Romans*. He writes: “If Christianity is not altogether and unreservedly eschatology, there remains in it no relationship whatsoever to Christ.” It becomes a best seller through the present day.

### **1921–1930 – Professor of Theology in Göttingen and Münster.**

1921 – Barth is appointed professor of Reformed theology at the University of Göttingen, and later to chairs at Münster (1925) and Bonn (1930).

1923 – Barth debates his distinguished teacher, Adolf von Harnack.

1924–1925 – *Göttingen Dogmatics* (published posthumously).

1924 – *Zwischen den Zeiten*. Beginning of the “dialectical theology” movement. Barth, Bultmann, Gogarten, Thurneysen, Merz. Dissolved in 1933.

1925 – October. Barth assumes a theology position in Münster.

1926 – First seminar on Anselm.

1927 – *Christliche Dogmatik*.

1928 – Collaboration with Heinrich Scholz. Beginnings of Barth’s Anselm book.

1929 – Meetings with Eric Przywara.

### **1930–1935 – The years at Bonn.**

1931 – *Fides Quaerens Intellectum*.

1931 – *Church Dogmatics*. Barth begins the first book of his *magnum opus*. It grows year by year out of his class lectures; though incomplete, it eventually fills four volumes in 12 parts, nearly 10,000 pages in all.

1933 – January. *Theologische Existenz heute* [Theological Existence Today]. From broadside to journal. “As though nothing had happened.”

1934 – 31 May. The Barmen Declaration. Barth mails this declaration to Hitler personally.

1935 – June. Barth is forced to resign from his professorship at the University of Bonn for protesting against the treatment of the Jews and for refusing to swear an oath of loyalty to Hitler. Arrested and deported.

### **1935–1968 – Professor in Basel.**

1935 – Increasing sense of isolation.

1936 – Attends lecture by Pierre Maury on “Election and Faith.”

1937– Gifford Lectures. *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God*.

1941 – Conversations with Bonhoeffer in Basel.

1942–1945 – Works against a Swiss law that prevented Jewish refugees from entering the country. His telephone is wiretapped by the police.

1944 – Committee for a Free Germany. Communist-led organization organized to support refugees from Germany.

1945 – Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt (19 October). Written under Barth's influence but he considers it to be too vague.

1946–1955 – The postwar era: Between East and West.

1941–onward – Friendship with Hans Urs von Balthasar.

1945–1955 – Opposes German rearmament and nuclear weapons, both in general and in Europe.

1945–1950 – Works for reconciliation with Germany and stands against retribution.

1948 – World Council of Churches. First Assembly in Amsterdam. Barth delivers plenary address.

1949 – “The Church Between East and West.”

1955–1962 – Final years of teaching and activism for peace.

1956 – Bicentenary of Mozart's death.

1958 – Petition against nuclear weapons. In company with many famous nuclear physicists, Barth calls for unilateral nuclear disarmament. Declares preparation for atomic warfare a sin and a denial of all three articles of the Christian faith.

### **1962–1968 – The years of retirement.**

1962 – Trip to the United States. Visits Chicago, Pittsburgh, Richmond, and Princeton.

1963 – Sonning Prize. Copenhagen.

1963 – Honorary doctorate in Paris. *Laudatio* given by Paul Ricouer.

1968 – Sigmund Freud Prize. Awarded by the Academy for Poetry and Speech in 1968 for the quality of his academic prose.

1968 – On 10 December Barth dies in his sleep.



# Karl Barth Personal Timeline

1886 – Barth is born in Basel on 10 May.

1907 – Barth, age 21, falls in love with Rösy Munger. They plan to marry but are prevented by Barth's parents. At their last meeting they burn their letters to one another.

1909 – Barth serves as assistant pastor in Geneva. Preaches from Calvin's pulpit in the Auditoire.

1911 – Barth's parents (mainly his mother) arrange his marriage to Nelly Hoffman (b. 1893), an accomplished violinist and a former pupil in one of Barth's confirmation classes.

1911 – Barth leaves Geneva for a pastorate in Safenwil.

1913 – Barth and Nelly's wedding day (27 March). He is 27, she is 19.

1921–1925 – Professor in Göttingen.

1925 – Charlotte von Kirschbaum meets Barth. She is 24 years old, financially almost destitute, and in poor health. Barth is 37.

1925–1930 – Professor in Münster.

1925 – Rösy Munger dies of leukemia. Barth spends a day in his study grieving for her. He carries a photo of her in his suit pocket for the rest of his life. He sometimes takes it out and weeps, even into his old age.

1926 – Charlotte visits Münster and begins secretarial work for Barth. They soon realize, in joy and anguish, that they have fallen in love.

1929 – Charlotte moves in with Nelly and Karl Barth and their five children in Münster. She lives in the household with them for 35 years.

1930–1935 – Professor in Bonn.

1931 – Barth begins the *Church Dogmatics*.

1933 – *Theologische Existenz heute!*

1934 – Barth writes the Barmen Declaration.

1935 – Barth returns to Basel in July, after the Confessing Church fails to support him with a teaching post. He is officially expelled from Germany by the police in October. Charlotte follows the family into Switzerland. From there they support the German Resistance and the Confessing Church.

1935–1962 – Professor in Basel.

Early 1960s – Charlotte becomes ill, possibly with Alzheimer's disease. In 1965 she moves to a nursing home in Riehen, where she dies 10 years later. Barth visits her every Sunday, often accompanied by Nelly. Nelly continues to visit Charlotte after Karl is gone.

1968 – Barth dies in his sleep on 10 December at the age of 82.

1975 – Charlotte dies at the age of 76. Nelly honors Karl's request that Charlotte be buried in the family plot.

1976 – Nelly dies at the age of 83. All three names appear on one gravestone.

*Barth is honored with a feast day on the liturgical calendar of the Episcopal Church (USA) on 10 December.*

## CHAPTER 1

# Karl Barth's Historical and Theological Significance

Christiane Tietz

Karl Barth allowed himself to be moved by the realities that surrounded him. It was the harsh and perplexing reality of the world that led him to ask about God in a new way. It was the poverty he confronted as a young curate in Geneva, not to mention the class divisions he encountered as pastor in Safenwil, that made him search for a hope against hope on the basis of faith (cf. Barth 1971, p. 306; GA 22, p. 730). It was the reality of World War I and the capitulation of many of his theological teachers to German zeal for the war that made him doubt their theological presuppositions and develop his disruptively “dialectical” counterproposals. It was the reality of his teaching post as a professor that made him move away from a merely dialectical critique to developing a full-scale dogmatics. And it was the reality of the Third Reich that made him lift up the relevance not only of the First Commandment as a theological criterion but also of Jesus Christ as the self-revelation of God. Although Barth argued that God and the Christian faith were not merely cultural or historical phenomena, his thinking arose in response to immediate historical circumstances that betrayed, he felt, a certain crisis of modernity (cf. Gestrich 1977, p. 6f).

Barth and the other dialectical theologians were not the only ones who discerned a crisis in modernity. Many intellectuals at that time like Ernst Bloch or Paul Tillich felt similarly. But the distinctive feature of Barth and the other dialectical theologians was their return to the theology of the Reformation (cf. Ebeling 1962, p. 1). For them that meant returning to faith in a God “whose existence radically questioned the world and oneself. Only God himself and his existence were no longer uncertain” (Gogarten 1937, p. 13 rev.).

Some of their contemporaries regarded their approach as a departure from “modernity.” They suspected that here “‘modern man’ after the First World War had become weary of Enlightenment ideals and was now clinging to an idea of God that erupted from dark,

medieval depths” (Gestrich 1977, p. 1).<sup>1</sup> Yet Barth and his friends did not understand their approach as a withdrawal from modernity and its rationality. They claimed that their concept of God as the Wholly Other was “the theme of the Bible and the sum of philosophy in one” (Barth 2010, p. 17; cf. Gestrich 1977, p. 2f.).

## Return to the Bible, Focus on “die Sache”

At the center of Barth’s new views lay his return to the biblical text. Of course, the biblical text was always – and also in Barth’s time – a subject of theological study. Yet because Barth regarded the historic-critical approach to the Bible as insufficient, he tried something different in his two commentaries on Paul’s Letter to the Romans. The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer considered Barth’s first commentary to be a milestone in modern hermeneutics, because it made clear that understanding a text means understanding “*die Sache*” or “subject matter” of the text. Here Barth undertook “a ‘critique’ of liberal theology which not so much meant critical history as such but the theological modesty which acknowledged that its results were already an understanding of Holy Scripture. Therefore, despite its refusal of methodological reflection, Barth’s Letter to the Romans was some kind of hermeneutical manifesto” (Gadamer 1972, 481 rev.)

In his preface to the second edition of *The Letter to the Romans*, it not only became clearer what Barth meant by “*die Sache*” of a text but also what he regarded as the shortcomings of the historical-critical method. Barth replied to the reproach that he was an “enemy of *historical criticism*” and little more than a biblicist (Barth 2010, p. 11). First he acknowledged the full “right and necessity” of historical criticism. Then he went on to register his dissatisfaction that historical criticism ended with an “interpretation of the text which I cannot call an interpretation, but only the first primitive attempt at an interpretation” (Barth 2010, p. 11). His own aim was first to bring out “what stands in the text,” yet then to think about it until “the barrier” between Paul’s time and ours becomes “transparent” so that “Paul *talks* there and we ... *listen* here, until the conversation between document and reader is focused totally on ‘*die Sache*’ (which *cannot* be different here and there)” (Barth 2010, p. 13 rev.). In focusing on one and the same “*Sache*,” text and reader become present to each other. *This* is the critique that was finally necessary when reading a biblical text: relating and comparing all its statements with “*die Sache*” of which it is talking. In this regard Barth penned his famous line: “In my view, the historical critics need to be more critical!” (Barth 2010, p. 14)

Barth’s perspective on the historical-critical method was a response to the dominance of historicism in Protestant theology at that time (cf. Gestrich 1977, p. 2). In standing against it, Barth, Brunner, Bultmann, Gogarten, and Thurneysen were on the same page as Paul Tillich and Emanuel Hirsch (cf. Gestrich 1977, p. 16). All of them judged that historicism had made the revelation of God into an inner-worldly phenomenon. The *extra nos* of the divine Word had been abolished and preaching had

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1 Gestrich’s allusion here is to Friedrich Karl Schumann’s *Der Gottesgedanke und der Zerfall der Moderne*, 1929.

thereby become impossible (cf. Gestrich 1977, p. 16f.). Ernst Troeltsch's historical method and its norms of critique, analogy, and correlation (cf. Troeltsch 1913) had dwindled God's reality into a part of history. God's absolute otherness could no longer be encountered (cf. Gestrich 1977, p. 21f.).

With his critique of historicism and his concept of the transhistorical simultaneity of *Sache* and reader (through the text), Barth had rejected a simple linear conception of time. He was convinced that the whole existence of the church depended on its simultaneity with the living Christ. In his mature view, this simultaneity was the essence of Christian celebrations like Christmas and Easter. When celebrating these holidays, Christians presupposed "that prior to our remembrance, the One whom we remember is himself in action to-day, here and now." They presupposed that *as* such events once took place definitively there and then, they *also* in some form (secondary and dependent) "take place to-day, and will take place again tomorrow" (CD IV/2, p. 112 rev.). This "realism" was grounded in Jesus Christ, the living Savior present then and present now. "He overcomes the barrier of his own time and therefore of historical distance .... He is present and future in his once-for-all act there and then .... He is among us to-day, and will be among us to-morrow, in his once-for-all act as it took place there and then" (CD IV/2, p. 112 rev.). Through his focus on "*die Sache*" – on the incarnate and present Christ who lived, died, and rose again – Barth was able to develop an understanding of the biblical text which expected that God would speak through it – not in the naïve sense of a fundamentalist biblicism but in reckoning with God's active, in-breaking presence when reading and studying the Bible.

Barth's methodological approach to the biblical text was rejected by distinguished theologians of his time. For example, in 1923 his former teacher Adolf von Harnack accused him of destroying the academic character of theology through his somehow naïve and devotional return to the meaning of the biblical text. In his eyes, Barth had turned the professor's lectern into a pastor's pulpit (cf. GA 35, pp. 55–88).

Barth's rediscovery of the Bible in fact led to a revival of biblical theology and of biblical preaching among his contemporaries. And it led to a new interest in the church, as the Bible has its decisive meaning only in and for the church. The church was the community that lived from reading the Bible and from preaching its texts. Whereas cultural Protestantism emphasized the individual and his or her subjectivity, Barth's theology brought the church back into the picture.

## God as the Wholly Other

In contrast to the liberal theological approach of his time that started with the human being, and in particular with religious self-consciousness, Barth emphasized that theology had to begin with God. This emphasis was prompted by the shock of World War I, which showed Barth that all human ethical concepts such as socialism or pacifism or even "Christianity" were part of the world and were not able to overcome the world as it is. In World War I, in Barth's view, all ethics had "gone into the trenches" (GA 48, p. 186). No ethical concept was able to overcome this human catastrophe, be it the concept of the state or of patriotism, not to mention socialism or even pacifism. Not unlike

the sixteenth-century Swiss reformer Huldrych Zwingli, for Barth everything human was “flesh” in its nullity and transitory nature (cf. Gestrinch 1977, p. 47). Barth concluded that “world is world” and that all worldly gods have become “battlefield grey” (GA 48, pp. 193, 195). Only God, as he can be recognized in the life and work of Jesus Christ, is the one who brings the New. “He is entirely different .... from anything else which seems true and right to me” (GA 48, p. 201).

Barth’s famous critique of religion, not least of the Christian religion, arose from his understanding of God as the Wholly Other who disrupts our self-satisfied existence. For religion wants to quell this disruption. It recommends that we “trust in God .... as a quite attainable and helpful requisite for life .... Without blushing one talks about ‘Christian’ customs, families, organizations .... [In religion], the ‘divine’ has taken possession of God, making God into an instrumental value” (GA 48, p. 679 rev.). In religion, God is used as a means to satisfy our self-determined needs.

Barth concluded that there are no human criteria with which we can measure the immeasurable deity of God. The only criterion is this, that “God’s will” conquers us and “puts such a claim on us .... that we have to recognize and confess: this God *is* God” (GA 48, p. 202). No detached evaluation of God according to worldly standards is possible.

Therefore, only God can reveal God. And only God can authorize any human word about God (cf. GA 48, pp. 567, 595). Although Barth’s decision to begin theological thinking with God could seem self-referential, it was in fact a consequence of his insight that all other starting points for theological thinking were unable to get beyond the hopeless human situation. “Human beings as human beings cry out for God ... Not again for something human, but for God, ... for God as the redeemer of their *humanity*” (GA 19, p. 153). Theology could start only with God, because God, as the Christian church believed, had in fact revealed himself, by a great miracle, in Jesus Christ – perpendicularly from above.

## Barth’s Political Critiques

It was Barth’s insight into the radical difference between God and world that enabled him to critique the politics of his time. He understood not only God’s gospel but also God’s law as different from what reason considered right (cf. Gestrinch 1977, p. 49). We encounter both, God’s grace and God’s law, not in history, but finally only in Jesus Christ as God’s self-revelation. As the Barmen declaration stated in 1934: “As Jesus Christ is God’s comforting pronouncement of the forgiveness of all our sins [Gospel], so, with equal seriousness, he is also God’s vigorous announcement of his claim upon our whole life [Law]” (Barmen 2). It is in fact God’s grace that judges human beings, revealing how little they live in accordance with God (cf. Gestrinch 1977, p. 50).

Barth understood his own political engagement, especially against National Socialism, as a consequence of the First Commandment, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20: 3). Only an exclusive orientation toward God could lead to an adequate Christian life (cf. GA 49, p. 239). The totalitarianism of National Socialism revealed its true face in its disobedience against the First Commandment. From the necessity of obeying this Commandment, Barth summoned the courage to not swear an

unconditional oath to Adolf Hitler, as it was demanded of him by the Nazis. Along with other factors, not least his outspoken speech on Reformation Day in Berlin in 1933, it was a decision that led to his dismissal as a professor in Bonn in 1935.

In contrast to many theologians of his time, Barth argued that Jesus Christ as the only criterion for theology and church led to a definite conception of the church-community. It was constituted, he insisted, "not through blood and accordingly also not through race [*Volk*], but through the Holy Spirit and through baptism" (GA 49, p. 327). This ecclesiological principle led him to conclude that a possible exclusion of Christians with a Jewish background from the church (as was planned in the so-called Arian paragraph of the Nazi state) would amount to the extinction of the Christian church.

Barth was not the only one who fought against Nazi ideology. But he was one of the most prominent figures of the Confessing Church. When Barth told the rector of the University of Bonn in 1934 that he could swear an oath on Hitler only if he would be allowed to add the phrase "so far as it would be responsible for me as an evangelical Christian," the rector reported Barth's behavior to the cultural minister of state Bernhard Rust, commenting that he "got the impression that Barth is searching for martyrdom, and that Barth's dismissal could perhaps become a desired signal for a new, large-scale rebellion in the Protestant church. This is just a world-famous theologian, the head of an immense number of followers all around the world" (Quoted in Prolingheuer 1977, p. 26).

Long before having become a famous professor in Germany, Barth had been politically active. During his time as a pastor in Safenwil, he had advocated for Religious Socialism. He agreed with Leonhard Ragaz and Hermann Kutter that the kingdom of God concretely breaks into the world and its materiality concretely (cf. GA 22, p. 396). He was convinced that "the movement for social justice in the 19th and 20th century" was the "largest and most insistent Word of God to the present." He saw it as a "very direct continuation of the spiritual power ... that entered into history ... through Jesus Christ" (GA 22, p. 387). Barth urged that the church had to speak out in unmistakable terms. He was convinced that Jesus and capitalism didn't go together (cf. GA 22, p. 402). "There should be no social misery" (GA 22, p. 395). He joined the social democratic (socialist) party.

After his return from Germany to Switzerland in 1935, Barth remained politically critical. In the Sudeten crisis, he encouraged the Czech people to resist Hitler's aggression even with armed force (cf. GA 36, p. 114). During World War II, he fought publicly against the Swiss policy of neutrality, which he regarded as an attempt to curry favor with the Nazis. He was worried that Switzerland could lose its identity as a shelter for refugees and as a place where injustice was called by its proper name (cf. Barth 1940, p. 7). Barth therefore questioned unconditional pacifism, because it would be irresponsible not to resist Hitler's expansionism with violent means. Yes, we need to pray and to work (*ora et labora*), as the order of Benedict tells us; but "to work ... in this case unfortunately means: to shoot" (Barth 1945, p. 141). In response to these public statements, many accused Barth of being a warmonger.

In the aftermath of World War II, Barth rebuked the church for joining in the ideology of western anticommunism. He felt that it cannot be "a task of the

church to repeat with some theological argument, what every citizen can read nodding his head anyway in his daily newspaper" (GA 15, p. 164). He warned against the possible rearmament, and in particular nuclear rearmament, of Germany. He expressed concern about the danger of returning to the old enthusiasm for war, of unnecessarily provoking the communist countries, and not least of sparking another world war. He increasingly opposed installing nuclear weapons in Germany and Switzerland. He called upon all citizens to "explain to their governments and their press by every possible means that they want neither to eradicate nor to be eradicated: not even for the defense of the 'free world', not even for the defense of socialism!" (GA 15, p. 392).

Some of Barth's contemporaries valued his brave and often nonconformist political statements. Yet others felt that his "interference" in politics was not what a Christian ought to do. The old saw was dragged out that Barth was mingling religion and politics. During World War II, Swiss censorship had cut back Barth's freedom of speech and publication. After the war many felt that Barth used theology only as a framework for promoting his own political convictions.

With an eye toward Calvin, Barth proposed a theological foundation for his political engagement and for the engagement he felt was incumbent upon the church. Everything depended on the reign of Jesus Christ. This foundation militated against any attempt to separate secular issues from the will of God. Because Christ's reign extended over the whole world, analogies needed to be constructed between the gospel of Jesus Christ and the shape of social structures. It was an analogy between that freedom which Christ brings and a robust political freedom. This analogy supplied Christians with criteria to engage in political action (cf. Barth 1939). As much as possible the state needed to exist as a parable of God's kingdom. Similarly, in the structure of its common life, the church needed to live an exemplary existence that unfolded what it would mean to live in accord with the gospel (cf. Barth 1960). Over against the critics who wanted to silence him politically, Barth was convinced that the gospel is "political from the very outset" (Barth 1960, p. 184).

## A Theology Outdated?

In the aftermath of World War II there was a general consensus that Barth's theology had proven to be an incomparable bulwark against Nazi ideology. More recently, however, at least in the German-speaking world, a perception has emerged that Barth's theology is outdated. Many German scholars would say that although his theology was relevant in its original setting, it has outlived its usefulness today. By historicizing Barth along these lines, his theology is relegated to the dustbin of history (cf. Weinrich 2013, p. 17f.). Critics complain that his theology is self-encapsulated without any relation to contemporary life. Tillich's old reproach that Barth throws revelation down like a stone from heaven has been revived (Tillich 1951, p.7).

The relation of Barth's theology to modernity has reemerged. "The question of its place in the history of the modern era has become more and more a question of methodologically fundamental meaning" (Pfleiderer 2005, p. 225). It is interesting that

those who would reject Barth as outdated often return to theologians who represent the nineteenth century like Schleiermacher and Troeltsch (cf. Weinrich 2013, p. 18). These figures arguably stand at a greater distance from our times than Barth, whether temporally or otherwise.

Some scholars have contended that Barth's theology prevented a "constructive debate" of Protestantism with modernity (cf. Wagner 1995, p. 52). They skirmish against the "authoritarian" character of Barth's theology and against those whom they called the "keepers of the Holy Grail" (Wagner 1975, p. 10). They claim that Barth's success depended on a climate in which people were "hungry for authority" (Lauster 2008, p. 20) and that his theology satisfied "a religious and not only a theological yearning for a return to premodernity" (Lauster 2008, p. 18f.). They hanker back to an era when Christianity was culturally dominant and uncritically accepted. Barth's "re-mythologization of the idea of God," argues Lauster, "his persistent insisting on the idea that God speaks, is an almost violent infantilization of the concept of God, which in many cases must have a repulsive effect, as it does not have any connection to modern critical thinking" (Lauster 2008, p. 22).

Other scholars would claim that Barth was fundamentally connected to idealistic philosophy (cf. Pfeleiderer 2005, p. 225) or even to Schleiermacher (cf. Duke and Streetman 1988; Leiner and Gockel 2015). Still others, like the Munich theologians Trutz Rendtorff, Falk Wagner, and Friedrich Wilhelm Graf contradict Barth's own self-understanding by contending that his theology was not a departure from but a "continuation of the theoretical formation of neo-Protestantism or 'liberal theology'" (Holtmann 2007, p. 13). His theology was not the explication of God's objective reality but of the "subjectivity [*Subjekthaftigkeit*] of all reality" (Rendtorff 1975, p. 8). Or again, it was really a secret theory of authoritarian self-consciousness that validated an "anti-democratic" mindset (Wagner 1975, p. 14).

Barth's claim to start with God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ was, for these critics, a misunderstanding on his part (cf. Pfeleiderer 2005, p. 239, summarizing Wagner). Against his conviction that the Word of God, as attested in Scripture, imposed itself as the beginning of all theological thinking for the church, they contend that it was merely Barth himself who devised God's 'Word' as the "principle of construction" in systematic theology (Wagner 1975, p. 16). They assert that even Barth could speak about God only in the mode of religious consciousness. Or in any case, even if Barth claimed that Christian self-interpretation (*Selbstdeutung*) was constituted by something beyond itself, this interpretation remained just an interpretation (cf. Korsch 1989, p. 208). Despite Barth's criticism of religion as a human, cultural product, his critique was itself little more than a cultural product (cf. Pfeleiderer 2005, p. 228). His critics may allow that although Barth was self-contradictory, he adequately summarized his views in terms of God as pure act (cf. Pfeleiderer 2005, p. 230). Others see this idea as proof of his failure. In general such critics seek to discredit Barth largely by reframing his theology in unfavorable terms as opposed to actually grappling with his arguments. They seem to place little weight on the first article of the Barmen Declaration, by which for Barth everything stands or falls: "Jesus Christ as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture is the one Word of God whom we have to hear, and whom we have to trust and obey, in life and in death."

## Barth's Ongoing Theological Significance

In 1950 Gerhard Ebeling reminded his contemporaries of the unsolved problems with which the theology of the nineteenth century dealt, which the dialectical theology ignored and which the theology of his time should deal with again (cf. Ebeling 1962, p. 9). Nowadays, in a time when the theology of the nineteenth century is being revived, theologians remind us not “to ignore rashly the question, if and how the critique of religion in dialectical theology ... did formulate justifiable warnings which have not received attention in the gunsmoke of the post-dialectical polemics of dissociation” (Laube 2015, p. 453). What are these warnings? Or, put differently, what is the theological significance of Barth for today?

In the center of Barth's theology stands the conviction that God can be known only if he reveals himself. No human path leads to God, no human effort, be it in recognition, be it in feelings, be it in culture, be it in ethics, can build a bridge from human beings to God. God does not stand at human disposal; human beings come “with empty hands” before God (Weinrich 2013, p. 21f.). Because of God's radical otherness, it is only God who can bridge the divide. As a consequence, it is essential for Christian faith and for Christian theology that it does not lose this *extra nos* aspect of God. For Barth, to acknowledge this point goes hand in hand with acknowledging two things: the correspondence between Christian faith and its object and the sinfulness of human beings.

The correspondence between Christian faith and its object means, for Barth, that faith is something incomparable. “Faith is a human activity which cannot be compared with any other in spontaneity and native freedom. But it is in a relationship. It is in relationship to its object, to something which confronts the believer, which is distinct from him, which cannot be exhausted in his faith, which cannot be absorbed by his believing existence, let alone only consist in it and proceed from it and stand or fall with it. The very opposite is true, that faith stands or falls with its object” (CD IV/1, pp. 741–742). Only a God who is absolutely *extra nos* can redeem us from our sinful self-absorption, from being as Luther said human beings turned in upon ourselves (*homo incurvatus in se*). If God were something that we could already find in ourselves – as coinherent for example in our religious self-consciousness – then we would never get beyond ourselves even in faith. On this point Barth agreed with Feuerbach.

Subsequent to Immanuel Kant's critique of theoretical reason, Barth stressed the fundamental difference between the recognition of God and any other human recognition. Our recognition of God was grounded in God's recognition of himself. The truth of God's self-revelation in Christ presupposed the truth of God's own self-knowledge. By the same token, God's self-knowledge was the ground of his self-revelation in Christ. “Only by proceeding downwards from the triune existence of God can we understand how God stands before us, how in his revelation he gives himself to be known and is known by us. The revelation of God, in which our human fulfilment of true knowledge of God takes place, is the disposition of God in which he acts towards us as the same triune God that he is in himself, and in such a way that, although we are human beings and not God, we receive a share in the truth of his knowledge of himself” (CD II/1, p. 51 rev.). Barth did not try to eliminate the circle that ran from God to us and then back

again from us to God. He did not claim to present the primary initiative of God in an unbroken way apart from faith. Instead he tried to honor it (cf. Weinrich 2013, pp. 22–23).

Whereas theologians in the wake of Friedrich Schleiermacher interpreted all human beings as somehow religious, no matter how they understood themselves, Barth was able to accept atheism as a human reality without attempting to explain it away (cf. Tietz 2017, pp. 232–33). “We have a secularism,” he wrote, “which approximates to a pure and absolute form, and which therefore stands furthest from the sphere of the Bible and the church, when a person or several persons stand unwittingly in full isolation from the Gospel in its biblical and churchly form, in which it has never or only very inadequately reached them, and when they are in a frame of mind in which it is to be humanly expected that when it does reach them their reaction to it will be hostile” (CD IV/3, p. 118 rev.). Barth did not try to identify some secret religiosity in even such human beings but affirmed quite soberly: “Human beings deny God ..., human beings are hostile to the Gospel of God” (KD IV/3, p. 133 [my translation]; CD IV/3, p. 119). Despite seeming to promote an “authoritarian” theology in the eyes of some, Barth was able to acknowledge how nonreligious, atheistic people understand themselves. He did not try to co-opt them for religion.

Barth’s conviction that it was nevertheless important to talk with nonreligious people about the Christian God had its peculiarity in this, that it did not begin with analyzing and critiquing the godlessness of nonreligious people but with talking about the Gospel and about the reconciliation of the world through Christ which is true for every human being. As Ingolf U. Dalferth explained: “Nobody has to be religious, and not everybody is religious. But all human beings – and *this* is the decisive theological point – have to do with God. For this, one does not have to prove that every human being is religious, even if he or she claims not to be, but to show vice versa, that *God is* such, that God is present to all human beings, no matter how they understand themselves” (Dalferth 2001, p. 11). “There may very well be a godlessness of human beings,” wrote Barth, “but according to the Word of reconciliation, there is no such thing as a God without human beings, no such thing as a human-less God” [*keine Menschenlosigkeit Gottes*] (KD IV/3, p. 133; CD IV/3, p. 119 rev.).

One of the pressing issues of in contemporary theology is the search for an adequate hermeneutics of biblical scriptures. In his *Church Dogmatics*, Barth unfolded his scriptural hermeneutics through explaining how the sentence “the Bible is the Word of God” should be understood (cf. Tietz 2016, pp. 296–298.). The Bible is a human word, a human testimonial to God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, which means that by the miracle of grace it can become an “address” to persons “in the here and now” (Körtner 1999, p. 121). The church believes that this address can and does happen. It believes “that Holy Scripture has ... priority over all other writings and authorities, even those of the church” and “that Holy Scripture as the original and legitimate witness of divine revelation is itself the Word of God” (CD I/2, p. 502).

This is not a claim about a property ingredient in the Bible but about “a divine disposing, action and decision.” “When we make these statements we have to look back on something that has already taken place and forward to something that has yet to occur again” (CD I/2, p. 502 rev.). The divine inspiration of Scripture by the

Holy Spirit, through the historical transmission of traditions, is a unique, once-for-all event, complete in itself, that continues as a perpetual operation. It is an ongoing miracle in which the Spirit is present and operative to faith as the living Lord of God's self-revelation.

Barth's concept of the Bible as the Word of God is an actualistic concept. The sentence "The Bible is the Word of God" means that "it was" made to be so *definitively* once-for-all, and thus *on that basis* "it will be" made to be so *continually* again and again. The "is" represents a miraculous event, at God's (not human) disposal, stretched out between past and future. The church's memory and hope depend on the "is" of this ongoing occurrence. The church lives by the Spirit's living and continual operation through the biblical text. Its faith depends continually and completely on this operation of grace as it points to the mystery of Christ.

When God's Word in and through the text is understood in this actualistic way, as an event in the power of the Spirit – upholding the centrality, the sufficiency, and the supremacy of Christ – a new hermeneutics becomes possible. Biblical interpretation can be sensitive to historical criticism (and thus avoid any substantial "is" which is no longer possible with a critical awareness), while at the same time granting the Bible a normativity in our time for the church. Ecclesial interpretation is enabled to avoid the mistakes of fundamentalism while reformulating the Reformers' strong affirmation of biblical authority. Barth's understanding of Scripture gives modern Christians courage to read the Bible again (cf. Bergner 2015, p. 307). If Christian theology wants to be faithful to its Christian substance (*die Sache*), it has no choice but to return to the biblical texts again and again. It must grapple with their historical meaning, yet at the same time hope that this witness from the past will become alive for human beings today, because the God of whom the texts give witness is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Historicism reaches its categorial limit, because the subject matter of the Bible is in but not of history.

Barth's attempt to break open the dominance of historicism in modern theology can be seen especially in his understanding of Christ's resurrection as having only "a tiny 'historical' margin" (CD III/2, p. 446). That margin is disclosed in the story of the empty tomb and of the eyewitnesses. The resurrection is affirmed as having happened, in some strong sense, in time and space. Nevertheless, Barth stressed that although it took place in history, it had neither an ordinary historical cause nor an ordinary historical effect. With this complex and mysterious event in view, he emphasized that although theology works with the means of critical historical investigation, it also speaks about a reality that is different from this world, a reality that renews our whole existence, a reality that holds promise for the future of all things. Christ's resurrection is thus the culmination of the basic theological fact that God's reality comes to us only from God. It reveals the God of the promised future who encounters us even now, in the Son and through the Spirit, as the God who makes all things new.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This chapter draws from my book *Karl Barth. Ein Leben im Widerspruch* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2018). For the second on Barth's ongoing significance, see Weinrich 2013, p. 17ff. All translations of German texts are my own.

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Part II

# Barth on Doctrinal Topics



## CHAPTER 2

# Barth on the Trinity

Paul D. Molnar

Karl Barth knew that by placing the doctrine of the Trinity “at the head of all dogmatics,” he was in an “isolated” position in relation to dogmatic history, though not entirely so, because Peter Lombard and Bonaventure also took that position (CD I/1, p. 300). For Barth “the doctrine of the Trinity is what basically distinguishes the Christian concept of God as Christian” (CD I/1, p. 301). The doctrine had played a marginal role in modern Protestant theology. Kant, for instance, held that it made no practical difference for living whether there were 3 or 10 persons in the Trinity (Moltmann 1981, p. 6) and Schleiermacher famously placed the doctrine at the end of his work on the Christian faith, because for him it was of no “constitutive significance for the consciousness of God” (CD I/1, p. 303 and Hunsinger 2011, p. 294). Barth’s aim was to reorient Protestant theology back toward the “great catholic tradition” (Hunsinger 2011, p. 294). His approach is generally acknowledged to have initiated a revival of interest in the doctrine that has continued up to the present day.

As far as I can see, Barth never departed from the main trinitarian position that he offered in CD I/1 §8–12, despite various developments as his dogmatics unfolded. As he himself explained, in his doctrine of reconciliation he was simply approaching the doctrine he presented in CD I/1 “from a special standpoint” (CD IV/1, p. 204). Thus, early in the CD, he asserted that although the eternal generation of the Son expresses God’s love and God’s will not to be alone, “it does not follow from this that God could not be God without speaking to us,” because God’s “free and unmerited love” does not rest “on any need” (CD I/1, p. 139). Indeed, “God would be no less God if He had created no world and no man .... The eternal generation of the Son by the Father tells us first and supremely that God is not at all lonely – even without the world and us” (CD I/1, p. 139 rev.).

In much the same way, the later Barth asserted that God “reveals Himself as the One who, even though He did not love us and were not revealed to us, even though we did not exist at all, still loves in and for Himself as surely as He is and is God; who loves us by reason and in consequence of the fact that He is the One who loves in His freedom in and for Himself, and is God as such” (CD IV/2, p. 755). Barth never abandoned these important assertions about God’s self-sufficiency and God’s freedom. In this essay I will concentrate on explaining Barth’s doctrine of the Trinity as found in CD I/1 and I/2.

## The Root of the Doctrine

Barth recognized that the doctrine of the Trinity could not be found directly in the Bible, because it was a formulation of the church based on the biblical witness (CD I/1, p. 308). He saw it as a faithful explication of that witness which drew upon the language of different ages. As Aquinas observed, the doctrine was formulated to combat “anti-Trinitarians” and other heretical viewpoints (CD I/1, p. 309). In Barth’s view, it must not be supposed in any age that the Bible contains this church doctrine (or any other) explicitly. Rather, to argue dogmatically in a proper way, “one must argue from a basis of Scripture that has to be discovered each time afresh, if one is not to argue as arbitrarily and untheologically as does the adversary [Arius, Pelagius and their historic successors, for example] would seem to do” (CD I/1, p. 310 rev.).

For Barth, it is not merely the concept of revelation, but “the fact of revelation itself and as such” (CD I/2, p. 879) that serves as “the root of the doctrine” (CD I/1, p. 304). In the event of revelation, as attested in Scripture, we really have to do with God himself. To know God in Jesus Christ as biblically attested is to know God as he truly is. For Barth the form of revelation – the life history of Jesus as biblically attested – cannot be separated from its content – his being as the Word incarnate (CD I/1, p. 390). Consequently,

we have to accept the simple presupposition on which the New Testament statement [of Christ’s deity] rests, namely, that Jesus Christ is the Son because He is – not because He makes this impression on us, not because He does what we think is to be expected of a God, but because He is. *With this presupposition all thinking about Jesus, which means at once all thinking about God, must begin and end.* (CD I/1, p. 415 rev., italics added)

Implications follow: First, “It is not true that in some hidden depth of His essence God is something other than Father and Son. It is not true that these names are just freely chosen and in the last analysis meaningless symbols, symbols whose original and proper non-symbolical content lies in that creaturely reality” (CD I/1, p. 432). The *foundation* of God’s revelation as our “Creator, Mediator and Redeemer” is that “in Himself and to all eternity God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit” (CD I/2, p. 878, italics added).

Second, therefore, “the reality of God which encounters us in His revelation is His reality in all the depths of eternity .... In connexion with the specific doctrine of the Holy Spirit this means that He is Spirit of both the Father and the Son not just in His work *ad extra* and upon us, but that to all eternity – no limit or reservation is possible here – He

is none other than the Spirit of both the Father and the Son" (CD I/1, pp. 479–480). Barth is especially clear in holding together the Spirit and the Son when he argues that the Holy Spirit is the power of the risen Lord enabling us to live as Christians, that is, as those united to Christ and thus to the Father (See CD IV/ 2, pp. 369ff.). Barth held that "the content of the doctrine of the Trinity ... is *not* that God in His relation to [human-kind] is Creator, Mediator and Redeemer, *but* that God in Himself is eternally God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit" (CD I/2, p. 878, italics added).

Third, because for Barth, God is really and eternally the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, these words are not simply symbolic or metaphorical terms constructed from our experiences which then could be changed by us for social, religious, or even political reasons. Instead, as already noted, their truth is determined by who God is in his eternal relations within the immanent Trinity. Hence "we cannot say anything higher or better of the 'inwardness of God' than that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and *therefore* that He is love in Himself without and before loving us, and without being forced to love us" (CD I/2, p. 377, italics added). This God can be known "only in the light of the 'outwardness' of God to us, the occurrence of His revelation," that is, only in light of his economic trinitarian self-revelation (CD I/2, p. 377). The triune God is thus knowable to us because that knowledge "is concretely realised by God Himself, in the Father and in the Son by the Holy Spirit. And by God's revelation we, too, receive and have a part both in His self-knowledge and also in His self-knowability" (CD II/1, p. 68). Accordingly, we have true knowledge of God, as God gives us a share in the truth of his own self-knowledge.

Fourth, thinking about the triune God does not begin with our religious experience, nor with the idea that we can derive knowledge of God from religious experience. Barth rejected the Cartesian method espoused by Karl Holl, who wrote: "Nothing ... is to be recognised as religiously valid but what can be found in the reality present to us and produced again out of our direct experience" (CD I/1, p. 195). For Barth, we have no access to God on the basis of our experience. No possibility of knowing the triune God can be found in us, because "we do not find *the Word of God* in the reality present to us." Rather, "the Word of God finds *us* in the reality present to us ... it cannot be produced again out of our direct experience. Whenever we know it, we are rather begotten by it according to Jas. 1 : 18" (CD I/1, pp. 195–196, italics added).

Barth turns to Scripture in order to make it clear that "the Christian concept of revelation already includes within it the problem of the doctrine of the Trinity" (CD I/1, p. 304). Accordingly, we cannot speak of revelation properly without bringing trinitarian doctrine to expression at the very outset. "God's Word is God Himself in His revelation. For God reveals Himself as Lord." This key assertion contains the seeds of trinitarian doctrine within itself. It refers to "God Himself in unimpaired unity yet also in unimpaired distinction as Revealer, Revelation, and Revealedness" (CD I/1, p. 295). God is the subject, the act, and the goal. As Barth famously explained, "*God* reveals Himself [as the Father, *supra nos*]. He reveals Himself *through Himself* [as the Son, *extra nos*]. He reveals *Himself* [as the Holy Spirit, *in nobis*]" (CD I/1, p. 296). This complex act of self-revelation means that "God, the Revealer [the Father], is identical with His act in revelation [the Son] and also identical with its effect [the Holy Spirit]. It is from this fact ... that we learn we must begin the doctrine of revelation with the doctrine of the triune God" (CD I/1, p. 296). "That God reveals Himself as the Lord means that He reveals what only He can

reveal, *Himself*” (CD I/1, p. 307, italics added). Therefore, “the statement, understood thus, *that God reveals Himself as the Lord ...* we call the root of the doctrine of the Trinity” (CD I/1, p. 307, italics added).

## Revelation/Reconciliation

In Barth’s understanding, God is his Word, and his Word is his decision or act – the decision and act in which God speaks to us by reconciling us to himself. This divine speaking cannot “be generally defined either by way of anticipation or by that of reproduction” (CD I/1, p. 144). Barth describes revelation as “the condition which conditions all things without itself being conditioned.” For Barth “revelation in fact does not differ from the person of Jesus Christ nor from the reconciliation accomplished in Him. To say revelation is to say “The Word became flesh”” (CD I/1, pp. 118–119).

Barth argues that “the work of the Son or Word is the presence and declaration of God, which, in view of the fact that it [God’s speaking] takes place *miraculously* in and in spite of human darkness, we can only describe as revelation. The term reconciliation is another word for the same thing [this divine presence and speaking as revelation]” (CD I/1, p. 409 italics added). In Barth’s thinking revelation means God’s act of accomplishing fellowship with us in spite of our enmity toward him. And that means reconciliation. “God’s gracious lordship consists in an overcoming of human rebellion and human need.” Therefore, “revelation is in fact the same thing as atonement” in which God “turns the need of man to his salvation” (CD I/2, p. 871).

Consequently, in all that Barth says about knowledge of and fellowship with God by grace through faith, he speaks of the fact that we cannot reach God on our own precisely because only God can restore that fellowship. This restoration is what he has actually done, and continues to do, in Jesus Christ, and through his Spirit. God alone enables us to live our new life in Christ here and now. Hence, Barth suggests that “*the inconceivable element* in revelation as such, in revelation as reconciliation which can be a reality only as it comes from God, *is the fact* of the Son of God who is the Lord in our midst, and therefore amid our enmity towards God” (CD I/1, pp. 409–410, italics added).

Barth distinguishes the new work of the Son from the work of the Father as creator, because the Son’s work of reconciliation is “an inconceivably new” act of lordship of the one God. Reconciliation is an act “above and beyond creation” that overcomes our sin (CD I/1, p. 410). Thus, “the power of reconciliation,” Barth argues, “will be underestimated if the true deity of the Reconciler is called in question” as he believes Schleiermacher had done, by viewing reconciliation merely as “the crowning of creation” and then interpreting the Trinity “modalistically” (CD I/1, p. 410).

Along the same lines, Barth rejected the traditional Augustinian idea of the *vestigia trinitatis*. He believed it was misguided to look for traces of the Trinity within the realm of creation. Attempts to find an “analogue of the Trinity ... in some creaturely reality distinct from [God]” (CD I/1, p. 334) always means devising one’s own idea of God in the end. It fails to allow God himself to determine our thinking in accord with the biblical witness to his self-revelation. For Barth God does not transmit traces of his divine being directly to the world or to humanity, not even to the humanity of Christ. Barth

rejected the proposal that Jesus is the revealer merely in his humanity as such (CD I/1, p. 323). He did so because this idea smacked too much of the *analogia entis* while also setting up a second root for the doctrine of the Trinity, a root that Barth believed would compromise the root established by God in his self-revelation.

Just as truth “is grounded absolutely in itself,” so the eternal Trinity is antecedently God in himself. Unless our knowledge of God begins with God’s self-revelation in Christ, it will always operate on the unfortunate assumption that it is somehow produced out of our experience and thus can be changed according to our experience (CD I/1, p. 196). It is just at this point that many debates about proper language for God continue to swirl. As long as it is thought that God can be known on the basis of human experiences of love, freedom, or self-transcendence, or perhaps more technically, through the coinherence of God in religious self-consciousness, then the possibility of knowing God will be ascribed to us. But then we will also assume that we can change our language for God without realizing that such assumptions inevitably mean that it is no longer the Christian God who is known.

Why is this the case? For Barth the answer is straightforward, but with profound consequences: the root of our knowledge of God is God’s own self-revelation as attested in Scripture. Therefore, Barth resists any assumption that we can know God without actually turning to Christ alone. As the eternal Son of the Father, Christ is God antecedently in himself; he alone reveals God to us in the power of the Holy Spirit, and he alone reconciles us to God in and through himself. Turning to any other basis fails to recognize that “God is known only by God” (CD II/1, pp. 179, 183).

## Methodological Concerns

In this regard Barth identified “the fundamental error ... which influenced Protestant orthodoxy at almost every point” with “deducing the doctrine of the Trinity – theoretically maintained to be the basis of all theology – from the premises of formal logic” (CD II/1, p. 261). In his doctrine of God, not only Barth’s conception of God’s being in act, but also his presentation of the divine aseity and the divine perfections, were revolutionary and powerful, just because, unlike “Protestant orthodoxy” (as he understood it), he refused to abstract this thinking from the Trinity, which for him meant from “the act of divine revelation” (CD II/1, p. 261). Consequently, “there is no possibility of reckoning with the *being* of any other God, or with any *other* being of God, than that of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, as it is in God’s revelation *and* in eternity” (CD II/1, p. 261, italics added). Any attempt at “free speculations about the nature of His being” (CD II/1, p. 261) is therefore excluded, because the only way to know God with “apodictic certainty” is from the revelation of God as it meets us in Jesus Christ (CD II/1, pp. 161–162).

For Barth, although faith is and remains a fully human act, the truth acknowledged and received in that act has its basis and meaning in the *miraculous* action of the Holy Spirit. This truth cannot be traced back to the human act itself (CD I/1, pp. 182, 451; I/2, pp. 242–243; II/1, pp. 345, 509; IV/1, pp. 646, 747–748, 761). For Barth “the Holy Spirit is ... the divine reality by which the creature has its heart opened to God and

is made able and willing to receive Him” (CD II/1, p. 669; I/1, p. 450). We need this miracle to know that God “is *not only* in Himself the Lord, the Creator, the Reconciler and Redeemer, *and not only* open to Himself as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, *but* that He is all this for [human beings] also” (CD II/1, p. 129, italics added). It is a miracle of grace that God is open for us in this way, and that we are made open for God (CD I/1, p. 182; I/2, p. 240).

Barth never separates the actions of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He stressed not only their eternal *perichoretic* unity but also the patristic principle that all the works of the Trinity *ad extra* are indivisible. Nonetheless “the Holy Spirit is differentiated from the Son or Word of God. The work of the Holy Spirit in revelation is different from that of the Son or Word of God. Though never separated from it, and to be distinguished only *per appropriationem*, it is still not to be confused with it” (CD I/1, p. 474). In revelation the work of the Son and of the Holy Spirit always constitute a unity-in-distinction.

In contrast to much modern theology, Barth therefore never separates the actions of the Holy Spirit from Christ himself. In knowing God in Christ, we know God and enact our fellowship with God as established by God himself, through the reconciliation founded in Christ. This fellowship is made possible in us by the Holy Spirit through faith. “The work of the Holy Spirit means that there is an adequate basis ... for our faith in Christ and our communion with Him, because He is no other Spirit than that of Jesus Christ” (CD I/2, p. 248). “The Holy Spirit is the power in which Jesus Christ the Son of God makes a [person] free, makes him genuinely free for this choice and therefore for faith” (CD IV/1, p. 748). Indeed, “it is the work of the Holy Spirit that the eternal presence of the reconciliation in Jesus Christ has in us this temporal form, the form of faith, which believes this truth” (CD II/1, p. 159). Hence, “the Holy Spirit is the authorisation to speak about Christ ... He is the summons to the Church to minister the Word” (CD I/1, p. 455).

## The Holy Spirit as Lord

None of this of course would be reality for us if it were not the case that the Holy Spirit “remains Himself the Lord” and never becomes “identical with ourselves” (CD I/1, p. 454; IV/1, p. 646). Moreover, God the Holy Spirit is not “a third I, a third Lord side by side with two others. He is a third mode of being of the one divine Subject or Lord” (CD I/1, p. 469). Indeed, the Spirit is “the fellowship, the act of communion, of the Father and the Son,” precisely because the Spirit is this fellowship “antedecedently in Himself.” As in time so also in eternity, the Holy Spirit is “the act of communion, the act of impartation, love, gift” (CD I/1, p. 470). Only on this basis, Barth suggests, is the Spirit this act of fellowship for us in revelation: “Not *vice versa!* We know Him thus in His revelation. But He is not this because He is it in His revelation; because He is it *antedecedently* in Himself, He is it *also* in His revelation” (CD I/1, p. 471, italics added).

This pivotal insight is one of the reasons Barth insisted upon a “sharp distinction” but not a separation between the immanent and economic Trinity (CD I/1, p. 172). To believe in the deity of the Holy Spirit means to recognize that “the Holy Spirit is with the Father (and the Son) the subject of creation. He is not just the Redeemer, so surely does

redemption stand in indissoluble correlation with reconciliation, so surely does reconciliation reach its consummation in redemption. He is thus the Reconciler too, with the Son and as the Spirit of the Son" (CD I/1, p. 471). Because the Father is revealed through the Son, creation too "is shown to have happened through the same Word who became incarnate in Jesus Christ" (CD I/1, p. 471). On that basis "now the Holy Spirit is revealed as the One who in His own way co-operates in creation too" (CD I/1, p. 471).

God's objective movement toward us in Christ as reconciler and revealer comes to us through "the work of the Holy Spirit" (CD I/2, p. 239). This is why Barth asserted that in our finitude and fallenness we know God by grace alone through his Spirit (See Hunsinger 2011, p. 298; CD I/1, p. 466; II/1, pp. 21–23). Thus, "grace is the Holy Spirit received, but we ourselves are sinners" (CD I/1, p. 466). "The assurance of faith by God's revelation" rests always on the grace of the Spirit not "just at the beginning but in the middle and at the end too." This assurance must be "sought in God alone and not anywhere else, not in ourselves" (CD I/1, p. 466). That is why we pray: *Veni Creator Spiritus*.

Through the Spirit we are given to know that "what makes [God's perfect being] divine and real being is the fact that it is the being of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and it is in the fact that they [the perfections of divine freedom and love] exist in this triune God in His one but differentiated being that God's freedom and love and all His perfections are divine in this concretion" (CD II/1, p. 659). In other words, all the divine perfections (or attributes) exist *eternally* in God's triune life and on that basis *also* for us in time. For Barth, everything to be said about God's nature, being, and existence must always be understood as that of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This trinitarian understanding is the gift of the Holy Spirit as based on the Word of God attested in Scripture.

## Primary and Secondary Objectivity

Barth has been accused of opening a "gap" between the immanent and the economic Trinity. This move supposedly led him to an arbitrary view of God's grace (Lewis 2001, pp. 209–210). Such criticism arises, however, only among those who overlook some subtle distinctions in Barth's thought. First, Barth distinguished what he termed God's "primary" and "secondary" objectivity without separating them. He made this distinction in order to stress that God is and remains free in and for himself while also acting freely for us as creator, reconciler, and redeemer. Second, it is a mistake to suppose that Barth opened a "gap" between the immanent and economic Trinity, because he held that "first to Himself, and then in His revelation to us, He [God] is nothing but what He is in Himself," namely, the triune God (CD II/1, pp. 16, 49–51). Third, Barth distinguished without separating God's essence from his works (*ad extra*).

For Barth, God in himself "is immediately objective to Himself" and "mediately objective to us in His revelation, in which He meets us under the sign and veil of other objects" (CD II/1, p. 16). God's "primary objectivity" refers to "His triune life as such" in which "God is first and foremost objective to himself." In this way "objectivity, and with it knowledge, is divine reality before creaturely objectivity and knowledge exist"

(CD II/1, p. 16). On this basis, we believe in God and know God truly through “His clothed, not in His naked objectivity [since God’s self-knowledge is mediated to us]” (CD II/1, p. 16). Importantly, God “acts towards us as the same triune God that He is in Himself, and in such a way that, although we are human beings and not God, we receive a share in the truth of His knowledge of Himself” (CD II/1, p. 51 rev.).

Because God is God as one being in three modes (“persons”) and not in “any kind of parts,” God “exists in the unity of His existence as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer” so that in knowing God in Jesus Christ we do not know only part of God but God himself in “His unity and entirety” (CD II/1, p. 52). Barth never posits a “gap” between God’s primary and his secondary objectivity. He distinguishes them because God who is objective to himself does not need us but freely and in grace chooses to have fellowship with us such that when we know God, we are in “the position of grace” (CD II/1, p. 21). That is why Barth held that knowledge of God in faith is just like any other knowledge, except that “the primary objectivity of God is to be distinguished – but not separated – from the secondary” (CD II/1, p. 21). Therefore the position of God as creator, reconciler, and redeemer and that of human beings who come to know God in faith and by grace can never be reversed, because we never can control God either in his primary or secondary objectivity. For Barth “the position of grace which is the position of faith, and in which God is known, is as such the position of subsequence which makes any disposal of the object [as in other human knowledge] impossible” (CD II/1, p. 21).

In a similar way Barth made another important distinction between God’s essence and his works. Once again, Barth did not separate the immanent from the economic Trinity by opening a gap between them. Rather, he held that “though the work of God is the essence of God, it is necessary and important to distinguish His essence as such from His work, remembering that this work is grace ... God gives Himself entirely to man in His revelation, but not in such a way as to make Himself man’s prisoner. He remains free in His working, in giving Himself” (CD I/1, p. 371). Thus,

God is who He is in His works. He is the same even in Himself, even before and after and over His works, and without them. They are bound to Him, but He is not bound to them. They are nothing without Him. But He is who He is without them. *He is not, therefore, who He is only in His works.* Yet in Himself He is not another than He is in His works. In the light of what He is in His works it is no longer an open question what He is in Himself ... there is no possibility of reckoning with the being of any other God, or with any other being of God, than that of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as it is in God’s revelation and in eternity. (CD II/1, pp. 260–261, italics added)

This thinking allowed Barth to hold, for example, that Jesus’ “sonship on the basis of which He can be the Revealer, the Mediator, the Reconciler, is not a mere contrivance of God behind which, in some higher essence of God which remains a mystery, there is no sonship or word-ness in God, but perhaps an inexpressible and speechless it-ness, a divine, a θεῖον with a different or unknown name” (CD I/1, p. 414). Again there is a distinction but no gap between who the Son is in himself to all eternity and who he is for us in time.

## Tritheism/Modalism

Barth rejected any sort of tritheism, insisting that the early church refused to posit “three different personalities, three self-existent individuals with their own special self-consciousness, cognition, volition, activity, effects, revelation and name” (CD IV/1, p. 205; I/1, p. 351). In this regard Barth famously preferred to speak of “modes [ways] of being” (*Seinsweisen*) in God, by which he intended to communicate what Augustine did when Augustine used the term “person” for lack of a better term for speaking of the three in God, namely, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, without falling into tritheism or modalism (CD I/1, p. 355).

This terminology did not mean that he advocated modalism since he regularly insisted that God was *eternally* the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in and for himself. God would be the triune God who loves in freedom even if he had never acted as creator, reconciler, and redeemer. Barth argued that God was not merely triune in history (a modalistic idea) but that the distinctions within the Trinity were essential to God’s living and eternal being. For Barth, “modalism finally entails a denial of God” (CD I/1, p. 382). It leads to a search for a God behind the God who makes himself known as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Indeed, modalism not only posits a “hidden Fourth” behind the God who is eternally one and three, but for modalism, “the divine subjectivity is sucked up into the human subjectivity which enquires about a God that does not exist” (CD I/1, p. 382).

For those who claim that Barth’s thinking was modalist, one has only to note his strong insistence that

God’s modes of being are not to be exchanged or confounded. In all three modes of being God is the one God both in Himself and in relation to the world and man. But this one God is God three times in different ways, so different that it is only in this threefold difference that He is God, so different that this difference, this being in these three modes of being, is absolutely essential to Him, so different, then, that this difference is irremovable. (CD I/1, p. 360)

Some have wondered how “modes of being” can love (Torrance 1996, p. 116; cf. Molnar 2017, pp. 442–443). Such a worry, however, presumes that Barth substituted “modes of being,” abstractly understood, for the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He did not. The idea of “modes of being” was a second-order reflection on the church’s first-order discourse about the “persons” of the Trinity. Barth’s thought about the Trinity was always dictated by the fact that the three in God always refer to these particular three. Consequently, there is no “possibility that one of the modes of being might just as well be the other, e.g., that the Father might just as well be the Son or the Son the Spirit, nor that two of them or all three might coalesce and dissolve into one” (CD I/1, p. 360). In the end Barth asserted that he had “no cause to want to outlaw the concept of person or to put it out of circulation” (CD I/1, p. 359). He only wanted to avoid tritheism, modalism, and subordinationism as would any theologian operating within the bounds of Nicene orthodoxy.

With regard to tritheism, Barth held that for modern theologians the word “person” signified “individual personal self-consciousness” in a way that would open the door to

a tritheistic understanding of the Trinity. Considering that Jürgen Moltmann's social doctrine of the Trinity led exactly in that direction, for example (cf. Molnar 2017, pp. 386 n. 26, 418–419), it seems clear that Barth's reasons for following what he saw as Calvin's rejection of tritheism and avoiding the more tritheistic perspective suggested by Melancthon (CD I/1, p. 358) was well founded.

Barth regarded the social doctrine of the Trinity as outlandish, saying "Modernism has no Doctrine of the Trinity. The notion of a 'Social Trinity' is fantastic!" (Barth 1962, p. 50). Barth was always concerned to avoid tritheism as well as modalism. He opposed any "division or inequality between Father, Son and Holy Spirit," insisting that "Christian faith and the Christian confession has one Subject, not three" (CD IV/1, p. 205). He appealed to the Athanasian Creed to make his point. "In this Trinity nothing is before or after, nothing is greater or less. But all three persons are co-eternal and co-equal. No one precedes the others in eternity or exceeds them in greatness or transcends them in power" (CD I/1, p. 353; see also IV/1, p. 205).

What Barth wanted to affirm, with the rest of Nicene orthodoxy, was that God is a unity in Trinity and Trinity in unity, precisely as the eternal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There is in God no "threeness of essence," and there are no "parts within the one Godhead," because "the doctrine of the Trinity does not seek to triple, but rather to recognise in its simplicity [God's one unique essence]" (CD I/1, p. 350). God's triune being is indeed "simple," since "within the Godhead there is no additional or subsequent being." At "no time or place, then, is He divided or divisible." God "is Lord in every relationship, because He is Lord of Himself, unconditionally One as Father, Son and Holy Spirit" (CD II/1, p. 445).

It would be a mistake to assume, however, that "the simple," as generally understood, is God (CD II/1, pp. 448–449). God's uniqueness and oneness include the multiplicity of his perfections in his triunity (CD II/1, pp. 332, 463). We encounter and know God's uniqueness only from an encounter with God himself based on revelation. That is what distinguishes Christian monotheism from all others; this "results from and consists in the fact that Jesus Christ bears witness to Himself and reveals Himself as the Son of His heavenly Father" (CD II/1, p. 455).

Barth wanted to avoid any attempt to understand God's unity from "reason" as opposed to revelation alone. He saw it as a sign of "antitrinitarianism" whenever it was claimed that theology "must confess the threeness on the basis of Scripture and the oneness on the basis of reason." The task of trinitarian theology then becomes the attempt to "combine them, which it naturally cannot do because it is prevented already by the difference in the sources from which ... it speaks of the two" (CD I/1, p. 352). Barth maintained that whenever this approach is employed, the revealed God's unity as disclosed by Christ and through the Holy Spirit is always undercut, so that Arianism and other heretical ideas intrude. Such an approach leads to the notion that the ideas of one and three had to be counterbalanced, when in reality the one God is One precisely as he lives, acts, and subsists as Father, Son, and Spirit (CD I/1, pp. 358–359). For Barth, the eternal God is One only as he is Three, and Three only as he is One.

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## CHAPTER 3

# Barth on the *Filioque*

David Guretzki

There's no indication Karl Barth attempted or was interested in solving the ancient *Filioque* debate that gave rise to the schism between Eastern and Western Christianity. From his first mention in his early lectures in dogmatics through multiple references in later volumes of the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth was unwavering in his assertion that the Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son* (*filioque*), Greek/Eastern opposition to the clause notwithstanding. Barth thus took his place in the long line of defenders of the Latin/Western position.

Why did Barth so steadfastly defend the *filioque* and what, if anything, did he add to this perennial theological debate? Before answering these questions, it is helpful to review briefly the history of the debate itself. Barth's own position will then be examined, followed by a concise consideration of Barth's contribution to the *filioque* debate.

### The *Filioque* Debate: A Brief Historical Sketch

This is not the place to narrate the history of the *filioque* debate.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, a very brief reminder of the debate sets the context for understanding Barth's position.

"*Filioque*" – Latin for "and the Son" – is metonymically used to represent a long-standing pneumatological dispute between Eastern and Western branches of Christianity regarding the relationship of the Holy Spirit to the Father and/or to the Son. The word and its attendant theological issues first became the focus of intense

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1 Readers who need either a primer or refresher should consult one of several sources listed here. The most comprehensive monograph length surveys of the history of the *filioque* in German and English respectively are Oberdorfer (2001) and Sicienski (2010). Shorter article or chapter-length histories include Badcock (1997); Daley (2001a, 2001b); Guretzki (2009); and Ritschl (1979).

consideration probably somewhere in the early fifth century when certain Spanish churches began including *filioque* in the Latin text of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (381 CE), mainly in an effort to resist what was perceived as creeping Arianism, which did not affirm the full deity of the Son (Siecinski 2010, p. 6). Though the original text (in Greek) of the third article read, “[I believe] ... in the Holy Spirit ... who proceeds from the Father,” the Latin version of the Creed recited in Spain reads “who proceeds from the Father and the Son [*qui ex Patre Filioque procedit*].” Not surprisingly, when news of the interpolation reached Greek speaking portions of the church, this caused deep concern because it appeared that not only were Latin speakers adding a word to the Creed, they were doing so without ecumenical approval. Only an ecumenical council, it was believed, had the authority to alter the Creed produced by an ecumenical council.

The third and fourth Councils of Toledo (589 and 633 CE) in the West, not “ecumenical” in the relevant sense, affirmed the *filioque*, resulting in relative peace for nearly three hundred years. After some localized theological skirmishes over the clause, in 810 Pope Leo III ruled that the *filioque* should *not* be included in the text of the Creed, even though the teaching represented by it was not unorthodox. Shortly thereafter, Patriarch Photius argued from an Eastern perspective in 867 that the intention of the Nicene fathers was to affirm the Spirit proceeds “from the Father *alone*” [Greek: *ek monou tou patros*]. Thus, Photius insisted the *filioque* is not only a creedal interpolation but is theologically misleading at best and heretical at worst (Photius 1983).

Pope Benedict VIII set a series of events into motion that would eventually contribute to the Great Schism between Eastern and Western churches. In 1014, he officially endorsed the *filioque* clause for use in the Latin liturgy, even while insisting that the Greek version of the Creed should remain untouched. It was then that the *filioque* became Catholic dogma. Although not the only issue at stake in the social, political, and theological differences between the Greek East and the Latin West, the *filioque* was the central issue that led Eastern and Western factions mutually to excommunicate one another on 16 July 1054 (Lossky 1985).

In some quarters, there has been a “hardening of the categories” in both West and East, with some on both sides arguing aggressively either for or against the *filioque*. For others devoted to ecumenical dialogue and healing, important attempts have been made to find a way through, over, or around the issue. Furthermore, there have been significant efforts expended in the direction of resolution since the death of Karl Barth,<sup>2</sup> the subject of this essay. But as of this essay, the theological dispute remains formally on the ecumenical books.

## Karl Barth’s Developing Position on the *Filioque*

It is beyond dispute that Barth defended the *filioque* and therefore is rightly identified as standing firmly within the Western trinitarian tradition. Though Barth first adopted the *filioque* with, apparently, only minimal understanding of the ecumenical arguments for

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2 See especially the international and ecumenical panel of essays presented in Vischer (1981) and Habets (2014). For a short summary of more recent efforts, see Siecinski (2010, pp. 206–213).

or against it, he eventually grounded his defense of the *filioque* in ways somewhat discontinuous from the Western forefathers. Further, though Barth consistently defended the *filioque* throughout his life, there is good evidence that his understanding of the importance of the *filioque* underwent some change over the course of his theological career. In this regard, Barth's stance on the *filioque*, though formally unwavering, may be developmentally and materially understood in three phases, namely, in latent, emerging, and mature phases.

### *The Filioque in Latency*

There is no known mention of the *filioque* in Barth's published work prior to 1923. However, there is good reason to believe Barth was predisposed toward the *filioque* early in his career if for no other reason than Protestants generally, and Reformed theology more specifically, had generally confessed and held to it. Indeed, in most Protestant traditions, the *filioque* is virtually a theological given (Marshall 2002). Indeed, there are signs of Barth's latent predisposition toward the *filioque* as early as his famous *Romans* (*Römerbrief*) commentary. Here we focus on the second edition of *Romans* (RII).

Not surprisingly, Barth nowhere delves into the *filioque* dispute in *Romans*. The book is, after all, a biblical commentary and not a work of dogmatics. However, as I have argued at length elsewhere, the second edition of *Romans* is marked by a dialectical christocentric pneumatology that, although not explicitly defending the *filioque*, is nevertheless already implicitly and structurally filioquist in orientation. Most telling is that when Barth discusses the Holy Spirit, both the ontic and noetic functions of the Spirit are primarily denoted in reference to Jesus Christ (Guretzki 2009, pp. 55–73). That is, both the nature of the Spirit and his work (which in *Romans* appears to be primarily, though not solely, noetic in focus) is spoken of relative to Christ. The Spirit is and does what he does as a "procession" from both the Father and the Son.

Ontically, the Holy Spirit in Barth's *Romans* is both to be distinguished from the human spirit while simultaneously wholly identified as the Spirit of the Father and the Spirit of the Son. On the one hand, Barth characteristically insists that the Spirit is "completely the Other" and "has spoken and acted in direct contradiction of everything that I can say or thou canst hear ... He is completely the Other." (RII, p. 275). In this regard, we "worship Him as the third Person of the Godhead" (RII, p. 274).

On the other hand, Barth also contends that the Spirit has no independent identity apart from the Father and the Son. The Spirit is nothing less than full deity because he is identified fully as the Creator Spirit together with the Father and the Son. Furthermore, the Spirit is the ground of spiritual fellowship between the Father and the Son – a union of love between Father and Spirit (RII, p. 495). Here the Augustinian/Thomistic concept of the Spirit as *vinculum amoris*, ("bond of love"), or *vinculum pacis* ("bond of peace"), between the Father and Son is evident, even if not explicit, in Barth's early thought (Migliore 2000).

If the Spirit is fully identified with Father and Son antecedently in his ontic existence, then the Spirit, according to Barth, is also the noetic Spirit of revelation. The Spirit is the one who enables human "apprehension of revelation," as Barth characteristically put

it. For Barth, a primary work of the Holy Spirit is to make Jesus Christ, the living and eternal Son of the self-revealing Father, contemporaneous to humans in their own history. In this way, Barth views revelation as that moment in which “we are apprehended and known by God [the Father]” in Jesus Christ (RII, p. 282).

To summarize, in the early stages of Barth’s career, he either appeared to be unaware of or unconcerned with the *filioque* debate per se. However, it is evident that Barth’s pneumatology was already on a filioquist trajectory. This was due in part to his location in the Reformed tradition that was largely pro-*filioque* in orientation already, but also in view of the emerging pneumatology evident in *Romans*. There Barth portrays the Holy Spirit as ontically the eternal Spirit of the Father and the Son, and functionally and noetically the Spirit of the Father’s self-revelation through the Son. In both ontic and noetic functions, the Holy Spirit of the *Romans* is, implicitly, the Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son.

### *Barth’s Emerging Position on the Filioque*

One of Barth’s earliest, if not the earliest, mentions of the *filioque* occurred in June or July 1923. Barth was then lecturing on the Reformed Confessions as the Chair of Reformed Theology in Göttingen, which he took up in 1921 (McCormack 1995, pp. 292–294).

Barth’s first passing mention of the *filioque* is in a lecture on the Reformed confessions. Barth’s theme in this context is Christology, under which he identifies three presuppositions: (i) The *reality* of God – which he identifies with the Father; (ii) The *outward* revelation of God – which he identifies with Jesus Christ; and (iii) the *inward* revelation of God – which he identifies with the Holy Spirit (TRC, p. 157). That the Father is real, that he reveals himself in his Son, and that he reveals himself through the Son by the Holy Spirit is the flow of Barth’s argument. Barth identifies the Spirit by which the Father draws humans to himself as none other than “the Spirit who is not only [the Father’s] but is also the Spirit of the selfsame Son” (TRC, p. 158). Thus, it is from within a discussion of God’s revelation of himself through the Son by the Spirit that Barth finally says, “Christianity knows no other Spirit than the *Holy Spirit*, proceeding not only from the Father but also from the Son (*filioque!*)” (TRC, p. 158). Although this barely merits attention as a *discussion* of the *filioque* itself, Barth’s parenthetical appeal to it at this point is significant. This is because for Barth, the procession of the Spirit from the Father and the Son certainly pertains to the question of who the Spirit is, but it is a question that can be answered only in reference to how it is that the triune God first reveals himself. The *filioque*, in other words, is first a statement about Barth’s perception of how God reveals himself, only after which can one say something about who God is in his eternal triune being. As we will shortly see, this two-step move is fully consistent with what Barth does when he finally gets around to discussing the *filioque* in a more formal way.

After settling in at Göttingen, Barth begins to lecture formally in dogmatics, the record of which we now have as the *Göttingen Dogmatics* (GD). The entirety of the GD was constructed on what Barth clarifies as the ground and presupposition of all

Christian speech, namely, *Deus Dixit* – that God has spoken and continues to speak. Succinctly put, if God has not first spoken, then all God-talk is but “scholarly metaphysics” (GD, p. 292). Furthermore, Barth establishes what one could, with good reason, identify as one of his fundamental dogmatic rules to which he holds consistently his whole life: “God’s relation [to humanity] ... is necessarily contained and grounded in God’s being. All that the Father does and the Son does, the Spirit does with them” (GD, p. 128). In other words, the knowledge of God is grounded upon a discernment of what it is that God as Father, Son, and Spirit does. Or to use the common turn of phrase, the economic Trinity – the workings of Father, Son, and Spirit toward the world – is identical to the immanent Trinity – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the depths of their eternal relationships. In short, God reveals himself in his action, which corresponds to how he really is in eternity.

Having clarity about these two presuppositions – the priority of God’s self-speaking and the correspondence of God’s action with his triune reality – helps to get at the significance of how Barth eventually discusses the *filioque* in GD, even though it may well have been that even Barth didn’t yet fully understand his own dogmatic moves. He admits that the ancient debates about the meaning of “procession” and “generation” have a degree of obscurity about them such that he confesses to never “having heard or read anything very plausible about it” (GD, p. 128).

Reading Barth on the *filioque* in the GD leaves one with the sense that he was struggling to make sense of it all. Nevertheless, Barth remained convinced that the Western position is superior, and his critique of the Eastern insistence that the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone was barely veiled in his rhetorical questioning. He asks:

Do we have in the Greek view an unsubjected remnant of sub-ordinationism, as though the Father were more and greater than the Son? Or is it a reflection of the very mystically oriented piety of the East which, bypassing the revelation of the Son, would relate man directly to the original Revealer, the *principium* or fount of deity, as though one could and should do this? (GD, p. 129)

As already intimated previously, it is significant that even Barth’s critique of a non-*filioque* position is posed as a question about revelation and not directly as a question about “eternal relations” per se.

When Barth turns to an explicit discussion of the *filioque* in GD, it is minimal; but it is noteworthy that he again connects it to the question of revelation, and more specifically, to his earlier discussion on the threefold Word of God. For Barth, God’s Word comes in three forms: revelation, Scripture, and preaching. Barth lays out what he sees as the relationship of these three forms:

Scripture is not revelation, but from revelation. Preaching is not revelation or scripture, but from both. But the Word of God is scripture no less than it is revelation, and it is preaching no less than it is scripture. Revelation is from God alone, scripture is from revelation alone, and preaching is from revelation and scripture. Yet there is no first or last, no greater or less. The first, the second, and the third are all God’s Word in the same glory, unity in trinity and trinity in unity. (GD, p. 15)

The structure of the relationship between the three forms of the Word of God functions for Barth as a structural analogy for the interrelationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Guretzki 2009, p. 87). Just as Scripture comes from revelation, and preaching comes from revelation and Scripture, so, too, the Son comes from the Father, and the Spirit comes from Father and Son. In other words, how God speaks (*Deus dixit*) in his threefold Word is analogous to how God subsists in his threefold existence as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Barth intentionally aligns “proclamation” coming from revelation and Scripture with the Spirit coming from Father and Son. As he put it, “Christian preaching ... proceeds from revelation and scripture (as the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son).” (GD, p. 16).

To be sure, the analogy for Barth is not simply accidental or coincidental but a legitimate analogy to be observed. At this point Barth’s defense of the *filioque* is more formal than material. That is, he does not defend where or in what specific ways the record of revelation witnessed to in Scripture and in the preaching of the church points antecedently to the eternal God. Nevertheless, he is convinced of the structural parallel: The Word of God as it comes to humans is of the same structure as the eternal relations of the triune God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

### *Barth’s Mature Stance on the Filioque*

Understanding Barth’s mature view of the *filioque* must necessarily focus on his extensive discussion in the first half-volume of the *Church Dogmatics*. Although Barth makes repeated mention of the *filioque* throughout the remainder of the CD, limitations here will restrict us only to an examination of the first half-volume.<sup>3</sup> Fortunately, his essential understanding of both the *filioque*’s defense and its dogmatic function remains consistent throughout the CD.

It is clear what had previously been a topic of minimal or tangential interest, in the CD now becomes a full *apologia* in favor of the *filioque*. However, before unpacking Barth’s defense of the *filioque* in CD I/1, it is helpful to observe both continuity and discontinuity between the GD and the CD. This will enable us to see the final steps of Barth’s maturation in his understanding of the *filioque*.

Two features are common in both GD and CD. First, although it may be stating the obvious, it is worth noting that Barth did not change his mind on the *filioque* in the intervening decade between Göttingen and Bonn. Moreover, if his commitment were tentative in the GD, in the CD it has become an all-out conviction.

The second notable point of continuity is that the *filioque* arises for Barth as a feature of his doctrine of revelation. In the GD, the *filioque* is mentioned by Barth relative to his fundamental dogmatic premise of *Deus dixit* – God has spoken. Similarly, in the CD, Barth discusses the *filioque* within the framework of his doctrine of the Word of God (CD I/1 and CD I/2) and, note well, not within his Doctrine of God (CD II/1 and CD II/2). This is especially significant to note against the backdrop of where the historic debate on the Spirit’s

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<sup>3</sup> For examination of other appeals to the *filioque* in the CD beyond I/1, see Guretzki (2009).

procession arose in the early middle ages: as a debate or as a feature of the doctrine of God, or more specifically, the doctrine of the Trinity. Whereas for medieval theologians, whether Greek or Latin speaking, the question of the procession of the Spirit is a question about the eternal (or “immanent”) Trinity, for Barth the question cannot be answered without pushing back a step to examine the (characteristically modern) epistemological question of how it is that we come to know about the nature of God, that is, the question of revelation. Thus, for Barth, the order of dogmatic discussion must move from the doctrine of revelation to the doctrine of God, and not vice versa.

When it comes to discontinuity, however, the difference between the GD and CD is subtle but real. Although Barth carries over his use of the threefold form of the Word of God, his material characterization of the relation of the three forms has shifted noticeably. Whereas in the GD Barth sees a definite “geometrical” relationship between the three forms of preaching (or proclamation), Scripture, and revelation – with preaching proceeding from revelation and Scripture – in the CD Barth advances what I’ve called a more “perichoretic” relationship between the three forms whereby each form is seen as intertwined and interpenetrating the other two. Barth calls this a “schedule of relations” that is worth citing here:

The revealed Word of God we know only from Scripture adopted by Church proclamation or through proclamation of the Church based on Scripture.  
 The written Word of God we know only through the revelation which fulfills proclamation or through the proclamation fulfilled by revelation.  
 The preached Word of God we know only through the revelation attested in Scripture or the Scripture which attest revelation (CD I/1, p. 121).

Although Barth continues to see a necessary connection between the way God reveals himself and an ability to speak of God’s own triune nature, the immediate parallel to the *filioque*, so evident in the trinitarian geometry of the GD, is lost in his account of the perichoretic relations of the CD. This is somewhat problematic. Though Barth continues to find a revelation/Trinity analogy, he construes the relations of the three forms of the Word in considerably different ways. By the CD Barth insists, “we can substitute for revelation, Scripture and proclamation the names of the divine persons Father, Son and Holy Spirit and *vice versa*, that in the one case as in the other we shall encounter the same basic determinations and mutual relationship” (CD I/1, p. 121). What is clear, however, is that after the discussion of the threefold form of the Word of God in CD I/1, Barth ceases to appeal to their relationship as an analogy to the Trinity in the remainder of the CD. Consequently, though Barth originally saw in the doctrine of the Word of God and its threefold forms a kind of theological grounding for the *filioque*, in the later volumes of the CD that is no longer grounds for the support of the *filioque*, Barth’s ongoing defense of it notwithstanding.

What, then, are Barth’s grounds for defending the *filioque*? It is to this question we now turn.

Barth’s fullest discussion of the *filioque* in his whole corpus occurs in *Church Dogmatics* at §12, “God the Holy Spirit” in section 2 titled, “The Eternal Spirit” (CD I/1, pp. 476–487). Consistent to Barth’s pattern, he begins the section by noting, “The Holy Spirit does not

first become the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, in the event of revelation.... What He is in revelation He is antecedently in Himself. And what He is antecedently in Himself He is in revelation” (CD I/1, p. 466).<sup>4</sup> Despite the change in how he sees the relationship of the three forms of the Word of God, he nevertheless continues to demonstrate his commitment to his dogmatic rule of correspondence between the “revealed” and the “real” God: God is as he reveals himself to be. Consequently, when Barth eventually deals with the *filioque* in this section, it is with this dogmatic commitment firmly in mind – that whatever it means for the Spirit to proceed from the Father and the Son must be asserted because that is how the Spirit functions in the event of revelation. As he puts it, “If the rule holds good that God in His eternity is none other than the One who discloses Himself to us in His revelation, then in the one case as in the other the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the love of the Father and the Son, and so *procedens ex Patre Filioque*” (CD I/1, p. 483).

With this rule of correspondence in mind, Barth rejects the view among some in Orthodoxy “that the *Filioque*, in any possible sense, can be said only with regard to the *opus trinitatis ad extra* [‘external work of the Trinity’], but not the inner life of God” (CD I/1, p. 479). On the contrary, for Barth the “incomparably saner” view in the East comes from those who see the *filioque* as a “private opinion which had wrongly been given the status of dogma” but which also could not be seen as ongoing grounds for continuing division between the Eastern and Western churches, if for no other reason than the Creed does not, nor could not have, negated the *filioque* as some in the Eastern tradition after Photius were apt to do (CD I/1, p. 479). Indeed, Barth perceived the latter position, in his day, as the “prevailing view in Eastern Orthodoxy today” (CD I/1, p. 479).

Negatively, Barth refuses to establish the details of the *filioque* on either philosophical or ecumenical grounds. Barth believes that one cannot settle the question of whether the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone or from the Father and the Son by clarifying the meaning of the term “procession” itself – as if by understanding the semantic meaning of procession one could settle from whence the Spirit really proceeds. That the Spirit is said to “proceed” and that the Son is said to be “generated” according to the Johannine witness and upon which the patristics relied in their accounts of the doctrine of the Trinity is, for Barth, a “fact” of revelation, witnessed to clearly in Scripture. However, these ancient terms are not subject to further linguistic, etymological, semantic, or philosophical clarification if only greater effort was given to the task. The terms do not provide a description of what the divine persons are like, but simply that the one generated (the Son) and the one proceeding (the Spirit) are not one and the same. The terms, in other words, serve to differentiate the Son and the Spirit – *that* they are different but not *how* it is that they are different. As Barth put it, “[w]e can state the fact of the divine processions and modes of being. But all our attempts to state the How of this delimitation will prove to be impossible” (CD I/1, p. 476).

Furthermore, Barth refuses to follow an ecumenical strategy of dealing with the “*filioque* problem” as if it is a puzzle to solve, or an argument to be won or lost. He is fully

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4 This doctrine of antecedence was the key to Barth’s insistence on the *Filioque*. The Spirit could not “proceed” from the Son in time if he did not already do so in eternity within God’s immanent trinitarian life. “The Eastern doctrine does not contest the fact that this is so in revelation. But it does not read off from revelation its statements about the being of God antecedently in Himself” (CD/1, p. 480).

aware that “from the Son” was not in the original text of the Creed and that this was a major factor in the Great Schism between East and West. He even admits that the later Latin interpolation of *filioque* into the Creed was “not in fact a shining testimonial to the Roman Catholic theory of the certainty of the Church’s teaching authority as concentrated in the hands of the pope” (CD I/1, p. 478). Nevertheless, Barth resolutely rejects the idea that because “from the Son” was not in the original Creed that therefore the truth of it must therefore be rejected. As he insisted, “there was no necessary reason — the factual reason adduced [i.e., that is was not originally in the Creed] is not a necessary one — why the *filioque* should not have been in the original creed” (CD I/1, pp. 477–478). That the church split over this question is for Barth a moot point, and the solution to the division has nothing to do with defending one or the other side, or with finding a compromise or middle way. For Barth, all that matters is whether *filioque* is true.

So why then did Barth accept the *filioque*? The rationale for Barth is rather simple: because revelation demands it, whether a great swath of the church historic accepts it or not. Barth is convinced, in other words, that the biblical witness to revelation consistently points to the Spirit’s conjoint working in the economy together with the Father and the Son, and that therefore, due to the correspondence between economic and immanent Trinity, the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son eternally as well.

What does Barth see as the demands of revelation? Certainly, it does not simply mean finding Scriptural verses that do or do not support the *filioque*. For example, Barth is well aware that John 15:26 speaks of the Spirit as one who proceeds (Greek: *ekporeuetai*) from the Father and that the passage does not explicitly say that the Spirit also proceeds from the Son, though it does say that the Spirit is sent (Greek: *pempō*) by the Son from the Father, a point of some interest to Barth (CD I/1, p. 480). In any case, he insists that taking this verse as evidence against the *filioque* is to take it in isolation from the many other passages that also call the Spirit the “Spirit of the Son.” Such exegetical appeals for Barth already point to why he sees the Eastern position as suspect, mainly because such a practice is “speculation which interprets individual verses of the Bible in isolation” (CD I/1, p. 480). On the contrary, he points out, the Spirit is said also in the same verse to be sent by the Son from the Father is evidence that the Spirit, if the rule of correspondence holds, proceeds from the Father and the Son and not only from the Father.

More important for Barth than adducing select biblical texts to uphold the teaching of the *filioque* is to discern the entire pattern of God’s personal self-giving in revelation through the broad contours of the biblical narrative of God’s history. In that regard, from what event in the economic history of God’s revelation and salvation corresponds to the eternal procession of the Spirit from the Father and the Son? For Barth, it is the event known in Scripture as the “outpouring” or “descent” of the Spirit most clearly spoken of, though not exclusively, in the account of Pentecost narrated in Acts. As Barth argues,

In the context of the New Testament witness the non-identity between Christ and the Holy Spirit seems to be necessarily grounded as possible. Thus we find the Holy Spirit only after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ or in the form of the knowledge of the crucified and risen Lord, i.e., on the assumption that objective revelation has been concluded and completed. (CD I/1, p. 451)

For Barth, the outpouring of the Spirit is not a restricted either forward or backward from the event of Pentecost but is evident both in the form of Jesus' promise to send the Spirit (e.g. John 7:38 f., 14:26; 15:26; 16:7) and in the fulfillment of the promise in the actual coming of the Spirit at Pentecost (e.g. John 20:22; Acts 2:2; 10:44; 1:15). Thus, the outpouring of the Spirit for Barth is the event in which, in past, present, and future, the Spirit testifies (noetically) and makes contemporaneous (ontically) in the people of God, the church, the presence of Jesus Christ.

Barth anticipates those critics who point to other revelatory events as evidence of economic action of the Spirit toward the Son. What about the conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit in Mary, or the alighting of the Spirit upon Jesus at his baptism? Do these events not reveal that the one can also read a "procession of the Son from the Holy Spirit"?

Barth's responds to this line of inquiry by distinguishing between the actions of the Spirit toward Jesus as it pertains to his divine versus human origins. Barth explains, "The work of the Holy Spirit in relation to the Son in revelation ... is not of such a kind that it can be described as commensurable with the eternal begetting of the Son by the Father or the eternal breathing of the Spirit by the Father and the Son, so that another eternal relation of origin can and should be read off from it" (CD I/1, p. 485). Instead, "what the Son 'owes' to the Spirit in revelation is His being as man, the possibility of the flesh existing for Him, so that He, the Word, can become flesh" (CD I/1, p. 486). In this, Barth argues that the economic actions of the Spirit toward the Son in birth, baptism, and resurrection in no way have anything to do with the eternal origin of the second person of the Trinity but are rather an action of "confirmation" that in the Son God has been united with creation in a communion of love.

Positively, Barth's distinction between the origins of the human and divine pertaining to Jesus Christ properly resists notions of adoptionism in which Jesus the man is said to "become" the Son of God by the action of the Spirit at some point in temporal history. Barth soundly rejects any such temporal "begetting" of the eternal Son. Moreover, Barth upholds the radical newness (*novum*) of the incarnation in the history of salvation – that Jesus truly and fully does take on human flesh at some point in history.

Negatively, however, it is difficult to avoid at least some hints of Nestorianism in Barth's approach – a dividing of the human and divine in Jesus Christ. This is paradoxically contrary to Barth's insistence almost everywhere else in the CD that the humanity of Christ has full revelatory significance to our knowledge of God. Moreover, from a methodological perspective, Barth's "exception to the rule" makes it more difficult to know how fully he himself is willing to follow his rule of correspondence to its fullest extent. Does the economic history of God reveal God as he really is in eternity? If so, why then can we rule out that the Spirit's action toward Jesus Christ – the fully divine, fully human one – as an event that does not reveal something of the immanent Trinity? To be fair, all proponents of the rule of the triune economic-immanent identity are forced to qualify the rule in some way, but it is evident here, at least, that Barth's commitment to the *filioque* leads him to "read in" conclusions to revelation and not the other way around. This is not necessarily a fatal move for Barth's defense of the *filioque* but it is a weakness of which he neither was aware nor made any attempt to overcome.

## Barth's Enduring Contribution to the *Filioque* Controversy

Despite his lifelong and ardent advocacy for the doctrine of the *filioque*, one should not pretend that in some way Barth "proved" the *filioque*. Nor should he be viewed as one who brought about a solution to the ancient debate. What, then, did Barth's approach contribute to the ongoing dispute? Although more could be said than what has been proffered here, three things can be said by way of conclusion.

First, Barth nowhere gave evidence that he thought the *filioque* was even a problem that needed to be solved. This was not because he was unaware of the ancient problem, but because he did not believe that some kind of mediating, compromise, or synthetic solution could be found that upheld both the Eastern and Western perspectives. It is no overstatement to say that Barth believed either the *filioque* was true, or it was not – full stop. Either the Spirit does indeed proceed both eternally and economically from the Father and the Son, or he does not. Such a position against the backdrop of modern ecumenical debates on the *filioque* is generally not popular, let alone polite. Yet Barth seemed to care more about whether the doctrine was dogmatically and scripturally defensible rather than whether there was a way to unite divided ecclesiastical bodies. One may or may not agree with Barth's approach, but it is an approach that still needs to be considered. The *filioque* may be definitively proven to be right – or wrong – but Barth does not consider that a mediating or synthetic solution may yet be found, various attempts to do just that after his death notwithstanding. Thus Barth raises the question: Has ecumenical discussion on the *filioque* sometimes moved too quickly to find a compromise or mediating solution rather than continuing to focus on whether the *filioque*, as a theological assertion, is true to revelation and therefore true to God in his eternal identity? Barth's approach, at least, should push present and future theologians to still consider that question.

Second, Barth's defense of the *filioque* is distinctly modern. From start to finish, Barth deals with the doctrine of the procession of the Spirit as first a question of revelation and epistemology – about how it is that we know what God is like – before it is a question of what in fact God is like. In this regard, Barth's defense of the *filioque* is somewhat novel, or modern, in the history of the debate in that it is grounded in matters of "theological epistemology," even if Barth would have been loath to call it as such. Consequently, Barth's contribution to the *filioque* debate must stand as one who, as a modern theologian, sought to answer a "premodern" question on modern terms. That doesn't mean Barth thought that the epistemological questions that drive modern thought prevent one from making a claim about the eternal God himself. Barth's defense of the *filioque* as a question about revelation (theological knowledge) first and ontology or theology second indicates that Barth refused to accept epistemology as a barrier or gap to the knowledge of the true God. Whether modern (or postmodern, for that matter) thinkers see epistemological questions as marking the limits of human theological inquiry, Barth is at least one modern theologian who refuses to accept that limitation and modern readers can ill afford to ignore one of the greatest, if not the greatest, modern defenders of the *filioque* as a theological assertion arising from analysis of revelation, and not simply as an assertion of medieval metaphysics.

Third, and perhaps most important, Barth's approach to the *Filioque* is fundamentally Protestant in that he is concerned at a much greater level about whether the doctrine aligns with God's historical self-revelation attested to in Scripture than whether the doctrine unites or divides the church. It is not that Barth does not care about the unity of the church – he not only cares about it but believes it and declares it throughout his written corpus. Rather, Barth is more concerned that the proclamation of the church, whether in the form of preaching, creeds, or confessions of faith, aligns with and is a witness to this revelation, even if holding to that confession means disagreeing even with those in the church. Premature or forced levels of dogmatic agreement on such a fundamental issue such as the *Filioque* cannot, for Barth, take precedence over faithfulness to the Word of God. This doesn't mean that Barth is in principle opposed to the possibility of dogmatic unity on the question as much as he is practically opposed to unity for the sake of unity. The *Filioque* divide, in other words, cannot and should not be solved if it means speaking or saying something that does not materially and evidently arise from an examination of the witness of Scripture to God's self-revelation. Barth did grant in passing, however, that it might not be impermissible to affirm, with appropriate qualifications, that the Spirit proceeds from the Father "through the Son" (*per Filium*) (CD I/1, p. 484), a phrase that some have seen as holding ecumenical promise.

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## CHAPTER 4

# Barth on Divine Election

David Gibson

### Introduction

By any standard, Karl Barth's doctrine of God's gracious election in *Church Dogmatics* II/2 is a monumental achievement. It is so, not only as an articulation of doctrines correlated with each other to form an elaborate cathedral of thought, but also because it manages a magisterial engagement with the church catholic, culminating in a development of Reformed theology through a sustained exercise in biblical-exegetical reasoning as the proper mode of dogmatics.

An exposition of such grandeur has drawn high praise from Barth interpreters. "When the history of theology in the twentieth century is written from the vantage point of, let us say, one hundred years from now, I am confident that the greatest contribution of Karl Barth to the development of church doctrine will be located in his doctrine of election" (McCormack 2000, p. 92). In a similar vein: "I still hold the *Gotteslehre* of CD II/1 and 2 to be the high point of Barth's Dogmatics. ... That second volume of *Church Dogmatics* surely ranks with Athanasius, *Contra Arianos*, Augustine, *De Trinitate*, St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, and Calvin, *Institutio*, as a supremely great work of Christian theology" (Torrance 1990, p. 124).

If the brilliance of Barth's treatment may be granted, it is less clear where the true value of his contribution lies. Is his doctrine of election to be prized for its recalibration of Reformed double predestination to an understanding of universal election, based on a richly expressed pretemporal Chalcedonian Christology in coherence with the doctrine of God? Or is it, rather, nothing less than a thoroughgoing revolution in the doctrine of God that takes Christian theology to postmetaphysical heights with a radically new divine ontology? Positions such as these – with various nuances along the spectrum – are part of a lively and contested ongoing debate within Barth studies.

In what follows, we will (I) provide a brief sketch of the precedents and development of Barth's doctrine of election; (II) trace the basic shape of paragraphs §32–§35 in CD II/2, chapter VII, "The Election of God"; before (III) attempting to show how Barth's doctrine of election exists as a worked example of the Reformed Scripture principle animating a coherent unfolding argument within the *Church Dogmatics*. To show this we will attend to a persistently neglected aspect of Barth's doctrine of election – his attention to the biblical materials – both to help illuminate the full contours of his doctrine and to show that provocative readings of Barth on divine ontology should be resisted despite their powerful claims to lay hold of Barth's best thoughts. We will conclude (IV) with an evaluation of Barth's contribution.

## (I) Precedents and Development

From its earliest iterations Barth's thought on election germinated in the soil of the Reformed tradition. In his first year as Honorary Professor of Reformed Theology at Göttingen (1921–1922), Barth delivered 13 lectures on Paul's letter to the Ephesians that reveal his critical appreciation of Calvin on this subject. Barth operates with profound sympathies for Calvin's close textual work, while also registering his great unease with the anthropological and psychological concerns of Calvin's doctrine. The Reformed tradition, for Barth, takes the wrong point of departure. The apostle Paul "is concerned about the double predestination of the human creature in *God*, not about the double predestination of the *human creature*. His outstretched finger points above, not below" (EE, p. 95; Barth 2017). Nevertheless, Barth's subsequent exposition in the *Göttingen Dogmatics* (1924–2015) contains notable similarities to the Calvinist tradition of Pauline exegesis (Romans 9 "teaches eternal, unconditional twofold predestination," GD, p. 453; Barth 1991), with a stated deviation being Barth's account of temporality. Barth rejects a concept of election as a decree occurring in a pretemporal past to save a fixed number of individuals. He prefers instead an actualistic understanding of election whereby God is involved in a continual interaction with individuals in the present as part of the divine decision of electing and rejecting (Gibson 2008, p. 137). Barth is self-conscious about this move: "And I for my part am fully aware that it is no secondary matter if I deviate here but that it will have the most far-reaching consequences. This is the rent in the cloak of my orthodoxy, for which undoubtedly I would at least have been beaten with rods in old-time Geneva" (GD, p. 453).

In June 1936 Barth traveled to Geneva for the Reformation celebrations and the International Calvin Congress on the theme of Calvin's doctrine of predestination. There Barth heard Pierre Maury deliver an address titled "Election and Faith," which had a profound effect on him, an impact quickly registered in lectures Barth gave in Debrecen, Hungary in September 1936 on the subject of "God's gracious election" (Barth 1936). Incubating there was a pervasive christological grounding for election that reaches full flower with the publication in 1942 of *Church Dogmatics* II/2. While wishing to remain in the Reformed tradition and adopt many of its foundational premises, Barth now expounds his profound reorientation of the doctrine to a christological center that issues in a completely new understanding of both election and double

predestination. He explicitly rejects not just his earlier moment-by-moment actualism in offering a more complex account of eternity and time but also the classical landscape of eternal, individual, double predestination. Yet his self-consciousness remains: the publication of CD II/2 gave Barth “much pleasure, but even greater anxiety,” for “I would have preferred to follow Calvin’s doctrine of predestination much more closely instead of departing from it so radically. ... But I could not and cannot do so” (p. x).

## (II) The Election of God

### §32 *The Problem of Election*

The commanding nature of Barth’s treatment is evident in a reading of the orientation, foundation, and place of the doctrine of election in §32. Barth titles the paragraph “The problem of a correct doctrine of the election of grace,” but it is immediately apparent that he is attempting to deproblematize election precisely by treating it as a *dogmatic* question. That is to say, Barth resists arguing from either psychological problems that the topic tends to generate in the modern mind (i.e. human freedom or fairness), or with particularly historical problems (i.e. the relationship of Israel and the church). Barth manages to deal with all the problems generated by election in Scripture and the tradition without making them the ground of his exposition. Partly this is achieved by style (in the setting of excurses into small print punctuating the main text), but largely it is a matter of theological judgment. To use a phrase of John Webster’s borrowed from a different context, Barth instructs us that election is a “distributed doctrine” (Webster 2016, p. 150). It is a doctrine “straddling both theology and economy” in that it involves both the divine being and the divine willing, as well as the relationship of these to created economic reality in the gracious work of election.

What distinguishes this approach in Barth’s hands is his unwavering concern to move election away from general doctrines of God and general doctrines of anthropology by ensuring that the identities of the agents involved in election (God and creatures) are considered only in their relation to Jesus Christ. In the election of grace, in Jesus, God determines himself for fellowship with humans, and also, in Jesus, determines humans for fellowship with himself. Election may not be treated by beginning with church tradition, nor with the pedagogic usefulness of the doctrine, nor the datum of human experience, nor even with God’s omnipotent will. In each case, wherever these moves are made, dogmatics is mired in general accounts of divinity and humanity before moving to the particular. Rather, Barth insists the entire sweep of biblical revelation directs us to both a particular identification of the one who elects to be self-determined and self-limited as the God for us in Jesus Christ, and to a particular identification of the man Jesus Christ as the elect man in whom and to whom elect humanity is united. The particular always informs the general.

The struggle of the continental Reformed tradition to understand the witness of Scripture to divine election necessarily involved adopting a position on this question: should Christ be understood in relation to the decree of election as its foundation, its origin, or merely as its executor? Barth’s exposition of the doctrine of election unfolds

against the historical backdrop of a Reformed tradition he regarded as having gone seriously awry – despite its best efforts and against its best intentions, it effectively reduced Christ to the role of election’s executor by emphasizing a secret *electio Patris* (election by the Father). A hidden God we can never know stands as the author of election behind a Christ appearing in time as “the organ which serves the electing will of God” (CD II/2, p. 65). The Reformed doctrine of election leaves us with a *decretum absolutum*: “The christological reference was warmly and impressively made, but it is left standing in the air” (CD II/2, p. 65). For Barth, the classic Reformed doctrine of election has severed the link between Christ and election, and so he seeks to recover it.

### §33 The Election of Jesus Christ

Barth’s doctrine of election “is arguably the classic instance in the *Church Dogmatics* of Barth working out his conviction that the church’s talk of Jesus Christ is to furnish the ground and content of all theological doctrine” (Webster 2000, p. 88). If the Reformed tradition had a concept of Christ *and* the decree, in Barth’s doctrine Christ *is* the decree: “He is the decree of God (*Gottes Beschluß*) behind and above which there can be no earlier or higher decree and beside which there can be no other, since all others serve only the fulfillment of this decree” (CD II/2, p. 94). “Jesus Christ is himself the divine election of grace” (CD II/2, p. 95). This means for Barth that Jesus Christ is both the one who does the choosing in election and he is himself the chosen one. The concept of Christ as the electing God involves, as Barth sees it, a radical concentration of the Reformed christological motif in election by going significantly beyond the notion of Christ as the first of the elect according to his human nature. Christ as the *object* of election in Barth’s thought advances beyond the Reformed position due to the weight Barth attaches to Christ being elect to suffer (with the death and resurrection of this chosen One being understood in universally actualistic and representative terms), but it is the weight Barth attaches to Christ as the active *subject* of election that makes his contribution so distinctive.

This idea of Jesus Christ as the subject of election, so basic to Barth’s doctrine, has proved to be one of the most difficult and debated phrases in his entire corpus. What is driving him at every point is the desire to show that “the doctrine of election is the sum of the Gospel because of all words that can said or heard it is the best” (CD II/2, p. 3), and the reason election is gracious, free, and gospel is because it is the decision of God to be God *for us*, and not against us. Barth uses the word “election” in an untraditional way to describe the self-giving of God in the sending of the only-begotten Son to a lost but loved world, *alongside* using it in a more traditional way to describe the object of that saving work as the man Jesus Christ. Barth reads a text like John 3:16 and sees it to speak wonderfully, and concretely, of election (CD II/2, p. 26).

Whereas the Reformed tradition held to a truly electing and free will of God, for Barth, “It must be shown, then, that it is Jesus Christ himself who occupies this place” (CD II/2, p. 75). In so doing, what emerges is Barth’s christological redefinition of double predestination. “In Barth’s hands, the term comes to refer not to a decision of God in which the human race is divided into the elect and the reprobate, but to God’s self-election

and the election of humanity, both actual in Jesus Christ” (Webster 2000, p. 91). Again, note the gospel incentive: if Jesus Christ is both the chooser and the chosen, Barth seeks to answer the problems generated by a Reformed tradition that sees the Father sending the Son into the world to execute a decree of election that nevertheless somehow took place behind the back of the Son, so that in the revelation of Jesus that occurs in the world there would remain a *Deus absconditus* (hidden God). This hidden God chooses some and rejects others and sends Jesus to save the some – but who is he? How may we know he is for us?

Barth is generous in his reading of the tradition. He recognizes that for Calvin, especially, Christ is the *speculum electionis* (mirror of election) – the place God has given us to look if we would know that we belong to him. And yet it is not too much to say that Barth’s own proposal is an attempt to save the Reformed doctrine of election from itself by so construing it as to provide the gospel certainty of genuine assurance of salvation. Calvin’s failure to see that Jesus Christ is *both* the electing God and the elect man “is the decisive objection we have to bring against his whole doctrine of predestination” (CD II/2, p. 111). Indeed, “all the dubious features of Calvin’s doctrine result from the basic failing that in the last analysis he separates God and Jesus Christ, thinking that what was in the beginning with God must be sought elsewhere than in Jesus Christ” (CD II/2, p. 111).

### §34 *The Election of the Community*

The double-predestination of Jesus Christ means a radical new direction for the doctrine of election. Barth judges that one of the most significant problems in the Reformed tradition has been its failure to make individual election take its proper place. In §34, which unfolds as a detailed exegesis of Romans 9–11, Barth argues that he is keeping to Holy Scripture which, unlike the classical doctrine, “is in no hurry to busy itself with the ‘many’ men elected in Jesus Christ, either in the singular or plural” (CD II/2, p. 195). Rather than the focus on individual destinies Barth works instead with the concept of a “mediate and mediating election”: the community (*die Gemeinde*). Barth chooses this concept because it unites as one the realities of Israel and the church. As one community, this fellowship of God’s people is “determined from all eternity for a peculiar service (*Dienst*)” (CD II/2, p. 196). This language of vocation is vital for Barth’s exegesis of Romans 9–11. He argues that the community is marked by both particularity (*Besonderheit*) and provisionality (*Vorläufigkeit*). Its particular character consists in the fact that it has to witness to Jesus Christ; its provisional character consists in the fact that it “points beyond itself to the fellowship of all men in face of which it is a witness and herald” (CD II/2, p. 196).

The self-determination that takes place within the divine being to elect humanity is the determination from which the entire covenant of grace flows, so that creation itself is predicated on the divine decision to be God for us in this particular way: for Christ to be the electing God and the elected man, there must be a humanity. This means that although divine election is worked out in history, the ground and origin of election’s inner life is immanent and not economic – it is the preexistent Christ who shapes and

forms the dynamic of election in the economy of grace. Barth argues that God “elects the people of Israel *for the purpose* of assuming its flesh and blood,” and that “the election of Israel occurred *for the sake* of the Son of God and Man” (CD II/2, p. 207 rev.). Barth applies the twofold determination of Jesus Christ to the one community of God. What God chooses for himself in Christ – rejection and judgment – he determines for one form of the community (Israel); what God determines for humanity in Christ – fellowship and mercy – he determines for another form of the community (the church).

For Barth the election of the community of God is the witness of history to the election of Jesus Christ. Israel in its historical existence must bear witness to what God has determined for himself in Christ (judgment); the church in its historical existence must bear witness to what God has determined for humanity in Christ (mercy). Radical new directions abound in light of this formulation. Katherine Sonderegger is surely right to say that part of what is most innovative here is that Barth has placed his *Israellehre* within his doctrine of God (Sonderegger 1992, p. 45). The grandeur of this conception of election is well stated: “The Christological center of Barth’s doctrine brings election into the living relationship of the Trinity, where the community, its history, and finally its individual flesh, rejected and assumed, find their meaning and source. No longer a doctrine of individual salvation, election now unfolds the eternal giving and receiving of the Son, through whom the covenant with creation is realized. The decision about the individual, and indeed, of the community and all creation, cannot stand alone. These decisions are secondary to the decision made in Christ, and are made real only in this primary, divine drama of self-giving and self-revelation” (Sonderegger 1992, p. 51).

### §35 *The Election of the Individual*

When Barth arrives at the election of the individual he is acutely aware that he is finishing where he believes every other treatment of election has (mistakenly) begun. For him, Jesus Christ is both the promise and the recipient of individual election. Yet this does not at all negate individual election and Barth’s discussion here even surpasses in length his treatment of the election of Jesus Christ. He is explicit: “There are no predestined families and no predestined nations ... There are only predestined men – predestined in Jesus Christ and by way of community. It is individuals who are chosen and not the totality of men” (CD II/2, p. 313).

Barth retains the traditional language of elect and rejected individuals but refracts it through his radically Christocentric lens. Jesus Christ reveals what distinguishes the elect and rejected from each other, but also what unites them: in Jesus we see what an elect person is (“it is he who is the man distinguished by this special relationship to God” [CD II/2, p. 351]) and what a rejected person is (it is Jesus who “is cast out from the presence of God by his righteous law and judgment, and delivered to eternal death” [CD II/2, p. 352]).

At this point one of Barth’s most interesting thoughts appears as he finds the OT to be replete with pairs which distinguish election and rejection – animals in the rituals of Leviticus, Saul and David in 1 Samuel, and two prophets in 1 Kings 13. This is in fact

one of Barth's boldest moves, for he seeks to show how such figures, often interpreted as examples of two *different* types of activity on God's part, instead derive their meaning from the one person of Jesus Christ, so that election and rejection are always typological of the *same* antitype, the election and rejection of Jesus. This further allows Barth to assert that the elect and the rejected are determined for different forms of service: the elect bear witness to the election of Jesus Christ and as such call the world to recognize its election in the community of God; the rejected too (which Barth analyzes in great detail by considering the person of Judas Iscariot) serve the divine witness to election by representing humanity in need of the gospel of grace, by showing what is overcome by the gospel, and in showing how lost humanity may have a future because of the gospel. Judas himself performs an apostolic ministry in his handing over of Jesus to death, and Jesus himself remains for Judas even while Judas is against him. "The situation between Jesus and Judas which is only a heightened form of the situation between Jesus and all other men – between God's election of man, and his necessary rejection – is ... the open one of proclamation" (CD II/2, p. 476).

### (III) The Scriptural Impulse in Barth on Election

This skeletal overview of election in Barth contains hugely significant moves in the history of doctrinal thought. These are often considered in great theological and philosophical depth by Barth scholars who nevertheless pass quickly over the primary mode of Barth's exposition of election: *biblical exegesis*. Barth's work as a biblical interpreter is well known, of course, and even within his massive *Church Dogmatics* the role of the Bible is well understood. Francis Watson observes that "If the *Church Dogmatics* does not persuade its readers to reread the Bible, then – by its own standards – it is a pretentious and presumptuous failure" (Watson 2000, p. 66). We should expect to find within Barth's mature thinking a centrifugal force from his text to the biblical text, so that we fail to read him well without engaging with his reading of Scripture. "As Barth's conceptual framework takes hold he does more and not less exegesis. It is as though the doctrinal framework stimulates rather than – as in too many contemporary theologies – suppresses exegesis" (Bartholomew 2008, p. 171).

Barth's doctrine of election is a classic example of this procedure, containing as it does a breathtaking amount of close and careful reading of extended portions of the OT and NT which punctuate his main text, not as ancillary to his main exposition but rather constituting the very heart of what he is seeking to say. Yet it remains the case that this material is rarely treated in depth when Barth's doctrine of election is expounded and such neglect has been a regrettable feature of much of the contentious debate surrounding Barth's doctrine of election. The result is the ongoing "marginalization of the scriptural impulse in Barth" (Wood 2007, p. 93) in genetical-historical accounts of Barth's development and the corresponding failure to see how Barth's interaction with the Bible along the way sheds light on the meaning of his more radical statements.

Consider the vexed matter of Barth's view of Jesus Christ as the subject of election. For him, election is "that which takes place at the very centre of the divine self-revelation,"

with Jesus Christ himself as the decision and self-determination of God's own eternal being (CD II/2, p. 59). Such talk of the eternal being of Jesus Christ has proved notoriously puzzling.

One influential explanation is that advanced by Bruce McCormack (2000). McCormack argues that for Barth, "election is the event in God's life in which he assigns to himself the being he will have for all eternity." Barth operates with an "actualistic" or "covenant ontology" where essence "is given in the act of electing, and is in fact, constituted by that eternal act" (McCormack 2000, pp. 98–99). He claims for Barth an extremely radical position: the incarnation of the Logos *constitutes* the being of God in eternity. Over against a Hegelian conception of the "constitution" of the divine being, McCormack argues his sense of the term: "as a consequence of the primal decision in which God assigned to himself the being he would have throughout eternity (a being-for the human race), God is already in pre-temporal eternity – *by way of anticipation* – that which he would become in time" (McCormack 2000, p. 100). This position leads McCormack to suggest that in terms of the logical relation between God's trinity and his election, the latter must actually precede the former: "The *decision* for the covenant of grace is the ground of God's trinity and, therefore, of the eternal generation of the Son and of the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son. In other words, the works of God *ad intra* (the trinitarian processions) find their ground in the *first* of the works of God *ad extra* (viz. election)" (McCormack 2000, p. 103).

Unsurprisingly, McCormack's reading has spawned a significant literature, both for and against (see the essays in Dempsey 2011; Hunsinger 2015). Yet apart from a single reference by McCormack (2000, p. 94), Barth's exegesis of John 1:1–2 that appears in CD II/2 §33, part of the very heart of his core thesis, is summarily ignored in the literature on this debate. The general absence of exegetical discussion is a telling indicator that this material is viewed as ancillary to Barth's argument, contrary, however, to what Barth himself says in his preface: "I have grounds for thinking that to some my meaning will be clearer in these [long expositions of some Old and New Testament passages] than in the main body of the text" (CD II/2, p. x).

Regardless of whether or not Barth's small print is *clearer* than the main body of text, their close connection is vital. McCormack asserts that Barth defends his conception of Jesus Christ as the subject of election with his exegesis of John 1:1–2, but this proceeds too quickly through Barth's argument. It is certainly true that Barth's conception of Christ as subject is drawn from this exegesis, but the Prologue exegesis is not there in the first instance to make the immediate point that Christ is the subject of election. Nowhere immediately preceding the exegesis in §33 does Barth refer to Christ as the subject of election, and nowhere in the exegesis does Barth make this exact point; rather, his precise aim there is to prove that "the divine predestination is the election of Jesus Christ." Once Barth has done this, only then does he elaborate a double reference in this concept, so that Christ is both the subject and the object of election (CD II/2, p. 103). In this way, in the Johannine exegesis itself, the relationship between trinity and election is parsed with self-determining conceptualities. Barth intends to show that God's self-determination is to be a God who is turned toward the human race, so that the primary referent of "election" must be Jesus Christ as the personal expression of this "turning towards" humanity.

This much is clear when Barth links his treatment of John 1:1–2 with a range of NT texts that all describe God’s giving of himself to humanity in the person of Christ. For example, the fullness of the Godhead dwelling in Christ as seen in Colossians 1:19; 2:9 is an instance where “the concept of election is quite clear” (CD II/2, p. 99). It is this movement, *in Christo*, toward humanity that for Barth counts as the election, the decree, the decision of God. But it is a movement of God outside himself, a description of who God is when he turns toward that which is not God. It is not a movement that is ontologically constitutive of the divine being (for a more detailed presentation of Barth’s exegesis, see Gibson 2009a, pp. 41–49).

This is further supported by how Barth both introduces and follows his exegesis. Immediately before his close reading begins, Barth states that Jesus Christ “is the free grace of God as not content simply to remain identical with the inward and eternal being of God, but operating *ad extra* in the ways and works of God” (CD II/2, p. 95). The *ad extra* should not be ignored when, in the exegesis, on the basis of *houtos*, Barth wants to locate Jesus Christ as “in the beginning with God.” After the exegesis, Barth comments on this *Anfang* that Jesus Christ “was not at the beginning of God, for God has indeed no beginning. But he was at the beginning of all things, at the beginning of God’s dealings with the reality which is distinct from himself” (CD II/2, p. 102). In other words, when the eternally self-sufficient God turned toward humanity, the way this turning is described is by the name of Jesus Christ. The turning itself does not constitute the divine being or the triune nature but is a determination of how the divine being is going to be *ad extra*, toward the creation. This turning is the election of Jesus Christ. This does not imply, of course, that God is not *like this ad intra*; merely that for Barth it does not *constitute* God *ad intra*. It is precisely because Barth’s talk of “the beginning” is a “temporal” referent that we must be cautious about understanding the “eternal being of Jesus Christ” in an ontologically constitutive way in Barth. Indeed, when he comes to engage with the tradition on the issue of Christ as subject of election, Barth asserts: “Between the eternal Godhead of Christ which needs no election and his elected humanity, there is a third possibility which was overlooked by Thomas. And that is the being of Christ in the beginning with God, the act of the good pleasure of God by which the fullness of the Godhead is allowed to dwell in him” (CD II/2, p. 107).

One very significant feature of this material is the role that it plays in locating Barth’s theology of election as part of a coherent trinitarian argument right from the beginning of the *Church Dogmatics*. In II/2, Barth is continuing to operate within “a broad dogmatic context involving an extended development of a Trinitarian doctrine of revelation” (Wood 2007, p. xiii), so that what he works out in II/2 is fully consistent with his earlier exposition of the Trinity. Readings like McCormack’s recognize that both before and after II/2 Barth made statements “which created the space for an independent doctrine of the Trinity; a triune being of God which was seen as independent of the covenant of grace” (2000, p. 102). In other words, McCormack accepts that the understanding of the Trinity, which he claims is demanded by Barth’s doctrine of election, is at odds with the understanding of the Trinity that actually emerges elsewhere in the *Church Dogmatics*. This is a further serious weakness in his thesis. McCormack can only suggest that “Barth either did not fully realize the profound implications of his doctrine of

election for the doctrine of the Trinity, or he shied away from drawing them for reasons known only to himself" (2000, p. 102).

This is hardly convincing, however, for in the exegetical treatment of John 1:1–2 Barth has not bracketed off his doctrine of the Trinity but rather is expounding it. He believes his exegesis contributes decisively to showing that God anticipated and determined within himself "that the goal and meaning of all his dealings with the as yet non-existent universe should be the fact that in his Son he would be gracious towards man, uniting himself with him." This was the choice of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in the beginning, and Jesus Christ was the subject and object of this choice (CD II/2, pp. 101–102). Repeatedly in this section Barth affirms that Trinity precedes election: "God did not stand in need of any particular ways or works *ad extra*. He had no need of a creation. He might well have been satisfied with the inner glory of his threefold being, his freedom, and his love" (CD II/2, p. 121).

#### (IV) Conclusion

Debate over Barth's doctrine of election in the areas outlined in this chapter is likely to continue and even more likely to dominate the primary way Barth on election is received. It would be unfortunate, however, if several other key aspects of his treatment were not admired and appreciated, just as the critical questions to be asked of his presentation also extend beyond the relationship between election and Trinity.

In Barth's reading of the tradition, there are at least two important questions related to the issue of Jesus Christ as the subject of election. The first is whether Barth's presentation really manages to capture all that has gone before. In Calvin there are grounds for thinking that Barth overlooks a significant piece of evidence for Christ as the active subject of election. A case can be made that Barth bases his reading of Calvin on the *Institutes*, not Calvin's Commentary on John's Gospel, and although there is some ambiguity in the former, in the latter the concept of Christ choosing before the creation of the world is crystal clear (Gibson 2009b, pp. 448–465). But if we grant that this kind of presentation is lacking in the tradition in the way that Barth regards as so supremely important, then the more interesting historical question is undoubtedly *why* Christ as the subject of election was not present precisely in the form that Barth constructs.

Barth's treatment of John 1:1–2 and texts like it, such as Colossians 1:17–19 and 2:9, involves a *prima facie* broadening of the semantic range of election to include the self-determination of Jesus Christ as electing God and elected man. Is Barth here strikingly original or strangely novel? It is an open question as to whether this move is valid as the prior exegetical foundation to considering texts such as John 6:70; 13:18; 15:16, 19. The exegetical issues to be faced here turn on the kind of "choosing" that Christ is the subject of in John's Gospel: is it a salvific choosing or a choosing for vocation? Barth engages with the tradition in terms of how it has (or has not) understood Christ as the subject of election in these verses but has little to say about the particularistic Christ that the tradition sees emerge from them. If Christ himself excludes some from his choosing, on what grounds is Barth right to hold that the election carried out by God in God's movement toward humanity is universal?

The same exegetical focus should guide consideration of the universalistic emphasis in Barth's doctrine of election. Barth's universalistic accent undoubtedly cannot be pressed as a form of incipient universalism; at several points he strenuously rejects the doctrine of *apokatastasis* (restoration of all things). Yet as Berkouwer says, "It is remarkable that in the background even of Barth's joyful doctrine of election *shadows* are to be found. These shadows fall specifically at that point where he extends the lines of election and rejection into *eschatology*" (Berkouwer 1956, p. 117). This is to wonder whether, with his stress on the freedom of divine grace, Barth has relocated the problem of a *Deus nudus absconditus* from the realm of the pretemporal decree to the eschatological realm by leaving us unable to say for sure what God may or may not do at the end of all things. Many interpreters will feel Barth's reverent agnosticism here is a suitably devout reconfiguring of the scriptural witness into a very different hermeneutical whole (Hunsinger 2000, pp. 246–249), whereas others will contend that the universal aspects of the witness have been accorded a primacy that forces other voices into subjection (Crisp 2008, pp. 300–322).

For Reformed theologians the exegetical reasoning of Barth's work should be taken as its greatest strength, even by those who yet want to register concerns. At the very point of divergence from the tradition Barth models the right way to engage with the tradition. Although he wished to follow Calvin, he could not, for, "As I let the Bible itself speak to me on these matters, as I meditated on what I seemed to hear, I was driven irresistibly to reconstruction" (CD II/2, p. x). The reconstruction Barth offers remains a peerless exercise in exegetical dogmatics that evades a common Reformed error of *solo Scriptura* (the Bible as the *only* authority) and instead displays the classic understanding of *sola Scriptura* (the Bible as the *supreme* authority). Even at points where he is likely to be most controversial (for instance, in what his material may or may not contribute to Jewish-Christian dialogue), Barth's vast exegetical output forces interpreters to wrestle with the fact that, before he has done anything else, he has tried to listen carefully to what the text is saying. The result is an attempt to display the gospel as the best of all words because God elects humanity for glory and himself for judgment. Barth's doctrine of election portrays "an exchange graciously weighted in the creature's favour" (Sonderegger 1992, p. 53). It is "a condescension inconceivably tender" (CD II/2, p. 121).

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## CHAPTER 5

# Barth on Revelation

Matthew J.A. Bruce

Christian preachers and theologians dare to speak about God. They do so because they trust, they have faith, that God has spoken and continues to speak in the church's preaching and teaching, in Holy Scripture, and ultimately in the person of Jesus Christ. Simply put, when God speaks something is revealed, something new, something that would otherwise be hidden, unknown. Basic to Christian theology is the idea that we can speak about God because God first speaks to us. "Theology," the discipline concerned with refining and articulating Christian doctrine, essentially means speech about God. Such speech about God happens, for the Christian, in the church, in the words and the deeds not only of individual Christians who belong to this community but also of the community as a whole. Theology is thus the activity of human beings reflecting upon and speaking to each other about God's speech. It is human words about the Word of God.

Like any theologian in the Christian tradition, Karl Barth affirms that human beings can know and speak about God. They can speak to others – both inside and outside of the church – about who God is and what God has done, because God has already spoken and continues to speak to them. The movement runs from actuality to possibility. God is known, and therefore can be known, through his self-revelation in Jesus Christ.

Barth defines theology as "the scientific self-examination of the Christian church regarding the content of its distinctive talk about God" (KD I/1, p. 1; CD I/1, p. 3).<sup>1</sup> By "scientific," he means that theology seeks to explicate the identity of God in an intellectually disciplined manner. It is a rule-based inquiry. It focuses on particular questions as they arise from its subject matter. By "self-examination," he means that this discipline is internal to the church. It is an exercise in ecclesial self-evaluation and self-criticism.

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<sup>1</sup> All translations of the CD are my own; references are given to both the original and the standard English translation.

Theology for Barth exists in the service of proclamation. It seeks to ascertain that what the church proclaims about God corresponds to what God has actually done and said. It is the church double-checking its own speech. It tests the church's proclamation *against the criterion of revelation*. This is why Barth begins the chapter in the *Church Dogmatics* on "The Knowledge of God," with the statement: "In the church of Jesus Christ, human beings speak about *God* and get to hear about *God*. About God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, about God's grace and truth, about God's thoughts and works, about God's promises, endowments, and commands, about God's kingdom and about the human way of life in the sphere of God's lordship. But always and in all circumstances, God himself is the presupposition, the meaning, and the power, God himself is the *subject* who absolutely, originally, and finally, moves, bears, establishes, and actualizes everything that is to be said and heard here" (KD II/1, p. 1; CD II/1, p. 3; italics original).

Theology is thus a "therapeutic" exercise. It examines how language about God is actually used by a particular community. It asks about the meaning of the word *God* according to this communal usage. And then it makes judgments about the faithfulness of this particular use of language to God's self-revelation. It is an act of *Nachdenken*, of thinking about the God who is spoken of as having revealed himself in the history of the covenant as fulfilled in Jesus Christ (see Jüngel 2001, pp. 9–11). Barth's doctrine of revelation is based on the idea that Christians do not ascend to God but rather "follow after" God along the path he has chosen in the history of salvation accomplished as a covenantal history. It is a history bracketed by God's work of creation and redemption, centered in the election of Israel, which culminates in Jesus of Nazareth, Israel's promised Messiah.

Barth does not ask whether knowledge of God is possible on the basis of general considerations. Some readers find this a curious feature of his work, and they are sometimes puzzled that he had little interest in apologetics.<sup>2</sup> He does not begin with arguments defending human capacities to know about God in general, nor with proofs of God's existence. Instead he moves immediately to the task of explicating the *meaning* of the word *God* as used in the language of the church. For Barth, the Christian faith has no need of neutral apologetic arguments. Christian theology cannot entertain the question of whether knowledge of God is a general human possibility. Nor can it attempt to prove the existence of God without calling into question its own basis. Barth believes that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ can speak for himself, and that he does so.

This does not mean, however, that believers are not called to enter into conversations about faith with unbelievers. Indeed they must. But the believer "need not first condescend" and find a (false) neutral ground from which to argue and defend the Christian

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<sup>2</sup> Although he rejected apologetics when conceived as a neutral enterprise prior to faith and independent of it (KD I/1, pp. 28–29; CD I/1, pp. 30–31), he allowed for a supplemental, incidental, and ad hoc apologetics subsequent to faith (KD II/1, p. 6; CD II/1, p. 8). He believed that the best apologetics was a good dogmatics (KD IV/3.2, p. 1011; CD IV/3, p. 882).

faith.<sup>3</sup> For believers “require no special art in order to approach non-believers; they are already in solidarity with them, for with their witness to faith they stand with them as poor sinners next to other poor sinners, over whom they are not superior.” As such, believers will enter into such conversations only “in the simple form of a witness,” engaging unbelief with belief. For believers do not even “have power over their own faith and... as such also do not have the power to conquer with their faith, to overcome the faith of others.” All that they can contribute, “in great inconspicuousness and unpretentiousness” “is only the fact of their faith.” Barth calls believers to engage unbelievers humbly, respectfully, and charitably, not seeking to lord it over them, but simply to bear witness to Jesus Christ. But, it is also the case that the believer must so bear witness, for believers have no power over faith, that of others *or their own*, they “have no warrant to abandon faith again, even tentatively [for the sake of evangelism or apologetic defense], for the sake of the unbeliever, the believer can only unambiguously obtain and keep it in human insecurity but also in divine security, both of which are just given since it is a matter of faith” (KD II/1, pp. 105–106; CD II/1, p. 96).

When they bear witness to their faith, believers will not seek to justify the faith by appeal to a general, neutral foundation. Faith is not truly faith, if believers suppose they have found a “recipe” that guarantees successful evangelism or catechesis if properly implemented. The act of bearing witness is an act of prayer; a prayer that “the divine counter-witness” might come, for without it, as they well know, they are not able to do anything. It is precisely by praying that believers do their work of bearing witness. They do so in obedience, “and therefore in the prospect of the power of the promise which alone promises a result.” But this means that believers do so “in the love for the other which alone deserves to be called love.” In their witness they have “no prospect of triumph” by their own efforts. If the triumph of faith actually occurs, as it can occur, it is “definitely not the triumph of the believer” (KD II/1, p. 106; CD II/1, p. 97). In his late reflections on mission, Barth affirmatively cites from Luther’s *Small Catechism*: “I believe that I cannot, by my own rationality or power, believe in and come to Jesus Christ, my Lord, but rather that the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel” (KD IV/3.2, p. 564; CD IV/3, pp. 490–491).

A certain radical, methodological self-doubt may be at the heart of much modern theology, influenced as it is by Descartes and postcartesian philosophy. Barth rejects this Cartesian method. His answer to the question of “whether God exists?” is not unlike that of Thomas Aquinas, who answered by first noting that it is in the Bible that God says “I am” (Ex 3.14; see *Summa Theologiae* I<sup>a</sup> q. 2 a. 3 s.c.). The church confesses by faith that God exists and can be known, because he attests himself through the prophets and the apostles. Hence Barth’s definition of revelation: the “*self-revelation* of God, i.e. as his revelation in Jesus Christ, as the Word that is spoken to us, that is given to us in the witness of Holy Scripture” (Barth 1948, p. 21).

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<sup>3</sup> Insofar as apologetics involves dispelling confusions or misconceptions, Barth had no objection to it. What he rejected was the attempt to assume a stance of false neutrality as a way of defending the truth of the gospel or some supposedly preliminary aspects of it.

## The Triune God Is the Self-Revealing God

Barth is only secondarily concerned with human epistemological capacities or human psychology and their relation to knowledge of God, though he is very concerned to address the problems of sin and creaturely limitation and their consequences for human knowledge of God. Barth's primary concern is with the being and act of *God*. He is concerned with the fact that God reveals himself, with the means God uses, and with the content of revelation. For Barth, "true knowledge of the one and only God" is possible only because God acts "to make himself known. ... He makes himself known through himself by distinguishing himself *in* the world *from* the world. Otherwise he cannot be known at all" (Barth 1938, p. 21, italics original; cf. KD I/1, p. 312; CD I/1, p. 296). God is the Lord not only of his self-revelation in Christ but also of its reception.

This is a basic principle of Barth's doctrine: *Human knowledge of God is an impossibility apart from God's act of self-revelation*. The accessibility of God depends on God's act of entering into creation in an objective, creaturely form in such a way that he can be seen and heard. Human beings have no natural ability to know God. They are part of creation and by nature are capable only of knowing objects that exist within and as part of creation. God in himself and as such is not an object within creation. He is hidden from human view, "located" on the other side of an "ontological divide." God is known by human beings only because God wills to cross this divide and become "an object of our knowledge by taking from in the creaturely sphere" (Hunsinger 1991, p. 77). Apart from God's gracious act of self-revelation, human beings do not possess the power, the faculties, or apparently even the desire to know God.

Balázs M. Mezei, in his treatment of the "cognitive origins" of revelation, points out that if divine revelation originates in the human mind, then it is "meaningless to speak of 'revelation'" (2017, p. 29). He classifies Barth, along with other theologians who strongly emphasize the idea of revelation as the *self*-revelation of God, as "non-conditionalists" because they do not attempt (and in fact discount such attempts) to explain the prerequisite conditions (e.g. human faculties, divine powers, etc.) that make revelation a possibility. For the nonconditionalist: "Revelation is what is in no way presupposed, assumed, prepared, or conditioned by the receiver of revelation. 'In no way' means here that there is absolutely no a priori capacity of receiving revelation. Not only are the conceptual structures missing, but even the mere possibility of such structures, not even the existence of a receiver of revelation, is considered to be a pre-supposition of revelation on this view. The very existence of the receiver of revelation is the result of the act of revelation itself, and whatever belongs to this notion of revelation is achieved strictly speaking by the act of revelation" (Mezei 2017, p. 29). According to this model, revelation is always an "event," something that occurs but which cannot be fixed. Moreover, for Barth, the truth made available to human beings in God's act of self-revelation is always "mediated," because it "is not directly accessible to us on the basis of general considerations or by our own innate powers of cognition or reception" (Hunsinger 1991, p. 76).

To begin well, we must recognize that "the beginning of our knowledge of God ... is not a beginning which *we* can make *with him*. It can only be the beginning, which *he* has made *with us*" (KD II/1, p. 213; CD II/1, p. 190). The problem that Barth perceives, and

which motivates his work, is that much post-Enlightenment theology proceeds in the opposite direction. It asks in abstract and general terms if knowledge and speech about God are even possible. And it often answers such questions by serving up lengthy accounts of prolegomena that seek to justify theology and demonstrate its possibility by appeal to nontheological standards.

Barth rejects the methodology of such “*modernist dogmatics*.” He argues that such a procedure is built upon the false premise that “church and faith ought to be understood as part of a greater nexus of being.” It supposes that dogmatics must be seen fundamentally “as part of a greater nexus of scientific problems.” It supposes that even for Christian dogmatic theology “it is only from the general structural laws of science that the particular conditions for knowledge can be deduced and that particular scientific criteria for it can be recognized” (KD I/1, p. 36; CD I/1, p. 35; italics original). Barth disallows any such proposals. He sees this “greater nexus of being” merely as part of the greater reality within which the church is called to bear witness to the Wholly Other God who is revealed in Christ and his resurrection from the dead (cf. Webster 1995, p. 23).

## The Problem with “Natural Theology”

Barth’s rejection of natural theology comes to bear precisely at this point. He understands natural theology as any attempt to ground knowledge of God in some source that is distinct from God’s act of self-revelation. He detects natural theology wherever there is a refusal to accept that human beings lack an innate disposition for knowing God. Natural theology, he contends, is to be found wherever knowledge of God is thought to rest even partially in human capacities apart from grace. Barth is convinced that whenever it assumed that human beings have some inherent disposition for God, even if minimal and weakened by sin, knowledge of God is bound to go astray. The misguided idea of a second source or basis for revelation competes with and finally compromises the true knowledge of God as received from God’s self-revelation.

The quest for knowledge of God apart from and alongside God’s self-revelation is for Barth the problem of sin. The Fall narrative, as he reads it, concerns the attempt by human beings to seek knowledge of God independently of grace. It is to seek God elsewhere than where he has allowed himself to be found (see GA 47, p. 340; RII, p. 247). “The person who cannot and will not be deprived of the idea that a disposition for God is at his disposal, even without the grace of God, ... is closed off to the disposition of God” and open instead to sin (KD II/1, p. 150; CD II/1, p. 135).

The impetus behind Barth’s famous *No!* to Emil Brunner lies just here. Brunner proposed that human beings *naturally* possess some, albeit very limited, ability to know and do the will of God apart from revelation, or to some degree without God’s gracious intervention. The possibility of this nonrevelatory knowledge lies in a supposedly “necessary, indispensable point of contact” that belongs to human nature (GA 52, p. 471; Barth 2002, p. 85). In this affirmation of a point of contact, Barth finds the beginning of a path that will end in the rejection of the doctrine of human sinfulness. It undermines

complete human dependence on God and ends finally in a refusal of grace. Above all, it fails to see the miracle of grace as the true point of contact. "The Holy Ghost who proceeds from the Father and the Son and is therefore revealed and believed as God, does not stand in need of any point of contact other than the one that he himself creates. Only retrospectively is it possible to reflect on the way in which he 'makes contact' with us as human beings, and this retrospect will ever be a retrospect upon a *miracle*" (Barth 2002, p. 121 rev., italics original). "Freedom to know the true God is a miracle, a freedom of God, not one of our freedoms" (Barth 2002, p. 117).

With his "nonconditionalist" account of revelation as grounded in the miracle of divine grace, Barth contends that human beings cannot exercise mastery, epistemic or moral, over the knowledge given to them by God. As they are mastered by this grace, they are summoned to humble themselves in thanksgiving and obedience. God and the things of God are not to be pressed into service for purposes devised by human beings. God's revelation is not something that human beings possess. It is not something that is at their disposal or under their control. Barth's rejection of natural theology entails a "dis-possessive" account of God's self-revelation. It serves to thwart attempts to co-opt God in service of sinful human interests (see McCormack 2014). Natural theology in the technical sense as espoused by Brunner opened the door to *Kulturprotestantismus* in the political sense as espoused by the German-Christians under Hitler. Both posited a second source and ground of revelation apart from and alongside Christ.

For Barth, the doctrine of revelation is ultimately concerned with what the Bible calls "repentance," "the total life-transformation that occurs with the implementation of a very determinate form of knowledge" (KD IV/3, p. 226; CD IV/3, p. 198). Such knowledge occurs because there is a "confrontation" with God in the person of Jesus Christ. This confrontation "is the basic form of revelation ... the event in which reconciliation overcomes and destroys the distance between it and the human being, disclosing itself to the human being and making itself the subject and content of his knowledge" (KD IV/3, p. 210; CD IV/3, pp. 183–184).

If this is the case, then the knowledge given in the divine act of self-revelation does not involve the mere "acquisition of neutral information, which can be expressed in statements, principals and systems .... What it really means is the process or history in which the human being, certainly observing and thinking, using the senses, intelligence, and imagination, but also the will, action, and 'heart,' and therefore the whole human being, becomes aware of another history [which encounters the human being] in such a compelling way that the human being cannot be neutral towards it, but finds her- or himself summoned to disclose and given her- or himself to it ... to direct themselves according to the law which she or he encounters in it ... to demonstrate the acquaintance which she or he has been given in this with this other history in a corresponding alteration of her or his own being, action, and conduct" (KD IV/3, p. 210; CD IV/3, pp. 183–184). For Barth, knowledge of God does not begin with us, but it does begin something in us. It creates in us a desire to know, obey, and love God and, because we love God, to love our neighbors as ourselves.

## The God Known by Revelation Alone

Barth's doctrine of revelation has a twofold aim: (i) to demonstrate that human beings are actually able speak of God as God is in himself and (ii) to defend against false knowledge of God mistakenly thought to be available in extrascriptural sources. To fulfill this aim, Christian theology must begin with God and not with the human knower. This means beginning with the concrete reality of God, God's being as triune. "If we really want to understand revelation from its subject, from God, then we must first of all understand that its subject, God, the Revealer [the Father], is identical with his act in revelation [the Son], and identical with its effect [the Holy Spirit, who actualizes knowledge of God within us through the miracle of grace]. This is the reason why we must begin the doctrine of revelation with the doctrine of the triune God" (KD I/1, p. 312; CD I/1, p. 296).

Knowledge of God means being given a share in the truth of God's own self-knowledge. "Certainly it is the share which God thinks proper and is therefore suitable to us. But in this share we have the reality of the true knowledge of himself" (KD II/1, p. 55; CD II/1, p. 51 rev.). God knows himself to all eternity as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. He knows his triune identity in the mode of "*primary* objectivity." "He is immediately objective to himself – for the Father is object to the Son, and the Son to the Father, without mediation" in the unity of the Holy Spirit (KD II/1, p. 16; CD II/1, p. 16). This is the "direct," "immediate," and "naked" form of self-knowledge that is proper to God as the Holy Trinity. This is the knowledge in which God give us a share through faith. "The triune God's self-knowledge is the basis for all creaturely knowledge of himself. Although it is mediated, it is no less true." Barth terms this mode of knowing God "*secondary* objectivity." It is the mode "in which God gives himself to be known" in a form that is "accessible to us." (KD II/1, pp. 15–16; CD II/1, p. 16, italics original).

Barth's aim is to demonstrate that God is truly known, despite the mediated character of faith's knowledge. When God reveals himself to faith in the mode of secondary objectivity, what is revealed truly corresponds to God's own self-knowledge in its mode of primary objectivity. Although we do not know God "directly, but indirectly," our knowledge of God is nonetheless true, "for God does not have to be unfaithful to himself and does not need to deceive us about his true nature in order to become objective for us too, for he is first in himself, and therefore in his revelation to us, nothing other than what he is himself" (KD II/1, p. 16; CD II/1, p. 16 rev.).

At the same time, God's act of self-revelation involves an aspect of concealment. For God becomes an object of knowledge for the human knower only by becoming an object within the created order. God acts to reveal himself by taking form or clothing himself in a creaturely medium. God is therefore paradoxically unveiled in a veiled form. His self-revelation exhibits a dialectical character. God is revealed in and through various creaturely means, most especially the humanity of Jesus, and yet this creaturely medium itself is a veil. God is never directly perceptible but remains hidden in the medium of revelation. He remains "wholly other" even in his act of self-revelation. God never becomes identical with the creaturely objectivity that he uses as an instrument of revelation (see Hunsinger 1991, p. 77ff; McCormack 1995, p. 459ff). The medium,

including the humanity of Jesus Christ, is never divinized. It never becomes identical with God but rather remains creaturely.

“Revelation in the Bible,” writes Barth, “means the *self-unveiling*, given to human beings, of the God, who of his essence cannot be unveiled to human beings” (KD I/1, pp. 332–333; CD I/1, p. 315; emphasis original). God reveals himself “such that the human beings concerned can say without any speculation or metaphor: Immanuel, God with us! Such that without any fiction or self-deception, they can say Thou to him and pray to him. This is what self-revelation is” (KD I/1, p. 333; CD I/1, p. 316). God can reveal himself to us, he can be God in this second way, without ceasing to be who he is in himself. He can do so because “the highest and final statement that it is permissible to say about the being of God is: God corresponds to himself .... The *Dogmatics* is an ingenious and diligent attempt to follow after in thought the movement of the statement ‘God corresponds to himself’” (Jüngel 2001, p. 36, trans. rev.). God as he reveals himself in history corresponds to who God is in himself in all eternity.

The self-revelation of God is secured by the doctrine of the Trinity. What trinitarian doctrine tells us, writes Barth, is that “the one who reveals himself ... can in fact be our God and ... can in fact be *our God*. He can be our God, because in all of his modes of being he is equal to himself, one and the same Lord. ... And this Lord can be *our God* – he can encounter us and bind himself to us – because he is God in these three modes of being as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, because creation, reconciliation, and redemption, the whole being, speech, and action in which he wills to be our God, have their basis and prototype in his own essence, in his own eternal being as God” (KD I/1, p. 403; CD I/1, p. 383 rev.). Robert Jenson summarizes Barth’s view of how revelation presupposes the Trinity: “The scriptural witness to the particular revelation which Scripture claims to occur poses certain questions to us which when we try to answer them, lead to the trinitarian doctrine” (Jenson 1969, p. 99).

## The Particularity of Revelation in Jesus Christ and the Question of “General Revelation”

“Who God is and what it is to be divine is something that we have to learn where God has revealed himself and therewith also his nature, the essence of the divine. And if he has now revealed himself in Jesus Christ as the God who does just this, then it is not for us to want to be wiser than he and to assert that this is in contradiction to the divine essence” (KD IV/1, p. 203; CD IV/1, p. 186). This quotation, which brings out an important implication of how Barth views revelation, provides an opportunity to correct a certain misunderstanding. Barth’s theology is fundamentally christocentric. The person of Jesus Christ is the definitive locus of God’s self-revelation. When this christocentrism is taken together with Barth’s rejection of natural theology, Barth is misunderstood, sometimes even by those who defend him, as having restricted revelation narrowly to the person of Christ alone. Barth is thought to teach that divine revelation does not really happen anywhere else in time and space except in the person of Jesus. Some have accused Barth of denying “general revelation” – a term he does not often use

except eschatologically: “the promise of the *general revelation* of glory still to come” (KD III/2, p. 587; CD III/2, p. 489, italics added; but cf. KD II/1, p. 112; CD II/1, p. 102) – and according it no role in his theology.

Barth does not deny *general* revelation or what he chooses to call an “*objective knowledge*” of God (CL, pp. 122–124). What he denies is *natural* theology. This denial has two parts: first, the idea is rejected that God can be known from nature alone, independently of God’s agency; and second, that this independent form of divine knowledge can be used as a bridge to arrive at God’s self-revelation in Christ. When it comes to divine revelation, there is no way for Barth from the general to the particular, but only from the particular to the general. Moreover, there is only one divine act of revelation, not a general act in creation and another more specific act in the history of the covenant. Revelation as centered in Christ cannot be divided into parts. It is a complex and indivisible whole. Revelation is a single divine act centered in the particularity of Jesus Christ. But this center has an objective circumference that includes many and various aspects in itself.

As Barth states in a slightly different connection: “There is no center without a circumference .... But the center establishes the circumference and not the reverse” (CL, p. 9). Only in light of the center, only in light of Jesus Christ, can the other aspects of divine revelation at the circumference be critically discerned and known. The discernment moves, in principle, from the center in Christ to the complexity at the circumference. In practice, however, the discernment process may move in any direction as long as the center is kept in view. The important point is that “Jesus Christ ... is not only the ontic but also the noetic basis of the whole of Christian truth and the Christian message” (CL, p. 9). He is therefore also the ontic and noetic basis for each and every aspect of divine revelation at the circumference. He is the critical norm by which any supposed aspect at the circumference needs to be tested and critically appropriated. Several dimensions of what Barth sees at the circumference may be mentioned.

First, far from being present only in the history of the covenant as fulfilled in Jesus Christ, God “has the freedom ... to remain the one who he is in a seemingly conspicuous abundance of distinctions which need to be taken into account” (KD II/1, p. 356; CD II/1, p. 316). However, “despite the almost bewildering richness” of the diverse forms of God’s immanence in the world, there is “a hierarchy, a sacred order, in which God is present in the world” (KD II/1, p. 357; CD II/1, 317). Whether openly or secretly, Jesus Christ is “the center and apex” of all these various forms, and he is “also their principle, their possibility and presupposition within the inner divine life” (KD II/1, p. 357; CD II/1, pp. 317–318). Only from a center in Christ, therefore, can this confusing richness of presence be sorted out: “everything *for which* and *in which* God is free, is then to be understood by us as the unity of the freedom of his essence, it will then not disconcert us in its manifoldness, when we understand it thus – as deriving from Jesus Christ the Son of God, attesting him, serving him, conveying to him – as he is actually placed before our eyes and brought before our ears in God’s revelation” (KD II/1, pp. 357–358; CD II/1, p. 318). Only from God’s revelation in Christ at the center can God’s immanence elsewhere be discerned, even if that discernment must often remain tentative from a human perspective. Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the noetic basis for faith’s discernment of God’s immanence in all its abundant forms. He himself is the critical norm.

Second, God may speak to the faithful in diverse ways apart from Holy Scripture. Barth affirms that God may actually speak and act, that he can reveal himself, in other creaturely forms than Jesus Christ. He wrote for example that “God can speak to us through Russian communism, a flute concerto, a blossoming shrub, or a dead dog. We would do well to listen to him if he does so” (KD I/1, p. 55; CD I/1, p. 60). Barth hastens to add however: “But, unless we regard ourselves as the prophets and founders of a new church, we cannot say that we are commissioned to pass on what we have heard as independent proclamation” (KD I/1, p. 55; CD I/1, p. 60). Once again, Jesus Christ is the critical norm.

In a similar manner, Barth affirms that there are “secular parables” of the truth. He argues that there are “true words which are not spoken in the Bible or the church, but which have to be regarded as true in relation to the one Word of God” (KD IV/3.1, pp. 126–127; CD IV/3, pp. 113–114). God is free to reveal himself at times and places of his own choosing, but what is revealed, while different in form, will never contradict what is revealed in Jesus Christ. Secular parables must therefore be tested from a center in Christ by extended lines of consistency with the gospel. Moreover, although God is free to reveal himself outside of the church, the recipients of revelation – if they are actually grasped and transformed by the revelatory event – are not likewise free. All who encounter the self-revealing God are called to be “in Christ.” This means that they are finally called to participate in the worshipping community that gathers around the Word of God (KD I/2, pp. 261–263; CD I/2, pp. 239–241).

Finally, Barth affirms what he calls an “objective knowledge of God” as given in and through the natural order (CL, pp. 120–124). This objective knowledge – or what is more commonly called “natural revelation” – is also, for Barth, part of revelation’s larger circumference as centered in Christ. It is not a second revelation independent of Christ or alongside him. Jesus Christ is the one from whom “all created being and becoming derives” (CD IV/1, p. 48). Through him all things were created, and the glory of the cosmos is a reflection of his glory. Objectively speaking, the glory of God in the cosmos and the glory of Jesus Christ are finally one. The apprehension of this glory on the subjective side must also be considered from a center in Christ. The psalmist who speaks in Ps. 8 or Ps. 104, for example, is objectively a surrogate, Barth argues, of the human Jesus (KD II/1, pp. 125–128; CD II/1, pp. 113–116).

In any case under the conditions of the fall, in which human beings are blinded by sin, the problem is not “the objective knowledge of God in the world” (CL, p. 122), but the culpable human failure to discern what human beings can and should know of God through the natural order. Objectively speaking, God “is very well known” to them and “not an unknown God” (CL, p. 122). The concealment is due not to the absence of natural revelation but to “human blindness” (CL, p. 123 rev.). “To the objective knowledge of God as Creator” – which is actually there – “there does not correspond with any reliability or continuity a subjective recognition and knowledge on the world’s part” (CL, p. 123). Not unlike Calvin, therefore, Barth affirms that natural revelation serves only to condemn the human creature who fails to apprehend God aright. Natural revelation or “objective knowledge of God” offers to such benighted creatures nothing that can be “generalized and systematized along the lines of natural theology” (CL, p. 122). To suppose otherwise always results in a domesticated God (CL, p. 130). Only

from a center in Christ, through “the awakening power of the Holy Spirit” (CD IV/2, p. 20), and therefore by the miracle of grace, can God’s objective revelation of himself through the natural order be rightly discerned. It is again a movement from the particular to the general, in this case from Christ as confessed by faith to God’s objective revelation through the cosmos.

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## CHAPTER 6

# Barth on Holy Scripture

Katherine Sonderegger

Just what is the Bible? Perhaps surprisingly, that is not an easy question to answer – especially if the Bible under study is the one exegeted by Karl Barth. Barth not only read the Bible in a remarkable, rich, and path-breaking fashion; he also characterized and defined the Bible as had few before him. Barth forged what in his early days he called the “Scripture principle” and put it to work in his torrent of publications, from early Scripture commentaries, to trial *Dogmatics* in the middle years, and to the heart of his *Church Dogmatics*, the great task of his maturity. The scriptural principle said that the Bible stood at the heart of theology and grounded and guided its doctrines. We might think of this principle as the Reformation teaching, *sola Scriptura*, transposed as a rule. Later on, Barth would speak of principles and rules only with reluctance. They were tainted by an association with the “abstract” – never an honorific in Barth’s idiom – and with the “systematic,” rarely a term of praise in the later Barth. But the aim expressed in this principle remained in force throughout his long career. Barth *studied* Scripture. As is often said, Barth made scriptural exegesis the cornerstone of his massive theological legacy, and the Bible is easily the most important, most prominent, most often cited book in the whole of the *Church Dogmatics*. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Barth did not shy away from extended commentary on the biblical passages, embedded in the running argument of his theological works. Some span 50 pages or more, at times in the small print of Barth’s discursive footnotes, called “excurses.” His exegetical style ranges widely: typology and figural reading; lower-critical attention to biblical languages and variants; christological interpretation, especially of Old Testament texts; the stray higher-critical debate, often with contemporaries; expressionistic and vividly colored expositions of Pauline thought; and broad thematic discussions, ranging over the whole canon of Scripture. Such remarkable exegetical work has sparked careful study by scholars, both in the fields of hermeneutics and of dogmatics, though only rarely by academic scholars

of the Bible. Barth knew his Bible well and used it extensively, passionately, freely. But just what is this Bible Barth followed so faithfully?

In one sense, of course, this is a plain question with a straightforward answer. The Bible is the Holy Book of Christians, composed of an Old and New Testament, binding together narratives, prophecies, prayers, and proverbs, letters to individuals and groups, gospel lives of Jesus, and visionary literature of an explosive End-time. The Bible is a Book of books, on this account, and though Christian communities have quarreled about its exact roll call, the Bible, in the main, is a settled family of sacred texts. To this the Christian tradition has given the name, Canon; the Canonical List of Holy Scripture. We might take this as the commonsense answer to the indexical, "What is this book I point to?" Yet, even this plain and simple answer can be expanded or perhaps amended to include a not-so-plain characterization of this Book of books.

We could speak, for example, of these books as *ancient*. In one way, the Bible contains ancient texts in a rather obvious fashion. The Old Testament – the Scriptures of the Covenant People, Israel – were written by communities, scribes, tradents who lived long ago, and whose language, thought-world, and material history veer far from those we know firsthand and inhabit. The Bible might be an ancient book in all these ways: this collection could represent the cultural sediment of worlds long gone by. The Apostle Paul, to borrow a phrase from the young Barth, was a "child of his age;" so too the Evangelists, or their communities, and mysterious author of the Letter to the Hebrews; even more so, the visionary of the Apocalypse. As an ancient text, the Bible offers *evidence* for the culture, idiom, and events of the Near East, under the rule of long-vanished empires, and the rise and fall of the great and the small within these peoples and nations. To understand such a book, the reader needs to learn something of the Israelite, Egyptian, Babylonian, and Roman histories. Reading ancient languages, studying comparative texts, holy and profane, building up a repertory of major dynasties and conquests in the region, and close examination of these texts and contexts: all these skills unlock a text that is defined as ancient, or perhaps better, as *historical*. The Bible as historical artifact stands as one of the principal definitions of Scripture in modern times, and one Barth treated with respect, but also with great reserve. The entire enterprise of "higher criticism," the historical assessment, interpretation, and judgment of the Bible, rested on this notion of Scripture as ancient text, a legacy Barth would accept but only on the condition of radical transformation.

We might also speak of the Bible as a *religious* book. This too appears to be a rather obvious truth, and can be applied, too, in a straightforward manner. The Bible contains rituals and instructions about holy places, holy vessels and garments; it speaks of priests and scribes and teachers of the tradition; it posts warnings about the profane and idolatrous, at times at peril of one's life; its pages encompass prayers and liturgies, ancient victory songs and laments; and its principal characters speak of God, God's majestic will and workings, and of lives broken on the hard mystery that is the holy God. The Bible rotates around the central axis that is the Temple, that in Zion and that One not made by hands, and *sacrifice* takes mortality and suffering and turns them over into religion. All this seems the very ingredient of religion, and the Bible seems to gain its dignity from the solemn tone of religious striving that is contained between its covers. But once again, a simple answer betrays, on examination, a not-so-simple depth. For it is just this

idea – that Holy Scripture is a religious text – that stood at the heart of the liberal academic tradition Barth inherited from his teachers.

In the *Christian Faith*, Friedrich Schleiermacher's great systematic work, the Bible is portrayed as the distillate of the piety of ancient religious communities, the record of their longing for and awed experience of God. The *focus* of the Bible, that is, should be trained upon the "personalities," the vivid characters and their salient modes of expression, who encounter the Holy and find their inner lives transformed by it. Parallel to the nineteenth-century attraction to the "religious genius" stood also the attention to cultural forms and national identities, both typified in and perfected by their religious expression. From the time of Johann Gottfried Herder forward, the very notion of the nation was tied to religion; and for the liberal academic tradition, the *cultus* of a people was its supreme self-expression and upward calling. Barth inherited this modernist vision of the Bible with enthusiasm in his early days and told with relish stories of great religious personalities in the Bible to his first catechism classes. But one way of understanding what is often termed Barth's "break with Liberalism" – his pronounced struggle to "begin again," as he often put it, in theology – can be understood as a thoroughgoing attempt to replace the notion of Scripture as *religious* with Scripture as *revelation*. This term, "revelation," though in use throughout the post-Reformation teachings on the Bible, gained fresh weight and purpose in Barth's postliberal career. It stood for a radical reconceptualization of the Bible itself, just what it is, and what it is for. This was a hard-won insight and deepened in color and dynamism as the *Church Dogmatics* unfurled. As with the Christian life itself, the Bible stands at the very center of Barth's life work, his dogmatic task and its constraints.

What does it mean to say that the Bible is principally *revelation*? The answer to that question will take us across Barth's long career, from the explosion that is Barth's early commentary on Romans, to his remarkable handling of texts from the Pentateuch, to his prolonged struggle with Rudolf Bultmann over the neuralgic complex, "faith and history," to his innovative treatment of the earthly ministry of Jesus and most especially his resurrection from the dead. The entirety of the *Church Dogmatics* is needed to answer fully just what "revelation" entails.

We begin with the most celebrated of Barth's early Scripture commentaries, his *Letter to the Romans*, published in a second edition in 1922. The 1922 *Romans* is by far the most closely studied text from Barth's early career. It earned the famous aphorism of "the bombshell in the playground of the theologians" from the influential Catholic essayist, Karl Adam; it changed everything in Barth's life, and in time, everything in modern Protestant theology. Something seemed to be dislodged in the young liberal pastor in Geneva and Safenwil around the outbreak of World War I; by 1916 Barth was writing on the "New World in the Bible." In that essay Barth famously depicts the Bible not as *religious* – "not our thoughts about God" – but instead as an alien and numinous disclosure of "God's thoughts about humankind," about God's judgment, God's sovereign will. The Bible, he comes to see, is a Book *about God*, not human beings who believe in God. Now, it may seem odd to say that a Book about God is not principally a religious text – what is more religious than God? – but Barth has particular and complex reasons for saying just that. A religion can be recognized by its constituents: in it, "God and the world are given to the self," in Schleiermacher's celebrated phrase. A religious state is an

inward one, yes; but even more, it is an inward awareness that contains worlds. The whole of reality – the whole of the cosmos; the whole of the divine – indwell the religious self, such that the human sense of the inner and the outer, the passive and active, rest upon a deep and unconditioned dependence that in the end can only be called, God. Such a definition of religion followed the modern “turn to the subject” that began with the remarkable achievements of Descartes and Locke and made the human subject the gateway to all knowledge of reality; indeed to reality itself. The long shadow cast by Immanuel Kant’s critical philosophy began, in truth, by the first light emerging from early rationalists and empiricists of the seventeenth century. Were the Bible to be religious in this sense, it too would be a work of and about the human subject, and God would be a Reality – a “Predicate,” Barth says – discovered within pious inwardness. Just this Barth rejects when in these early essays he declares the Bible a Book “about God.”

The search for God in the Bible broke out like a fever in the Barth of the World War I years. He writes to his friend Eduard Thurneysen of filling notebook after notebook with reactions to Scripture’s sudden voice, speaking to him about God. Time and again in the early essays Barth strains to express the utter *externality* of God: we are to “look upward” to see what the Apostle Paul stares at; we are to see Almighty God “in heaven,” while we are “on the earth”; we long for an entire “world” that has not yet come, or will break out over us like a firestorm, an apocalypse; lines approach but do not touch; the God who draws near brings menace and death in His mighty train. The Bible *reveals* a God who cannot otherwise be known – there is no route, inward or outward, to knowledge of the true God apart from His willingness to be known.

Now, during these years, Barth came to affirm that stricture in a radical fashion. The radicality of Barth’s position is the crucial measure, for after all, any Christian, any theist at all, might say that God could not be known or approached without God’s consent or welcome. Such an affirmation could in truth be little more than what we say of all living subjects: they must disclose themselves to us. Further, the long tradition of philosophical inquiry into the nature of deity, as old as the Timaeus, could also rest upon the prior conviction that the divine allowed itself to be thought, manifested Itself to the searching intellect. Such affirmations stood behind the scholastic tradition Barth came to call natural theology; yet nothing so imperiled the proper knowledge and worship of God, Barth said in those years, than the analogy of being and the natural theology of philosophers and Protestant dogmaticians. In a sweeping condemnation, Barth linked philosophical argument for God, medieval doctrines of analogy, and modern Protestant liberal accounts of religious experience together as one false idolatry before God. They were *religion*; not *revelation*, the Sovereign Self-disclosure of the transcendent God.

This radical conclusion followed from Barth’s deep anxiety that a human subject or people who found God embedded in their history, their inwardness, their openness to transcendence, or their longing for beauty, say, or the sublime, would find in those drives not Almighty God but their own ideals, dressed up in royal vesture. The projection theory of Ludwig Feuerbach, that is, haunted Barth in those years, and he held that the God known in religion was only the echo of ourselves, disguised and exalted into an empty sky. Now, philosophers of the tradition will notice that this is not an *argument*, exactly, but rather an intuition, a suspicion of an urgent sort: the relation between this

“God” and the world, divine “Object” and human subject, was *reversible*, Barth warned, and the creature, not the Creator, would govern this upturned relation. In the celebrated words of Barth’s preface to the second edition of the *Letter to the Romans*: “If I have a system, it is limited to a recognition of what Soren Kierkegaard called the ‘infinite qualitative distinction’ between time and eternity, and to my regarding this as possessing negative as well as positive significance: ‘God is in heaven, and thou on earth.’ The relation between such a God and such a man, and the relation between such a man and such a God, is for me the theme of the Bible and the essence of philosophy” (RII, 10). This is not the whole story, of course. Histories of Barth’s early career will fill out a coherentist pattern that gives weight and cogency to Barth’s suspicions. But, here, we can say that what Barth discovered in the Bible during his years in Safenwil is a God who is *beyond* religion; the God who is *LORD*. This Eternal LORD could never be placed in a reversible relation with a creature, could never become a “predicate” of human piety, could never be known apart from the confession, surrender, and awe of the sinner, brought near to His holy presence. Just this is *Revelation*, and it marks the “crisis” of the human creature, the divine judgment that breaks out over a sinful world. It is the seed-bed of “dialectical theology.”

In the 1922 *Romans*, Barth pours his notebooks, his spiritual wrestling, and his voracious reading into a commentary on Paul’s major letter to the church in Rome. Here Barth exhibits what a nonreligious reading of a biblical text looks like. In these early years, the revelatory Bible will stand as our contemporary, a voice addressing us, the readers, with a startling directness and urgency. Again, from the preface to the second edition: “When I am faced by such a document as the Epistle of Paul to the Romans, I embark on its interpretation on the assumption that he is confronted with the same unmistakable and unmeasurable significance of that relation (between God and creature) as I myself am confronted with, and that it is this situation which moulds his thought and its expression” (RII, p. 10). In the several later prefaces to the work, Barth speaks of his exegetical task as one of “utter loyalty”: he “stands by Paul’s side,” “determined to follow him to the very last word,” wrestles, with “much sweat and many groans” to see what the Apostle sees, to speak of the “Spirit of Christ” – the theme Barth now says of the Letter – as does the Apostle to the gentiles. Indeed, in an early flare-up of a lifelong battle with Rudolf Bultmann, Barth asks, “Is there any way of penetrating the heart of a document – of any document! – except on the assumption that its spirit will speak to our spirit through the actual written words?” (RII, p. 18). This, Barth notes, invites comparison with doctrines of verbal inspiration, a sympathy he never tried to disguise.

But once again, Barth radicalizes the tradition: everything Paul writes is “letter” not “Spirit”; over the whole spreads the judgment of the Holy God, and we await His electing verdict even as did the Apostle Paul, in the “ambiguity” of his own life and calling. Barth makes Paul his contemporary in just this sense: they both stand before God, having nothing they did not receive, justly seen as those who have sinned and fall short, and Paul’s own anguish about the Law captures, in other idiom, Barth’s own night-wrestling with the religion of his day. Such a reading reminds historical critics of “eisegesis,” the importing of foreign ideas into the ancient world of the text. But Barth had no fears of such a charge; rather, he welcomed it. We bring our world into the text, naturally and

necessarily, for *we* are the ones standing shoulder to shoulder with the ancient author. We make Paul's world our own, even as his world lives on and is expressed in ours. Such is Barth's historiography in that era: the past is *meaningful*, not chaotic, irrational contingency, when it is seen to follow *patterns*, to take up perennial questions, to ask after deep truths that will parallel one another, in striking, formal similarities. Without these, no understanding of the past is possible – Barth will go that far.

Consider, as an example, a brief passage from Barth's commentary on Romans 9–11. Here if anywhere we confront the Paul who is a "child of his age." Yet in just these chapters Barth is most strenuous in his conforming himself to Paul, Paul to himself. Barth begins the chapter, "The Tribulation of the Church" with the following translation: "I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience bearing witness with me in the Holy Ghost, that I have great sorrow and unceasing pain in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren's sake, my kinsmen according to the flesh" (Rom 9:1–3). As commentary, Barth writes:

And now, in contrast with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, there is thrust upon our attention – Israel, the Church, the world of religion as it appears in history, and, we hasten to add, Israel in its purest, truest, and most powerful aspect. We are not here concerned with some debased form of religion, but with the ideal and perfect Church. Does the Church stand over against the Gospel as one point of view against another? Are we setting one company of men who think rightly over against another company who do not?

Yes, undoubtedly we are. The Church confronts the Gospel as the last human possibility confronts the impossible possibility of God. The abyss which is here disclosed is like to none other situated on this side of the abyss which separates men from God. Here breaks out the veritable God-sickness: for the Church, situated on this side of the abyss which separates men from God, is the place where the eternity of revelation is transformed into a temporal, concrete, directly visible thing in this world. (RII, p. 332)

This is a remarkable reading of Holy Scripture! The salient element of the apostle's life here is his *God-sickness*, his *religion*: the human possibility of visible worship of God, its cultus and practice. Paul is a Jew, yes. Barth does not *erase* the historical particularity but he does *transform* it. To be an Israelite is to belong to a larger movement within human culture, the upswell of religious text, ritual, and building; and in just this way, Israel is the church, the church, Israel. Barth is feeling his way here; the struggle to express the living *force* of Scripture for him is nearly visible on every page; the exegesis is wrung out of him. This is not quite history "by analogy," nor a technical interpretation "under a description," but rather an existential encounter with the text, striving to grasp what it means to speak of God and the creature in this way. Barth's agonized question in his early essays – *Is it true?* – rings out on every page of the *Letter to the Romans*. During these years Barth's identity as *preacher* stood out as the moment when the truth of the Bible demanded confession and exposition from the pulpit. Barth was a realist in his epistemology and metaphysics throughout his break with Liberalism: the Bible does *refer* to reality beyond itself, but not the referent historians customarily assume. The Bible, rather, reveals the encounter of the Holy God, the Absolute Origin, and the creature, all gathered together as one in their desperate waiting, hope against

hope, on the Reality who is God. Nothing is ever past in such a reading; all is caught up in the Now, the Event, of God's explosive Self-disclosure. The Bible is revelatory Fire; and we are all seared by its scorching heat.

No one could stand such heat for long. Barth himself recognized the restless instability of his early exegesis, and longed to find a more measured voice that did not lead, against all his efforts, to a religious, Schleiermacher-like, reading of Holy Scripture. Barth sought an understanding of the Bible that would allow its *historical* character proper stature, yet continue to honor its *revelatory* power. Early in the *Church Dogmatics* Barth experimented with what is sometimes called an "actualist" account of the Bible and its interpretation. Traces of Barth's early struggles persist through the long first volume of the *Church Dogmatics*; it retains the unchecked energy of a pastor now turned professor, troubled by a Bible that demanded his witness, even in the midst of his utter incapacity and need. In the massive second part to volume I, Barth takes up Holy Scripture explicitly, treating matters of historicity, of canon and canons of interpretation and the varying forms of the doctrine of inspiration. Barth shows his voracious appetite for work and study, often to great advantage throughout. His opening thematic statement to the section on Scripture shows the greater confidence and scholarly command Barth now brings to the topic. The Bible becomes something more than revelation, more than an antireligious text. Barth writes there:

The Word of God is God Himself in Holy Scripture. For God once spoke as Lord to Moses and the prophets, to the Evangelists and apostles. And now through their written word He speaks as the same Lord to His Church. Scripture is holy and the Word of God, because by the Holy Spirit it became and will become to the Church a witness to divine revelation. (CD I/2, p. 457)

Barth has taken giant strides here. He begins where he left off in the 1922 *Romans*: the Word of God is God Himself, God as LORD; Scripture is revelation. But notice the movement: Now Barth can speak of something having *taken place* – the proper past tense can be used of the Word of God. To Moses, God *spoke*. Revelation itself can now be "tensed." This insight will undergird the extraordinary treatment of time and eternity that is Church Dogmatics III/2 §47, "Jesus, Lord of time." Revelation can enter into the past, can concentrate in central moments of Divine Self-disclosure, and can extend into the future, till the end of the ages; and yet remain all alive to God. This complex adaptation of Barth's pronounced focus upon the eschatological in his early years will pay handsome dividends in Barth's doctrine of the threefold office, especially in Christ's Office of King and Prophet. And, as if stung by the charge that, like his teacher Harnack, Barth favored Marcion, Barth underscores the *identity* of the God who spoke with the God who *speaks*, now to the church. Two more elements emerge from Barth's thesis statement that show a remarkable deepening and innovation in Barth's understanding of the Bible. They go hand in hand. The Bible, Barth now says, is *witness*; and its holiness stems from an event, the act of the Holy Spirit, by which it once and will once again become that witness. The Bible still retains the character of revelation, but it does so as an historical text that bears witness to the living Act of God. Barth could always cheerfully acknowledge the frail and fallible character of the Bible's leading

figures: Paul inhabited the “letter” not the “Spirit.” But now Barth can turn that wholesale recognition of human finitude into a doctrine of Holy Scripture: as witness, the Bible both *is* and *is not* the Word of God.

Consider the delicate way Barth handles the notion of witness. Barth is well aware of the traditional idea of a witness as source of evidence for settling legal disputes: testimony is central in a law court to establish the truth of contested events. Barth is willing to treat the evangelists, the prophets, and apostles as witness in this commonsense fashion. They are the ones who have seen these things taking place among us. In some such way the early rationalists, such as John Locke or Hermann Samuel Reimarus, viewed the biblical authors, to their benefit or shame. And under the pressure of modernism, the notion of witness turned over into an examination of the reliability and probity of the witness, the human subject, and not the subject matter, the event the witness claimed to see. Barth will have none of that. A witness, for Barth, is one who answers questions; simply that. An attorney, a judge cross-examines a witness and he or she must give a report. The Bible as witness functions in just that way. The authors answer to Almighty God, the Judge: they give an account for what has taken place to them and for them, for their sake. Notice that Barth in this fashion has introduced several distinctions that give depth and resonance to his doctrine of Holy Scripture. We draw a line of distinction now between the text and the author or evangelist, prophet, or apostle. The literary quality of the Bible now comes into view. Barth can acknowledge the history of manuscript tradition, of tradents, and redactors; the Bible can have a written history. It can be a *book*. These written reports are not simply placeholders for the eyewitnesses; we are not simply looking at transcripts. Rather, the Bible belongs to the church in a particular sense: out of the community of believers, the testimony of the prophets and apostles is given literary form, combined, refashioned, and reordered in order to hand on what had been received. Two layers of fallibility are introduced, the witnesses and the literary text. They are each *reliable* – that is the church’s proclamation – but they remain, each in their own way, a human record, capable of error, even in faith and morals. In this sense, a double witness stands behind each biblical text, the historical recipient of revelation and the author or community that reports that reception. The intense flattening that brought Barth shoulder to shoulder with the Apostle Paul now opens up into a large landscape where historical figures, divine Self-disclosure, written texts and authors, and present-day readers can each move, distinct from one another, yet enclosed within God’s mighty working.

That mighty working is the Holy Spirit, Inspirer of both author and reader of Holy Scripture. Barth speaks of this divine agency as an event with both a past and a future: Scripture became and will become witness to divine revelation. Just this “actualism” is what Barth now means by the Bible as Word of God. We can hear echoes of Barth’s God-hauntedness in this actualism: the struggle for the truth of God; the conviction that religion only sits by “empty canals,” a somber reflection on an explosion now cooled and hardened; a radical awakening to the Living God, the One who comes. These are caught up in this event-like doctrine of inspiration; but they are changed. Now Barth can speak of a “Secondary Identity” of the Bible, an exaltation of the written word up to the Living Word, such that, in the Spirit, they are one. (We may expect that Barth’s lengthy study of the gospel of John while at Göttingen has alerted him to the

theme of communion and unity among disparate realities.) The Bible has an identity: it is a historical, creaturely artifact. But it can be graced by a second identity: it can become Word of God. But this electric transformation, note, rests in no way upon the written text itself, or the historical agents who lie behind it. Barth holds firm to his radical rejection of the “religious personality”: there is *no* power inherent in the human word to lay hold of God, to convey or disclose or know the Almighty and Transcendent LORD. There is no “point of contact.” Rather, Barth says, the Elixir who transforms creaturely words into Heavenly Words is the Eternal Son, the true Word of God Himself. He is the One who has a “Secondary Identity” in its most proper sense. The Divine *Logos* can be Himself in a second way, can repeat Himself in a creaturely idiom, can make Himself known in the vehicle that cannot, on its own, bear that Reality or witness to it. With human beings, it is impossible; but with God, all things are possible. Barth here makes Holy Scripture witness in a thoroughgoing christological fashion. Even as the Incarnate Word is fully human, fully divine, so the Bible is utterly creaturely, historical, profane, but under God’s working, can become the very Word of God, the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Now, this is a powerhouse of a doctrine of Scripture, a methodological *tour de force*. But it is no discovery of today that it provides little material help in reading the Bible as Christian Scripture. After all, it appears from the framework Barth provides that the telephone book could be as soon a revelation of the High God as could the canon of the Old and New Testaments: it is a completely unconstrained methodological relation. But Barth clearly does not consider the Bible *adiaphora* in that way! Rather, the long course of the *Church Dogmatics* testifies to how he prizes the *texts themselves*; the events they record; the teachings, prayers, and prophecies they preserve; and the broad historical sketch they offer of Jesus Christ; there is no substitute. What Barth carries out in practice, over many volumes and excurses, is a loving, attentive, and strikingly innovative exposition of concrete biblical texts, according to them the dignity of the church’s Book, the unexcelled witness to Almighty God.

In practice, Barth broadens his definition of the Bible as witness to encompass a final, and more concrete dimension of Scripture as Holy Book: the Bible contains and just is, “saga” or “meaningful history.” Barth develops this notion of “saga” most fully in his doctrine of creation, the long third volume of the *Church Dogmatics*. Within the first part-volume, Barth introduces saga as a means to understand the aim and tenor of the opening chapters in Genesis. Paradigmatically, Genesis 1 and 2 are saga; they narrate “meaningful history.” Barth characterizes this art form in this way: “I am using saga in the sense of an intuitive and poetic picture of a pre-historical reality of history which is enacted once and for all within the confines of time and space” (CD III/1, 81). Like any definition, every word tells. Barth now insists that the Bible narrates *history*: it depicts events that happen once, only, and happen within our realm of time and space. In this part-volume Barth insists on the historical character, however bracing and strange, of the act of creation; in later volumes, Barth draws once again on saga to underscore the historical nature of Christ’s resurrection. Against all counterproposals he hears from Bultmann and his students, Barth emphasizes that the resurrection is something that *happened*, to Christ and not to us, in our piety or existential awareness, and took place “there and then,” in a garden outside Jerusalem, in an empire soon to be turned upside

down. It is not *myth*; indeed, nothing in the Bible can be that. But the literary *genre* in which these events, creation and resurrection, are told – and *must* be told – is saga, the “intuitive and poetic picture” of an event that lies deeper than any common historical deed. Now, this is because:

not all history is “historical.” ... In its immediacy to God every history is in fact “non-historical,” i.e., it cannot be deduced and compared and therefore perceived and comprehended. But this does not mean that it ceases to be genuine history. ... That [the Biblical history of creation] does actually contain a good deal of saga (and even legend and anecdote) is due to the nature and theme of the biblical witness. It also contains “history” but usually with a more or less strong wrapping of saga. This is inevitable where the immediacy of history to God is prominent, as in the histories which the Bible relates. (CD III/1, pp. 80–81)

Striking in this passage is the wide scope Barth imparts to the notion, saga: the Bible as a whole, in its historical witness, will express itself inevitably in the form of saga. In truth, Barth has given us a shorthand here for his mature understanding of the nature of the Bible. When we ask ourselves, What is the Bible? Barth now answers, and will answer throughout the late work of the *Church Dogmatics*: It is Saga, a Book of sagas. We should be quick to say that this new definition does not imply that Barth has discovered some newfound uncertainty about the Bible and its reliability. No, it is rather that he has now found the proper thought-form in which the astonishing complexity of the Bible can be captured and expressed. The Bible, Barth now sees, is the “history of encounter” between God and humanity, most especially between God and Israel. It is a Book about God, yes; but the God who forges a covenant with a people of His own choosing and commands a world into being as the “external basis” of that covenant, guiding and prompting and chastening that people, until the promised Son should appear, and make visible all Israel as the light to the gentiles. This narrative of “immediacy” – Barth can now dare to use this term of high liberalism! – contains a relation in which only one of the *relata*, the creature, can be expressed in ordinary historical idiom. The Other, the Creator, remains LORD, and cannot be rendered in creaturely categories, the Kantian intuitions of time and space. Rather, the explosive encounter between these two – now the theme of the whole Bible – can be told only in a historical form unique to its surpassing and incomprehensible strangeness: Saga as the history of God with us, Emmanuel. This is what Martin Kahler famously called, *Geschichte*, “meaningful history,” the record of the past not as chaos or aimless contingency but as the ordered, significant, and hope-filled unfolding of God’s Lordship over His creatures. *Historie* cannot capture such depth, by definition; it is the shallows of creaturely doings as if God did not see and stand guard. (Myth is even more powerless before this high task, for it concerns only what never happened, but only, as Celsus said, what always is.) The question that haunted the young Barth – how can the creature speak about God? – can now be answered with a term that at once preserves that early haunting and transcends it. The Bible gives us the idiom in which we can speak – saga – and it belongs to our realm, our lifetime and landscape, but it is unlike any history we know. The biblical saga can have errors, can have legends and odd folkways embroidered all along its edges, can show its literary seams and artwork; yet remain the Word of God, the foundation of all

Christian thought and life. It alone speaks of God come earthward, and there is no greater story, no greater history in all creation than that.

Barth has taken his readers on an intellectual journey from the Scripture principle to the Bible as the saga of God with humanity; he has redefined the Bible through “joyful discovery” and “much sweat and many groans”; and he has reshaped the entire terrain of “faith and history” through a remarkable liberty of exegesis and historiography. Barth’s doctrine of Scripture may not be his most well-known achievement; but in many ways we should say, it is his most profound, his most lasting.



## CHAPTER 7

# Barth on Theological Method

Kevin W. Hector

The most important feature of Barth's theological method is that it is a *theological* method, in the sense that his method is itself an instance of theology, as opposed to a more general method that is applied to theology. To explain what this means (and why it matters), this article will (i) sketch Barth's theological method, (ii) contrast that method with one of its leading competitors, and (iii) consider some objections to which it appears liable.

### Barth's Early Method

It would be fair to say that, when it came to theological method, Barth knew what he was *against* long before he knew what he was *for* (or, more precisely, before he knew quite *how* to be for it). To understand his mature views, then, it will be helpful to begin by considering his criticisms of Friedrich Schleiermacher, a theologian whose method embodied, for Barth, what he saw as the fundamental wrong turn that had been taken by liberal Protestantism. (With characteristic vigor, Barth thus informed his friend Thurneysen, in 1921, that he would have to open his new teaching position with a "declaration of war" on Schleiermacher.<sup>1</sup>) Barth's objection to Schleiermacher's method, summarily stated, is this: as Barth understands him, (i) Schleiermacher focuses on Christian piety rather than on the object of that piety, in consequence of which (ii) his theology lacks objectivity in the sense that it is unwilling or unable to judge the

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1 So Barth: "wahrscheinlich werde ich mein Lehramt gleich mit einer Kriegserklärung an diesen Kirchenvater und religiösen Virtuosen eröffnen müssen" ("Barth to Thurneysen, 18 May 1921," GA 3, p. 489); a few days later, Barth informs Thurneysen that "die Mündung des Geschützes" [the muzzle of the gun] is now sharply trained on Schleiermacher ("Barth to Thurneysen, 23 May 1921," GA 3, p. 492).

would-be correctness of that piety; more important, (iii) it lacks objectivity in the sense that it relativizes the transcendence of God and Christ; and (iv) his theology ends up in this predicament precisely because Schleiermacher thinks theology should answer to nontheological, putatively general norms.<sup>2</sup>

These worries are fairly well known, but for present purposes they require a bit of explication, beginning with what Barth sees as the exceptionable role that piety plays in Schleiermacher's theology. So Barth claims, for instance, that for Schleiermacher "the *object* of theology is a *phenomenon* — namely, so-called piety — and though it is, of course, a *spiritual* phenomenon, its psychical *givenness* is like any other" (GA 11, p. 275; TS, p. 153); as such, he claims that "Schleiermacher thus makes the Christianly-pious person into the epistemic foundation and content of his theology" (Barth 1968, p. 303; TS, p. 271). This is what Barth terms "Schleiermacher's Copernican Revolution" (GA 17, p. 11; GD, p. 9), namely, his transformation of theology into a science focused on faith or piety itself; Barth thus hails Schleiermacher as a revolutionary of sorts, because he adopted for theology a "conscious and thoroughgoing and conspicuous anthropological approach in the center of its thinking and its statements" (1968, p. 302; TS, p. 270). Not just any anthropological starting-point, however; Schleiermacher's approach is especially disastrous, Barth claims, in that he seeks to base theology on a species of human *feeling*; this is disastrous precisely because such feeling exists, Barth thinks, "only in complete undifferentiatedness, qualitylessness, and timeless inwardness" (GA 11, p. 294; TS, p. 164). By contrast with other candidates for an anthropological starting point, such as knowing or doing, Barth argues that "feeling" lacks intentionality or objective purport, from which it follows that a theology based on feeling can never move *beyond* feeling. Hence its particular disastrousness.

Its foundation in feeling would thus explain why Schleiermacher's theology seems to Barth to lack objectivity. So Barth claims, as I already mentioned, that Schleiermacher's theology lacks objectivity in the sense of a concern for *truth*, that is, that it lacks either the ability or the willingness to render judgments about the *correctness* of the prevailing piety; Barth writes, accordingly, that if "Schleiermacher's dogmatics fails to consider the *truth* of its statements," this is because his statements "intend to be nothing more or less than a faithful picture of *reality*, namely the reality of possible, permissible, and necessary states of the religious disposition" (GA 11, p. 292; TS, p. 163). Hence it is hardly surprising, Barth thinks, that Schleiermacher's theology would lack concern for objective truth, for as Barth understands him, Schleiermacher has taken as his subject matter a phenomenon that lacks objective purport and is as such an essentially or constitutively anthropocentric phenomenon. Schleiermacher would no more ask about the truth of piety, Barth argues, than a cultural anthropologist would ask about the truth of indigenous peoples' customs.

This is not the only respect in which Barth thinks Schleiermacher's theology lacks objectivity, however, nor the most important; much more troubling, Barth thinks, is that, in virtue of its (alleged) assimilation of all Christian words and deeds to pious self-expression, Schleiermacher's theology cannot help but relativize or even eliminate the

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<sup>2</sup> I am here borrowing some material – in revised form – from two of my earlier essays: Hector (2015a,b).