Karl Barth and Evangelical Theology
Convergences and Divergences

Edited by
Sung Wook Chung

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Contents

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2

A Person of the Book? Barth on Biblical Authority and Interpretation

Kevin J. Vanhoozer

Evangelicals are a "people of the book."[1] The supreme authority of Scripture, typically cashed out in terms of verbal inspiration, inerrancy, and infallibility, is a characteristic mark of evangelical theology. Karl Barth is well known for his theology of the Word of God and for his reassertion of biblical authority in the face of its erosion in modern Protestantism.[2] Yet many evangelicals have found Barth's distinction between the Word of God (i.e. Jesus Christ) and the words of men (i.e. Scripture) disquieting, to say the least—so much so that many have questioned Barth's credentials as a "person of the book."

Given Barth's indirect identity thesis—according to which the Bible *becomes* the word of God—it is only fitting that we begin our study of Barth's doctrine of Scripture *indirectly*, through the effective history of its reception among evangelicals. The story, alas, is something of a tragicomedy of errors, complete with mistaken identities (for example, of the meaning of "is"), dramatic ironies, and outright misunderstandings. The reception of Barth's doctrine of Scripture among evangelicals also serves as a barometer of various pressures within the evangelical movement itself.[3] When hot (read: "reformist") air masses meet cold (read: "traditionalist") fronts, the result is invariably severe storms. One call still hear the rolling thunder occasioned by the encounter of evangelical readers who were respectively hot or cool towards Barth.

Barth thought and wrote as a "biblical dogmatician."[4] Does this qualify him as a "person of the book"? The primary goal of the present chapter is to come to a better understanding of Barth's view and use of the Bible.[5] A secondary goal is to tear down the "dividing wall of hostility" that has prevented evangelicals from appreciating Barth's accomplishment. In so doing, we may also find ourselves making progress towards the further goals of addressing tensions within contemporary evangelicalism concerning biblical authority and, *Deo volente*, of clarifying the relationship between God and Scripture.[6]

1. First contact: a hermeneutics of epistemological suspicion

The first evangelical responses to Barth were largely negative and reactionary. They were motivated by the concern that neo-orthodoxy was a modernist wolf in evangelical sheep's clothing, an uneasy yoking of biblical insights and a non-biblical philosophical

[1] See John Barton, *People of the Book? The Authority of the Bible in Christianity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1988).

[2] According to David Mueller, reclaiming the Reformers' view of biblical authority is one of Barth's most important positive contributions (Mueller, *Karl Barth* [Waco, TX: Word, 1972], p. 144).

[3] Gregory C. Bolich's book describes the story of Barth's reception in terms of two basic evangelical responses: on the one hand are those who see him as a "foe of evangelical faith," on the other those who see him as a "potential friend" (*Karl Barth and Evangelicalism* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980). Philip R. Thorne writes that "constructive appropriation of Barth became one source and sign of the change taking place in post-war American evangelicalism as it shed its fundamentalist pattern" (*Evangelicalism and Karl Barth: His Reception and Influence in North American Evangelical Theology* [Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1995], p. 178). See also the way in which Barth figures in Roger E. Olson's telling of "The Story of Evangelical Theology," in *The Westminster Handbook to Evangelical Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), esp. pp. 39–56.

[4] John Webster, *Karl Barth*, 2nd ed. (London/New York: Continuum, 2004) p. 173.

[5] Barth's doctrine of Scripture is impossible to separate from his broader understanding of God, the way in which God makes himself known, and the tie between revelation and redemption. It also depends on a correct grasp of the way Barth relates philosophy and theology.

[6] Bolich suggests that studying Barth "can aid evangelicals in effecting a workable unity, proving their validity and discovering their fundamental identity" (*Barth*, p. 27).

framework. For Cornelius Van Til, refuting Barth was a matter of preserving the integrity of the gospel, of asserting Christ's death and resurrection as space-time historical events, rather than merely events of *Geschichte*. This is a legitimate concern. Nevertheless, it is regrettable that the early evangelical reception of Barth is characterized by its (1) disproportionate concern for epistemology, (2) focus on certain statements in isolation from their "canonical" context (viz. the whole of Barth's work), and (3) lack of attention to Barth's actual exegetical practice.

1.1 Cornelius Van Til

Van Til was the first evangelical to engage Barth critically. Because he was the teacher of a number of students destined to become evangelical leaders, his interpretation of Barth wielded a disproportionate influence.[7]

In *The New Modernism*, Van Til investigates the relation between the earlier and later Barth. Though Barth himself later acknowledged that his earlier work was too indebted to modern philosophy, Van Til discerns a pervasive influence of modern critical and dialectical philosophy throughout Barth's work. Exhibit number one is Barth's consistently dialectical and activist take on revelation. If there is only one thing true of Barth's whole theology, says Van Til, it is "that it is the diametrical opposite of a theology that is based on a finished revelation of God in history."[8] The basic assumption behind all Van Til's criticisms is that Barth uses orthodox terms in a non-orthodox way: "for all its verbal similarities to historic Protestantism, Barth's theology is, in effect, a denial of it."[9] He is a dangerous enemy precisely because he comes "in the guise of a friend."

What, then, might Barth mean when he speaks of Scripture as the Word of God? Van Til is clear as to what Barth does not mean: that what there is to be known of God has been deposited in the

[7] It is significant, however, that the focus of his earliest treatment of Barth's doctrine of Scripture in his first book on Barth, *The New Modernism: An Appraisal of the Theology of Barth and Brunner* (Philadelphia: P&R Publishing Co., 1946), was Barth's 1927 *Die Christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf* rather than the later, more mature statement of Barth's position, the *Church Dogmatics*.

[8] Cornelius Van Til, *The Protestant Doctrine of Scripture* (Philadelphia: Dalk, 1967), p. 36.

[9] Cornelius Van Til, *Christianity and Barthianism* (Philadelphia: P&R Publishing Co., 1962), p. vii.

biblical texts once for all. Such a fixed revelation would deny God's freedom to reveal himself or not. Revelation is for Barth always indirect: always a gift-like event, never a given. It is precisely at this point that Van Til makes a fateful inference from indirect revelation (a theological notion) to *existential* event (a philosophical notion). In brief: Van Til concludes that, for Barth, the Bible becomes God's Word only in and for an existential moment (*Geschichte*) that refuses to be tied down either to history (*Historie*) or meaning. The Bible becomes revelation only when God decides to encounter its readers dialectically: if the Bible "is" the Word of God, it is only because, and when, "the 'is' is active."[10]

Van Til proceeds to measure Barth's theology by means of a single overriding conception: activism.[11] This is also why he labels Barth's theology the "New Modernism." Modernity involves the turn to the human subject (i.e. the human knower); Barth makes a turn to the divine Subject (i.e. the divine revealer). The crucial question is whether Barth's emphasis on the discontinuity of the Word of God with the words of men is an expression of modernity, or a criticism of it. Van Til leaves us in no doubt as to his own opinion: "Barth interprets the Bible in a modern activist sense just as Origen interpreted the Bible in accord with principles borrowed from Greek philosophy."[12]

Van Til is also convinced that Barth's whole approach to theology presupposes human autonomy: "It is by . . . assuming that his God is wholly revealed and wholly hidden to him that man can make sure that he has no God who has any existence prior to himself and who can make any demands on him."[13] It is difficult in the extreme, however, to construe Barth's turn away from the human knowing subject as "a projection of the would-be autonomous man"[14] or a "New Humanism."[15] Almost everybody else recognizes Barth's achievement as the rediscovery of the deity—the Wholly

[10] Cornelius Van Til, *Karl Barth & Evangelicalism* (Philadelphia: P&R Publishing Co., 1964), p. 14.

[11] This is in significant contrast to George Hunsinger's employment of multiple "motifs"—including "actualism"—in his *How to Read Karl Barth* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1991).

[12] Van Til, *Protestant*, p. 36

[13] Van Til, *Christianity*, p. 412. Cf. Van Til's comment: "Barth's basic concept of a revelation as wholly revealing and wholly hiding God to man is based upon the assumption of the autonomy of man" (p. 410).

[14] Van Til, *Christianity*, p. 434.

[15] Van Til, *Evangelicalism*, p. 32.

Otherness—of God. Van Til's interpretation of Barth as a humanist is as tendentious a reading of the *Church Dogmatics* as was the Tübingen School's insistence that James had to be contradicting Paul.

Given Van Til's well-known presuppositonal apologetics, it is highly ironic that a faulty presupposition underlies, and hence undermines, his reading of Barth. Van Til reads Barth as being committed to a critical (i.e. Kantian) philosophy. Van Til seems not to have grasped the possibility that Barth may have had other, more properly theological, reasons for his dialectical approach.[16] It has also been suggested that one reason behind Van Til's "Barthian animus" is the apparent similarity between Barth's theology and Reformed orthodoxy.[17] Might it not also be because of a strong point of similarity between Barth and Van Til himself? Many would place both thinkers together on the spectrum of contemporary theology: both were biblical fideists; both were uncompromising about their respective starting-points; both made the doctrine of the Trinity their key presupposition.[18]

1.2 Carl F. H. Henry

Carl F. H. Henry followed his teacher Gordon Clark in construing Barth as an "irrationalist." Like Van Til, Clark could not conceive of how the Bible could only "become" revelation: "the Bible *is* the Word of God, but only at certain instants . . . when God lets the

[16] Some evangelicals have criticized Van Til for interpreting the later Barth in terms of the earlier. In this regard, at least, recent research in on Van Til's side: Bruce McCormack argues that dialectic is indeed at the heart of Barth's theology, and that Barth never shifted it from the center of his theological method and his theological concern (see McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909–1936* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1995). The issue, however, is not whether Van Til was or was not right about the *presence* of dialectic in Barth's theology, but its *nature*. Van Til thought it was a residue from Barth's youthful flirtation with existentialism. McCormack (rightly in my opinion) shows that it stems from properly theological concerns.

[17] Thorne, *Evangelicalism*, p. 35.

[18] In this regard, it is regrettable that there is no book-length study comparing and contrasting these two Presbyterian and Reformed theologians. Note also that no course has been offered on the theology of Karl Barth at Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia) since Van Til left the scene (personal conversation with Richard Gaffin).

Bible speak to us."[19] Barth's concept of revelation was unintelligible to the extent that Barth failed to identify the event of revelation with the verbal statements of the Bible.

For Henry, to say the Bible is the Word of God is to affirm divine revelation as verbal and conceptual. Revelation is "propositional": God makes his mind, and hence truth, known in the words of Scripture. He complains that Barth, by contrast, locates revelation (and hence truth?) in "the stratosphere of superhistory."[20] Anything that calls into question the identity of the mind of God with the words of Scripture results in skepticism. In Henry's opinion, the notion that revelation is cognitive was lost on Barth's watch: "The enigma of Barth's theory is: why should revelation—which according to Barth is not to be hardened into concepts and words—ever have become so entangled in concepts and words that it requires the disentangling he proposes?"[21]

Henry's core problem with Barth's view of Scripture is best seen in a supplementary note in *God, Revelation, and Authority* volume 4 entitled "Barth on Scriptural Errancy."[22] Barth clearly regards the prophets and apostles as "capable of error even in respect of religion and theology."[23] How then, Henry wonders, can one treat a fallible book as an authoritative norm? Henry also finds perplexing Barth's claim that what is humanly fallible may nevertheless become divinely infallible: "can even faith that moves mountains turn the writer's supposed contradictions and errors into the truth of revelation?"[24] It makes no sense to say that the Bible "becomes" true. Henry thus agrees with Clark that "the idea of sentences, propositions, verses of the Bible increasing or decreasing in truth from time to time and from individual to individual is a skeptical delusion."[25] The difficulty lies in Barth's espousing two incompatible axioms: first, that the Bible is the Word of God; second, that the Bible contains errors and contradictions. Henry's verdict is telling: "By respecting

[19] Gordon H. Clark, *Karl Barth's Theological Method* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1963), pp. 163–4.

[20] Carl Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority* vol. 2 (Waco, TX: Word, 1979), p. 287.

[21] Henry, *God* vol. 4, p. 200.

[22] Henry, *God* vol. 4, pp. 196–200.

[23] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1956–75; hereafter *CD*), I/2, p. 510.

[24] Henry, *God* vol. 4, p. 197.

[25] Clark, *Method*, p. 172.

the law of contradiction [Barth] could and would have avoided irrationalist tendencies."[26]

Henry is aware of Barth's "analogy of grace" whereby human concepts become adequate to the knowledge of God through a divine miracle, but considers this too little, too late to save revelation as cognitive and propositional: "Where evangelicals disagree with Barth is in his explicit affirmation of the dialectical event-character of revelation that declares God to be propositionally unknowable to man in the present, and in his denial of the objectivity of the Scriptures as God's written Word that robs Scripture of any revelatory-epistemic significance as a carrier of valid information about God."[27] If revelation does not begin with words, "how can it later attach itself to one set of words rather than to another, or to any words at all?"[28]

2. Second thoughts: tentative appropriations

By the 1970s, there was a fairly widespread consensus among evangelical and non-evangelical theologians alike about the "Barthian" view of Scripture.[29] According to this consensus, Barth "is always careful to distinguish God in his revelation from the testimony to that relation which confronts us in Scripture."[30] The Bible *becomes* what it essentially is not (i.e. the Word of God) when God uses its human witness to point to Christ. This is Barth's indirect identity thesis concerning the relation of revelation and the Bible. On this reading, Barth is saying of Scripture what Arius said of the Logos, namely, "There was a time when it (the Bible) was not (the Word of God)." This way of putting it exposed the fundamental problem of Barth's position for conservative evangelicals: an *adoptionist* view

[26] Henry, *God* vol. 4, p. 200. Henry surely means to speak of the law of non-contradiction which stipulates that the conjunction of a proposition and its negation is a contradiction, not a dialectical truth!

[27] Henry, *God* vol. 4, p. 267.

[28] Clark, *Method*, p. 221.

[29] John Morrison has recently argued that what passed for a "Barthian" view of Scripture rests upon a misinterpretation of Barth's actual view. See his "Barth, Barthians, and evangelicals: Reassessing the Question of the Relation of Holy Scripture and the Word of God," *Trinity Journal* 25 NS (2004), pp. 187–213.

[30] David Mueller, *Karl Barth* (Waco, TX: Word, 1972), p. 56.

fares no better in describing how the Bible is the Word of God than it does in describing how Jesus is the Son of God.

Other evangelicals disagreed, insisting that Barth had raised valid points about the dangers of "biblicism" and refusing to read him as an indentured servant to existentialist philosophy. This latter group of evangelicals was more interested in appropriating Barth for the sake of constructive theology, not apologetics.[31]

2.1 Bernard Ramm

If Carl Henry was the "Dean" of post-war evangelical theologians, Bernard Ramm, author of several influential textbooks, was its Associate Dean. After years of wrestling with Barth's theology, Ramm dropped a bombshell of his own on the playground of the evangelical theologians with the publication of his *After Fundamentalism: The Future of Evangelical Theology*.[32] In it, he argued that Barth represents the most adequate theological response to the Enlightenment, and hence to the sterile confrontation between fundamentalists and modernists that had warped evangelical theology by making it defensive, suspicious, and reactionary.[33] It was during a sabbatical year in 1957–58 that Ramm learned from a personal encounter with Barth that "if we truly believed that we had the truth of God in Holy Scripture we should be fearless in opening any door or any window in the pursuit of our theological craft."[34]

Ramm gradually came to see in Barth one who was fearless in the face of modern biblical criticism, one who was able to restate the essentials of Reformed theology in the aftermath of the Enlightenment, recognizing its genuine positive gains but without

[31] Thorne discusses four professors from Fuller Theological Seminary—E. J. Carnell, Colin Brown, James Daane, and Ray Anderson—under the rubric of "New evangelicals" (*Evangelicalism and Karl Barth*, ch. 3). Carnell's statement—"I am convinced that Barth is an inconsistent evangelical rather than an inconsistent liberal"—captures perfectly the note of critical appropriation (Carnell, "Barth as Inconsistent Evangelical," *The Christian Century* 79 [June 6, 1962], p. 714).

[32] Carl Ramm, *After Fundamentalism: The Future of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1983).

[33] See Ramm's autobiographical comments in "Helps from Karl Barth," in Donald K. McKim ed., *How Karl Barth Changed My Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), p. 121.

[34] Ramm, "Helps," p. 124

capitulating to it. evangelicals, by contrast, "have not developed a theological method that enables them to be consistently evangelical in their theology and to be people of modern learning."[35] Ramm sees Barth as charting the way forward for theology, neither succumbing to the Enlightenment and becoming revisionists as the liberals did, nor ignoring the Enlightenment and becoming obscurantists, denying the validity of modern knowledge, as the fundamentalists did.

That Barth is both child and critic of the Enlightenment is evident, Ramm thinks, in Barth's view of Scripture. The critical study of Scripture is compatible with faith in its inspiration. One can study the Bible as a human and historical document and at the same time acknowledge its divine authority. In short: one can affirm both the humanity and the divinity of the Bible. But how? By recognizing an interval or *diastasis* (distance; distinction) between the Word of God on the one hand and its expression and embeddedness in a linguistically and culturally conditioned text on the other.[36] The Word of God is in some measure "refracted" because "no human language can mirror perfectly the mind of God or his Word."[37] It follows that the Word of God must be "sought" in the text through the process of interpretation: "By studying the text, the interpreter penetrates the *diastasis* to the Word of God itself."[38]

Neither Ramm nor Barth are skeptics; neither wants to say that the interval is a chasm. Nor do they employ Kant's distinction to separate the "phenomenal" text from the "noumenal" Word of God. On the contrary, Ramm says that "Barth believes that the Word of God is in Scripture as the *Sache* [subject matter] of Scripture."[39] Ramm's formula is telling: the Word is in the words.[40] Ramm therefore denies the charge that Barth has a purely subjective or existential view of the Bible becoming the Word; rather, the Word is objectively *in* the words. When Barth speaks of the Bible "becoming" the Word of God, he is speaking of its being recognized as such by particular hearers or readers who hear and read in the right spirit (i.e. in faith and obedience).[41]

[35] Ramm, *Fundamentalism*, p. 27.
[36] Ramm, *Fundamentalism*, p. 89.
[37] Ramm, "Helps," p. 124.
[38] Ramm, *Fundamentalism*, p. 92–3.
[39] Ramm, *Fundamentalism*, p. 92.
[40] Ramm, *Fundamentalism*, p. 94.
[41] Ramm is unequivocal on this point: "Barth does believe that Holy Scripture is the Word of God in itself" (*Fundamentalism*, p. 120).

Ramm contends that Barth treats biblical texts like Genesis 1–3 or the resurrection narratives neither as sources nor as evidence to be used for reconstructing history, but as witnesses to divine revelation.[42] To treat every part of the Bible as a source book for historical information is a violation of what Ramm considers to be the most basic principle of interpretation, namely, "a book is to be interpreted in the light of what it claims to be."[43] Ramm thinks that Barth is essentially correct in viewing Scripture as testimony to its subject matter: the revealed Word of God. Finally, Ramm agrees with Barth that the only worthwhile apologetic strategy for demonstrating the Bible to be the Word of God is to focus on its christological content rather than argue for the supposed perfection of its form.[44]

2.2 *Donald Bloesch*

Like Ramm, Donald Bloesch says that what he most admires about Barth is "his fresh interpretation of biblical authority."[45] Specifically, Barth meets the challenge of higher criticism by showing that it needs to be "supplemented and fulfilled by theological criticism, which is carried on only by faith seeking understanding."[46]

Bloesch counts Barth among his principal theological mentors, along with Luther and Calvin.[47] There are actually more index entries to Barth than to anyone else in Bloesch's *Holy Scripture*, the second volume of his seven-volume systematic theology. In the first volume, *A Theology of Word and Spirit*, Bloesch says that "we need to take his [Barth's] way of doing theology" over that of liberals like Tillich and conservatives like Carl Henry.[48] That means viewing God's Word as referring not to the Bible per se but to "the living Word in its inseparable unity with Scripture and church proclamation as this is brought home to us by the Spirit."[49]

[42] Ramm, *Fundamentalism*, p. 109.
[43] Ramm, *Fundamentalism*, p. 109.
[44] Ramm, *Fundamentalism*, p. 132.
[45] Donald Bloesch, "Karl Barth: Appreciation and Reservations," in McKim ed., *How Karl Barth Changed my Mind*, p. 126.
[46] Bloesch, "Appreciation," p. 127.
[47] Bloesch, "Appreciation," p. 126.
[48] Donald Bloesch, *A Theology of Word & Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), p. 271.
[49] Bloesch, *Word & Spirit*, p. 14. Elsewhere Bloesch writes: "I think Barth is biblically sound in his judgment that Christ alone is the living or

Bloesch flies Barthian colors when he distinguishes his own "biblical evangelical" stance on the doctrine of Scripture from the prevailing "evangelical rationalism" that equates revelation with Scripture and thus regards the Word of God as something that humans can grasp through exegetical procedures, and formulate through deductive reasoning: "The Bible is not in and of itself the revelation of God but the divinely appointed means and channel of this revelation."[50] For Bloesch, the particular *diastasis* between the words of men and the Word of God is a function of the Spirit's action: "the Bible . . . is not divine revelation intrinsically, for its revelatory status does not reside in its wording as such but in the Spirit of God, who fills the words with meaning and power."[51] Bloesch works a sacramental variation on a Barthian theme, comparing the Bible to a light bulb[52] and revelation—the Spirit's communicating the Word—to the light that shines through it: "The Bible is the divinely prepared medium or channel of divine revelation rather than the revelation itself."[53]

Bloesch reads Barth as distinguishing between the human form (viz. the historical and literary witness) and the divine content of the Bible (viz. Jesus Christ): "Criticism may be directed to the form but not to the content of Scripture, which lies outside the compass of historical investigation."[54] The final authority for Christian faith and theology "is not what the Bible says but what God says in the Bible."[55] At the same time, Bloesch follows Barth in affirming a conjunction between the human form and divine content brought about by the action of the Spirit and perceived only by faith. Hence the *diastasis* between the Word and the words has implications for hermeneutics as well, for Bloesch posits "a clear-cut distinction"

revealed Word of God, yet the Bible can become transparent to this Word by the interior action of the Holy Spirit" ("Donald Bloesch Responds," in Elmer M. Colyer ed. *Evangelical Theology in Transition: Theologians in Dialogue with Donald Bloesch* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999], p. 192).

[50] Donald Bloesch, *Holy Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), p. 57. Bloesch contrasts rationalism—the attempt to arrive at truth through one's native cognitive powers—with the need to establish the claims of faith with Word and Spirit.

[51] Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, p. 27.

[52] Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, p. 59.

[53] Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, p. 18.

[54] Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, p. 177.

[55] Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, p. 60.

between the historical meaning of the text and its "revelational" or "spiritual" meaning that the text assumes when the Spirit acts on it in bringing home its significance to people of faith in every age."[56]

3. Third wave: evangelicals meet Barth's postliberal progeny

In the 1980s and 90s Barth indeed had become, as Ramm hoped, a paradigm for a new way of doing theology. It was not associated with evangelicals, however, but with Yale Divinity School. Hans Frei's *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*[57] held up Barth's theological interpretation of Scripture as a model of how to make the biblical narrative itself rather than some other, extratextual framework the touchstone for biblical meaning and truth.

3.1 Why narrative?

Neither Barth nor Frei was interested in being hermeneutically fashionable. Their prime interest was rather the revelation of God in the person and history of Jesus Christ.[58] Yet form and content are inseparable, for the identity of an agent, even a divine agent, is rendered through the words, actions, occurrences, and sufferings that unfold through the story. According to Frei, Barth read the gospels as "realistic narrative" whose meaning simply is the story it depicts. This was in marked contrast to those who sought to translate the biblical story into some conceptual scheme or to view biblical meaning in terms of historical reference—the typical gestures of conservative and liberal modern theologians alike. George Lindbeck, Frei's colleague at Yale, coined the term "intratextuality" to describe this habit of redescribing reality within the framework

[56] Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*, p. 190. See also Millard Erickson, "Donald Bloesch's Doctrine of Scripture," in Colyer ed., *Evangelical Theology in Transition*, pp. 77–97, especially his final verdict: "Overall, Bloesch's view of Scripture, while combining elements of neo-orthodoxy and traditional evangelicalism, appears closer to the former than to the latter" (p. 91).

[57] Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

[58] See also David F. Ford, *Barth and God's Story: Biblical Narrative and the Theological Method of Karl Barth in "The Church Dogmatics"* (Frankfurt: Verlag Peter Lang, 1981, 1985).

of the biblical narrative rather than translating Scripture into extrascriptural categories.[59]

3.2 *The Frei-Henry encounter*

The encounter between Carl Henry and Hans Frei at Yale in 1985 marked the first serious evangelical attempt to engage postliberal theology. Uncannily mirroring Van Til's critique of Barth, Henry objected to what he took to be Frei's "flight from history" and "revolt against reason" when it came to the question of the truth of biblical narrative. Frei, for his part, insisted that the narratives of Jesus' death and resurrection are referential, but he refused to subscribe to a theory of historical reference or factuality that, he feared, would displace the intratextual logic of Scripture itself: "The truth to which we refer we cannot state apart from the biblical language which we employ to do so."[60] The still-born dialogue was revived only ten years later when evangelicals and postliberals came together at one of the annual Wheaton Theology Conferences.[61]

The voice to which Henry reacted was Frei's, but the spirit was Barth's. The debate appeared to be about the nature of narrative reference, but the real issue concerned which movement—evangelicalism or postliberalism—had better claim to the title "people of the book" or, more precisely, which had the better account of the unity, authority, and interpretation of Scripture.[62] Though both men affirmed the sufficiency of Scripture with regard to its subject matter, Henry viewed the gospel narratives primarily as reports about historical facts, while Frei saw them as depictions of a particular unsubstitutable Person.[63]

[59] George Lindbeck, "Barth and Textuality," *Theology Today* 43 [1996]: 361–76.

[60] Hans Frei, "Response to Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal," in *Trinity Journal* 8 NS (1987): 23.

[61] Papers from the conference were later published. See Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, eds., *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals & Postliberals in Conversation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

[62] See further George Hunsinger, "What can evangelicals & Postliberals Learn from Each Other? The Carl Henry-Hans Frei Exchange Reconsidered," in Phillips and Okholm, eds., *Confession*, pp. 134–50.

[63] So Hunsinger, "Postliberals," p. 144. Cf. p. 142, where Hunsinger observes "Whereas Henry seems to think the narratives are finally about the doctrines, for Frei it is just the reverse."

3.3 *Karl* dixit: *back to the sources*

The history of the reception of Barth's texts is no substitute for an examination of the primary sources themselves.[64] It is especially important in Barth's case to listen to all that he has to say about Scripture; readers miss the true significance of Barth's statements about the Bible when they attempt to make sense of sentences apart from their "canonical" context (i.e. the whole of Barth's *Church Dogmatics*). In particular, what Barth says in the *Church Dogmatics*, I/1 about the indirect identity of Scripture with the Word of God has to be balanced by what he says in the *Church Dogmatics*, I/2 about the authority of the Bible in, and over, the church.

3.3.1 Scripture as form of and witness to God's Word. "The Word of God is God himself in Holy Scripture."[65] Barth never tired of insisting that only God can make God known. The overarching theological presupposition, without which Barth's doctrine of Scripture cannot be understood, is that revelation is a predicate of God as a free, gracious, and active subject. Jesus Christ—the Word made flesh—is the definitive Word. Yet both Jesus in his humanity and Scripture in its humanity become revelation only when God acts in and through them to make himself known: "When we speak about revelation we are confronted by the divine act itself."[66] With this thought, we are now in a position to locate where, and why, evangelicals have so often misread Barth. It all boils down to a case of mistaken identity. For evangelicals, the Word of God is an object—the deposit of revealed truth in Scripture. By contrast, for Barth the Word of God is a subject whose speaking in and through Jesus Christ creates both the canon and the church.

God's Word does not piggy-back on the writings of the prophets and apostles. On the contrary, "It is because God reveals himself

[64] The main sections in the *CD*, are I/1/4, pp. 88–124, "The Word of God in its Threefold Form" and I/2/19–21, pp. 457–749 "Chapter III: Holy Scripture". Other relevant sources include Barth's 1947 essay "The Authority and Significance of the Bible: Twelve Theses," in *God Here and Now* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 55–74 and *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1963), ch. 3 "The witnesses," pp. 26–36.

[65] Barth, *CD*, I/2, p. 457.

[66] Barth, *CD*, I/1, p. 117.

that they are witnesses."[67] Witness is the operative concept. To bear witness means to point away from oneself. The biblical authors "do not want to offer and commend themselves to the Church, and especially not their own particular experience of God and relationship to God, but through themselves that other."[68] The biblical authors attest God's revelation in Jesus Christ: "This participation of human words in God's Word is the principal element in the Scripture principle."[69]

To affirm the Bible as a form of the Word of God, then, is to conceive of Scripture as an active rather than a standing witness. It is precisely as actual witness that the Bible in some way shares in what Jesus Christ himself is (viz. divine revelation). Hence, "The reality of revelation is indirectly identical with the reality of Scripture."[70] To be sure, there is a distance (*diastasis*) that remains: "The Bible is one thing and revelation another."[71] But Barth does not leave it at that: "Nevertheless, we have revelation not in itself but in the Bible."[72]

It is precisely as written testimony that the Bible is a form of the Word of God: "The presence and Lordship of Jesus Christ . . . has its visible form, in the time between His resurrection and His return, in the witness of His chosen and appointed prophets and apostles."[73] Nevertheless, it is thanks not to the perfection of its form but to its being elected as a human instrument of divine speech and to its christological content that the Bible is indirectly identical with revelation: "The truth, power, and validity of the witness of these men is that of their subject."[74]

While recognizing the positive value of Barth's emphasis on its witnessing function, Geoffrey Bromiley wonders whether Barth might not inadvertently undermine the role of Scripture as a form of the Word of God by differentiating the two by means of the distinction

[67] Eberhard Busch, *The Great Passion: An Introduction to Karl Barth's Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 66.
[68] Barth, *CD*, I/1, p. 112.
[69] Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian Religion* vol. 1, Geoffrey W. Bromiley tr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 212.
[70] Barth, *Göttingen Dogmatics* vol. 1, p. 216.
[71] Barth, *Göttingen Dogmatics* vol. 1, p. 216.
[72] Barth, *Göttingen Dogmatics* vol. 1, p. 216.
[73] Barth, "The Authority and Significance of the Bible," p. 57.
[74] Barth, "Authority," p. 58.

between a witness's testimony and its object.[75] Klaas Runia raises a similar objection. How, he asks, do we know when and where the Bible has become the Word of God? Does the Bible have to become the Word of God again and again? Is there no sense in which the work of the Holy Spirit is continuous? In Runia's words: "In our opinion, one of the greatest weaknesses in Barth's early works is that he has place for the reality only, and not for the continuity."[76] This complaint becomes even more pronounced with regard to our next theme.

3.3.2 Inspiration and inerrancy. The theme of God as the active subject of his revelation decisively informs Barth's view of biblical inspiration. No other topic has been singled out by more evangelicals for criticism than Barth's reformulation and rejection of the doctrines of verbal inspiration and inerrancy respectively.

As we have seen, Barth denies that the Word of God is ever "available" in a direct and straightforward and permanent way. Why not? Because the Word of God *is* God in his free and sovereign activity of making himself known. The seventeenth-century Protestant doctrine of verbal inspiration did incalculable damage, Barth thought, because it historicized or "materialized" revelation, opening it up to the possibility of becoming subject to human investigation and control: "The Bible as the Word of God surreptitiously became a part of natural knowledge of God, i.e. of that knowledge of God which man can have without the free grace of God, by his own power."[77] Note well: Barth has no qualms affirming divine supernatural communication. His reticence towards verbal inspiration is not that of the skeptic, but the prophet: while he affirms that God has spoken in Scripture and will speak again, he refuses to *presume* upon God's speaking.

[75] Geoffrey Bromiley, "The Authority of Scripture in Karl Barth," in D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge, eds. *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995), p. 290. The positive merits of emphasizing the witnessing aspect of Scripture are (1) it highlights the authorizing role of God as subject and object of revelation; (2) it directs attention to Scripture's leading theme and chief content, Jesus Christ.
[76] Klaas Runia, *Karl Barth's Doctrine of Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962), p. 128.
[77] Barth, *CD*, I/2, pp. 522–3.

Barth's gloss on 2 Timothy 3:16 ("All Scripture is inspired [breathed out] by God . . .") is telling.[78] He notes that Paul has just reminded Timothy that the Scriptures have *already* played a decisive role in his life (v. 15) and that they will once again be profitable (v. 17). Why? Because they are "of the Spirit of God," that is, because they are the Spirit's appointed instrument. It is not the instrument alone that reveals, however, but the Spirit's *speaking* in and through it.

That the human words of the Bible become the Word of God is, for Barth, ultimately a miracle: "That the lame walk, that the blind see, that the dead are raised, that sinful and erring men as such speak the Word of God: that is the miracle of which we speak when we say that the Bible is the Word of God."[79] Note that the miracle is not that the human authors spoke infallibly, but rather that God uses fallible human words to speak his infallible Word. Barth insists on this point because he cannot regard the presence of God's Word and divine truth "as an attribute inhering once for all in this book,"[80] for the simple reason that this would "materialize" the active speaking of God and consign divine freedom to being the permanent property of a creaturely entity (viz. the biblical text). God, says Barth, is not ashamed to speak through the foolishness (1 Cor. 1:21) and fallibility (1 Cor. 1:25) of men. This is the "impossible possibility" that must be accepted on faith.[81] Barth's view of biblical inspiration is one more example of his eschatological realism, that is, his belief that the event of Jesus Christ, though real and historical, does not have its condition of possibility among the resources of this world; on the contrary, it wholly depends on a miraculous and mysterious act of God.

For all his talk of miracle, Barth's denial of inerrancy has proved a stumbling block and scandal to evangelicals who cannot fathom how he can simultaneously attribute both error and authority to Scripture. Runia understands the theological reason for Barth's hesitation: the desire to preserve the sovereign freedom of God, the acting subject of his revelation. While Barth's motive for denying inerrancy is rooted not in doubt but faith, Runia nevertheless believes that in this one instance at least, Barth's faith is misdirected:

[78] See Barth, *CD*, I/2, p. 504.
[79] Barth, *CD*, p. 529.
[80] Barth, *CD*, p. 530.
[81] Barth is careful to add that the inspiration of the Bible "cannot be reduced to our faith in it" (*CD*, I/2, p. 534).

"The Bible knows nothing of a fundamental contrast between the dynamic and the static, between the existential and the ontological, between the personal and the conceptual."[82] And while Bromiley sympathizes with Barth's motive to protect, not undermine, the status of Scripture as God's Word by refusing to base its authority on the contingent outcome of scientific or historical corroboration, even he regrets Barth's failure to accept inerrancy as an implication of his position on the Bible's authority.[83]

3.3.3 Canon and authority. Barth's statements about the nature of Scripture in §19 need to be tempered with his statements concerning the function of Scripture in the church in sections §20 and §21, on the "authority" and "freedom" of the Word, respectively.

God's sovereign freedom remains the leading motif in Barth's discussion of the canon and biblical authority. The basic principle is simply this: God's use of Scripture is prior to and decisive for the church's use of Scripture: "The establishment of the canon is [the church's] confession of God's election and calling of His witness."[84] Scripture has supreme authority in the church because it is the testimony of commissioned witnesses.

Despite Barth's uncertain sound with regard to inspiration and inerrancy, he is unequivocal on the matter of the Bible's authority over the church. In stark contrast to contemporary postconservatives and postliberals who identify the cradle of theology with the practices of the church, Barth states that the authority of the church is the derivative authority of obedience to Scripture.[85] Barth similarly affirms the Bible's authority over theology: "Even the smallest, strangest, simplest, or obscurest among the biblical witnesses has an incomparable advantage over even the most pious, scholarly, and sagacious latter-day theologian."[86] As to church confessions, their authority too derives from their being formulations of the church's insights into the revelation attested by Scripture.[87]

In his discussion of providence and the role of God the Father Almighty in the origin of the Scriptures and the formation of the canon, Barth notes that despite their human and historical

[82] Runia, *Doctrine*, p. 202.
[83] Bromiley, "Authority," pp. 293–4.
[84] Barth, "Authority," p. 60.
[85] Barth, *CD*, I/2, p. 574.
[86] Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, pp. 31–2.
[87] Barth, *CD*, I/2, p. 620.

conditioning, "its authors were objectively true, reliable and trustworthy witnesses" because it pleased God to raise up these true witnesses.[88] Having secured the principle of God's sovereign freedom in Scripture, Barth is apparently free to treat the Bible, for all intents and purposes, as inerrant testimony to God's self-revelation. The broader "canonical context" of Barth's works, then, calls for a more nuanced evaluation of his negative view of inerrancy. His dismissal of that notion may owe less to theological consistency than to well-intentioned, though somewhat overblown, rhetoric.

4. The use of the Bible in Barth's theology: authoritative text; "free" interpretation

Evangelicals do Barth a disservice when, in analyzing his view of Scripture, they treat only his statements about the Bible and its indirect relation to the Word of God. To neglect Barth's actual use and interpretation of the Bible is to fail to examine an enormous amount of evidence that casts his more theoretical (and rhetorical) statements in a markedly different light. Such disregard explains the paradox that one whom evangelicals consider suspect with regard to Scripture is a virtual biblicist in the broader theological scheme of things.[89] Indeed, Barth considers dogmatics as secondary to exegesis: "The *Church Dogmatics* is best read as a set of conceptual variations upon scriptural texts and themes."[90]

For Barth, the church's authority and freedom is an authority and freedom "under" the Word. Barth defines "freedom under the Word" as the freedom to accept the Word and the responsibility to hear and understand it.[91] Francis Watson suggests that, "From beginning to end, Barth's *Church Dogmatics* is nothing other than

[88] Barth, *CD*, III/3, p. 201.

[89] Kenneth Kantzer writes: "In spite of his rejection of biblical infallibility, he always takes the biblical text with dreadful seriousness as the authoritative witness to the Word of God." ("Thank God for Karl Barth, but . . ." *Christianity Today* Oct 3 (1986), p. 15).

[90] John Webster, "Barth, Karl" in Kevin J. Vanhoozer ed. *Theological Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), p. 83.

[91] Barth, *CD*, I/2, p. 696.

a sustained meditation on the texts of Holy Scripture."[92] In Barth's own words: "My sole aim was to interpret Scripture."[93] Hence biblical interpretation is not merely one of many doctrinal *loci* for Barth but "the foundation and principle of coherence of his entire project."[94] Evangelicals would therefore do well to consider not only Barth's theory but also his exegetical practice. Kenneth Kantzer goes even further: "evangelicals have much to learn from his constant and faithful appeal to the written text."[95]

First, the facts: Barth cites more Scripture than any other theologian in the history of theology, some fifteen thousand times in the *Church Dogmatics*, not to mention the approximately two thousand extended exegetical sections. These statistics attest Barth's conviction that the primary task of theology is to clarify what is written in Scripture. Barth uses the Bible in many different ways, including extended exegeses of individual statements, analyses of key biblical words and themes, expositions of whole books, typological interpretations, narrative analysis, and massing verses in virtual proof-text fashion.[96]

4.1 The task of exegesis: the *sachlich* text

Barth's break with the theology of his day, much like the Reformers with theirs, was as much a hermeneutical as it was a theological revolution. His 1919 *Romans* commentary was the spearhead of his revolt against the hegemony of modern biblical critical scholarship.[97]

[92] Francis Watson, "The Bible," in John Webster ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 57.

[93] Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. ix.

[94] Watson, "Bible," p. 57.

[95] Kantzer, "Thank God," p. 15.

[96] See Christina A. Baxter, "The Nature and Place of Scripture in the *Church Dogmatics*," in *Theology Beyond Christendom: Essays on the Centenary of the Birth of Karl Barth*, John Thompson ed. (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1986), pp. 33–62.

[97] Richard E. Burnett argues that Barth's commentary challenged the hegemony of Schleiermacher's author-oriented approach to biblical exegesis. *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001 and Grand Rapids, MI:

As a student trained by theological liberals, Barth learned to interpret the Bible as an expression of human religious experience. His hermeneutical revolution stemmed from his growing convictions that, (1) a truly critical or scientific approach is one that is appropriate to the particular subject matter being discussed and, (2) the particular subject matter or *Sache* of the Bible is neither subjective religious experience (contra theological liberals) nor the objective history of the historian (contra conservative evangelicals) but rather the revelatory and redemptive self-presentation of God in the person and history of Jesus Christ.[98]

The freedom of the Word is first and foremost the freedom of God in communicative action. Barth believed that the actuality of God's being is prior to all human attempts to inquire into its possibility. The task of biblical interpretation according to Barth is to do justice to the sovereign freedom and uniqueness of this particular subject matter. This involved not simply recovering the authors' intention (contra much evangelical biblical study) but thinking with the biblical authors about—or better, participating with them in—their subject matter. Barth's interpretative interest was less in the historical Paul than in *what* he wrote and, especially, in *about what* Paul wrote.[99] As a theological interpreter, Barth aims to understand Scripture "as articulating not simply an authorial intention but above all a single, infinitely rich theological subject-matter."[100] Historical critics who attempt to "master" the text by following methodological procedures will never penetrate the subject matter; God is not known "after the flesh." On the contrary, "in the face of this subject-matter there can be no question of our achieving, as we do in others, the confident approach which masters and subdues the matter. It is rather a question of our being gripped by the subject matter."[101] Biblical interpretation is essentially the attempt to hear and obey the subject matter of Scripture, not to observe and master it.

Eerdmans, 2004). Burnett pays special attention to the several drafts of the preface to the first edition of Barth's commentary as an important source of evidence for tracking Barth's thinking.

[98] See esp. Barth's famous "Preface to the Second Edition," in *The Epistle to the Romans* 6th ed. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1933), pp. 2–15. See also Burnett, *Barth's Theological Exegesis*, pp. 74–8 on the question of just what is the Bible's main subject matter.

[99] See Burnett, *Theological Exegesis*, pp. 184–97

[100] Watson, "Bible," p. 58.

[101] Barth, *CD*, I/2, p. 470.

That the Bible is a witness to revelation is of the utmost exegetical significance. According to Barth, the tendency of modern readers of Scripture, whether liberal or conservative, was to treat the Bible primarily as a source. For Barth, however, the very words of the Bible are an integral part of the witness to revelation.[102] In short, to understand the Bible as a witness is to consider its verbal, literary, and canonical form as integrally related to its content. Hence Barth interprets the various parts of Scripture in light of the canonical whole and in light of the subject matter—God revealed in Jesus Christ—that unifies the whole.

Barth's decision to read all of Scripture as a unified witness to God's Word and his concomitant tendency to read the Bible as a literary whole leads him to focus on large canonical patterns and to make typological connections in a way that makes evangelical exegetes trained to read in grammatical-historical fashion uneasy.[103] By contrast, evangelicals (for example, Charles Scalise) who appreciate Brevard Childs's canonical exegesis ultimately have Barth to thank.

4.2 History, reference, truth: the empty tomb

Barth's main concern is to exegete Scripture, not to formulate hermeneutical theories. In a draft Preface to his *Romans*, Barth writes that his commentary is "an attempt to read the Bible differently . . . more in accordance with its subject-matter, content, and substance, focusing with more attention and love upon the meaning of the Bible itself."[104] As to hermeneutics, then, the main principle is to let the authors and texts have their say on behalf of their particular subject matter.[105] Evangelicals agree. The problem

[102] Barth attributes the Bible's ability to witness to divine revelation not to a capacity of language for revelation but rather to revelation's capacity to bear witness to itself through language (so Burnett, *Theological Exegesis*, p. 228). This too is an aspect of the "freedom" of the Word.

[103] Perhaps this explains why there are to date few studies of Barth's actual interpretative practice. See, however, Paul McGlasson's *Jesus and Judas: Biblical Exegesis in Barth* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991) and Mary Cunningham, *What is Theological Exegesis? Interpretation and Use of Scripture in Barth's Doctrine of Election* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995).

[104] Cited in Burnett, *Barth's*, p. 277.

[105] Barth, *CD*, I/2, p. 725.

stems from Barth's particular construal of the Bible's subject matter, its relation to history, and hence its truth.

That the actual words of the Bible refer to the self-revelation of God is made possible only by the latter, not by the former. Scripture refers to Jesus Christ by an act of the Holy Spirit and not an inherent quality or property of the language of the Bible itself.[106] Furthermore, God's self-revelation—the event by which God uses Scripture's words to bring about an encounter of the reader with the divine subject matter—is not under human control, nor is it, strictly speaking, the kind of historical event that a historian could examine or reconstruct.

Take, for example, the Gospels' account of the empty tomb. How does this biblical narrative become the Word of God? There is no suggestion in Barth that the Holy Spirit changes the *sense* of the words on the page. No, what happens is that the *Sache*—the free God in his self-revelation—"commandeers" the biblical language, and the thoughts of the reader, so that the text actively points to the living Christ. It is ultimately the Holy Spirit who closes the gap between what is written and what the reader discovers therein.

What of truth? To what exactly does the narrative of the empty tomb *refer*?[107] Barth's position is best understood in contradistinction from both literalism (for which the empty tomb has the status of an extratextual fact) and expressivism (for which the empty tomb is a mythological expression of the faith's self-understanding and feeling).[108] The problem with literalism is its assumption that we have some access to the referent apart from its textual rendering. To assume we have independent access to God's historical self-revelation, however, is to distract us from the only norm for theology, namely, the biblical *testimony* to God's self-revelation in history.[109]

The true referent of the empty tomb narrative is, for Barth, the living Jesus Christ—a referent that is not open to either verification

[106] So Burnett, *Theological Exegesis*, p. 224.

[107] For Barth's exposition of this narrative, see *CD*, III/2, pp. 451–3.

[108] So George Hunsinger, "Beyond Literalism and Expressivism: Karl Barth's Hermeneutical Realism," in Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000).

[109] For an excellent discussion of the Bible as testimony and its relation to historical reference, see Mark Smith, "Testimony to Revelation: Karl Barth's Strategy of Bible Interpretation in the *Church Dogmatics*" unpub. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Sheffield, 1997.

or falsification by academic historians.[110] Barth describes the empty tomb as "the sign which obviates all possible misunderstanding."[111] Hunsinger provides a helpful paraphrase: "'Sign' is essentially an intratextual category whose extratextual force is that of analogy."[112] The point is that the empty tomb is part of the narrative identification of Jesus Christ. What counts is not the factual accuracy but the rendering of the description. The literary, intratextual, and theological point of the empty tomb is to say something about the kind of resurrection being attested: it is "real and therefore physical."[113] In sum: the witness of the narrative of the empty tomb is that of a realistic (i.e. legendary) witness that analogically depicts something utterly real.[114]

Barth's reticence to affirm the literal empty tomb had nothing to do with his having doubts about Jesus' resurrection; on the contrary, Barth had "material theological grounds" for refusing to build on the neutral ground of the historical critic. The event of Jesus' resurrection, because it involves God's acting only, is strictly speaking not part of the space-time causal network. The inaccessibility of the resurrection event to the academic historian is thus a function not of its unreality but of God's sovereign freedom. Better, then, to stay within the confines of the text in order better to understand its intratextual analogies, patterns, and connections.[115]

Despite Henry's suspicions to the contrary, Barth's reticence to specify the historical referent of the resurrection narratives stems

[110] Hunsinger, "Literalism," p. 201.

[111] Barth, *CD*, III/2 p. 453.

[112] Hunsinger, "Literalism," p. 212.

[113] Hunsinger, "Literalism," p. 212.

[114] Cf. Paul McGlasson's claim that "The relation between text and object consists of *analogical depiction*" (*Jesus*, p. 150). See also Bruce McCormack's argument that the relation between the historical sense of the biblical text and its revelatory significance is best understood in terms of an *analogia fidei*, a correspondence between an act of God and an act of a human subject (e.g. the human author and reader) ("Historical Criticism and Dogmatic Interest in Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis of the New Testament," in M. Burrows and P. Rorem eds. *Biblical Hermeneutics in Historical Perspective* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991], pp. 322–38).

[115] Cf. Hunsinger: "For Barth the relation between text and referent, far from being literal, was essentially a relation between a network of intratextual patterns and a real but ineffable (extratextual) subject matter, mediated by analogical predication" ("Literalism," p. 214).

not from a disregard for Scripture's truth but from an even greater regard for the integrity of God's self-revelation. Revelation is in history, but it is not *of* history. While the resurrection is a historical event, Barth distinguishes between the sheer occurrence of events and God's self-revelation in them. The Gospels are not historical records but testimonies to God's self-revelation in history; it follows that the referent of the resurrection narratives is discovered not by treating the Gospels as evidence but by treating them as *testimonies*: faith-based observations.[116] With this thought we return to the notion that the Bible is a witness to the Word of God.

Readers come face to face with the object of Scripture's witness only when they encounter what the prophets and apostles themselves experienced; here, too, it is a matter of the triune God, as the sovereign subject (and subject matter) of Scripture, making himself present as the referent of the words. The Spirit, as "Lord of the [reader's] hearing," is also Lord of the text's referring. With the Spirit's work in the reader, the words of the Bible work in vain inasmuch as their signification falls short of the thing (the *Sache*) itself.[117] While the sense of the Bible's words is intelligible to unaided human reason, the mystery to which they testify is not.

5. State of the Barth: the current situation

The contemporary renaissance of Barth studies affords evangelicals an opportunity to reconsider Barth's doctrine of Scripture, perhaps for the first time, as a theological proposal in its own right rather than the bastard child of modernist, existentialist, narrativist, or postmodern influences. Two recent proposals concerning the dogmatic location of Barth's view of the Bible are of particular interest.

[116] Mark Smith draws on C. A. J. Coady's *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1992) to argue that testimony is a source of knowledge in its own right, a reliable cognitive mechanism for producing rational belief. Hence: the resurrection really happened, and the apostolic testimony is the evidence. See Smith, "Testimony."

[117] Without the Spirit, the Bible renders the conception (e.g. the *esse in intellectu*) but not the reality (*res*) itself. Becoming aware of the *res* is not the same as receiving more information; it is rather a matter of grasping not merely the conception of the thing but the thing itself. For further clarification of this matter, see the helpful discussion in Smith, "Testimony," ch. 5.

5.1 The ontological Scripture

In an important restatement of Barth's doctrine of Scripture, Bruce McCormack claims that American evangelicals have taken Barth's statements about the Bible's "becoming" the Word of God out of context and, furthermore, have misunderstood what it means to say that Scripture has its being in becoming.[118] McCormack's main point is that *everything*—God, the world, and especially Jesus Christ—has its being in becoming according to Barth's theological ontology.[119]

Just as important is Barth's contention that not everything becomes what it is under the same conditions. The being of God is absolutely self-determined; human being is only relatively self-determined. The being of Scripture is not self-determined at all; as discourse fixed in writing, it is rather the product of its human and divine authors. McCormack claims that, for Barth, "It is the divine will and act that make the Bible to be what it is 'essentially'."[120] So, when God chooses not to bear witness to himself to a particular reader, then the Bible does *not* become what it is to that reader: in this case, it *is not* (actually) what it *is* (essentially). By contrast, when the Bible becomes the word of God, "it is only becoming what it already is."[121]

[118] Bruce L. McCormack, "The Being of Holy Scripture is in Becoming: Karl Barth in Conversation with American Evangelicalism Criticism," in Vincent Bacote, Laura C. Miguélez, and Dennis L. Okholm, eds., *Evangelicals & Scripture: Tradition, Authority and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), pp. 55–75. McCormack also points out that Barth distinguishes the Bible from revelation only to insist that the Word of God is one-in-three (e.g. revelation, Scripture, proclamation) and three-in-one (p. 58).

[119] McCormack explains this curious notion in terms of Barth's "actualizing" understanding of the Incarnation. Significantly, the sovereign freedom revealed in God-becoming-man becomes decisive for Barth's understanding of God's (triune) being as well. To say that God's being is a being-in-act is to translate the notion of God's sovereign freedom into the realm of ontology. In short: Barth refuses to view Scripture in terms of a static divine "substance" for the same reason that he denies this category to the incarnate Christ. See the important footnote in McCormack, "Being," p. 64 n. 12.

[120] McCormack, "Being," p. 70.

[121] McCormack, "Being," p. 66. McCormack hopes also to have demonstrated that there is no contradiction between Barth's doctrine of

The key is to see the Bible's becoming as a matter of divine discretion—an actualization of *grace*, not nature.[122] McCormack's account shows how far off base is the charge that Barth espouses a subjectivism in which human faith is the condition of the Bible's becoming the word of God. McCormack's final verdict with regard to Barth's doctrine of Scripture vis-à-vis its evangelical counterpart is worth noting: "They are compatible doctrines, even if they are not identical."[123] In the final analysis, however, evangelicalism's inerrancy thesis smacks too much of nature inasmuch as it ascribes divine truthfulness as a static quality to Scripture. Barth's own notion, which McCormack dubs "dynamic infallibilism," is yet another outworking of Barth's actualistic ontology of grace.[124] Despite this ongoing tension, at least one evangelical has enthusiastically endorsed McCormack's interpretation.[125]

5.2 *The economic Scripture*

Whereas the first approach locates Barth's view of Scripture within his broader theological ontology, the second locates it in the economy of divine communicative action. Francis Watson captures the idea perfectly: "The theological significance of the Bible is derived not from any of its immanent characteristics—its value as a historical source, its literary qualities, its religious insights . . . but from the

Scripture and his actual use of the Bible as absolutely authoritative—a relation that, as we have seen, some evangelicals had seen as paradoxical (see p. 73 n. 31).

[122] Or perhaps of eschatology. Inasmuch as the Bible becomes the word of God only when there is an in-breaking of the Spirit into the world of the reader, we may say that the being of Scripture is "eschatontological," poised as it is between the "already" and the "not yet" of the Spirit's action.

[123] McCormack, "Being," p. 73.

[124] McCormack insists that Barth's ontology owes less to some philosophical scheme than it does to the properly dogmatic problem of how to reconcile the meaning of divine immutability with the historical fact of the Incarnation. In short, "being as becoming" is Barth's solution to the problem of how God could become man while remaining God (p. 74). This is yet another illustration of my own conviction that one's view of Scripture is inextricably tied up with one's view of God. See my "God's Mighty Speech Acts," in *First Theology: God, Scripture, & Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), pp. 127–58.

[125] Morrison, "Barth, Barthians, and evangelicals."

indispensable role assigned to it in the outward movement of the divine communicative action into the world."[126] Specifically, the Bible is a continuing testimony to the history of Jesus Christ, the primary locus of God's self-communicative action. Both the event of Jesus Christ and the biblical testimony to this event are ingredients in the economy of God's self-communicative action.

The purpose of the Bible's becoming revelation to particular readers is ultimately redemption: "Revelation is a way of indicating the communicative force of God's saving, fellowship-creating presence."[127] Human readers of Scripture are drawn into the economy of this communicative action by virtue of their being addressed by Word and Spirit: "Since God's action intends communication, human beings . . . are not spectators but participants, drawn into the circle of the divine communicative action."[128]

Scripture is "holy" precisely because it has been set apart—sanctified (so Webster)—for a divine purpose: "For Barth this means that the Bible is a field of divine activity."[129] So, too, is the reading of the Bible. Gadamer spoke more than he knew when he called Barth's *Romans* a "revolutionary . . . hermeneutical manifesto":[130] to be precise, Barth affects a reverse Copernican Revolution, a turn to the *divine* Subject, in which the human act of interpreting Scripture is itself an ingredient in the economy of divine self-communication. John Webster argues that what Barth discovered in his study of Calvin was "an account of the act of the interpretative situation which sees the reading of Scripture not as a spontaneous human action performed towards a passive and mute textual object, but as an episode in the communicative history of God with us . . . God, we might say, is not only textual content but also the primary agent of the text's realization before us."[131] In sum: "*Exegesis is an aspect of sanctification.*"[132]

[126] Watson, "Bible," p. 61.

[127] John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 16.

[128] Watson, "Bible," p. 60.

[129] Webster, *Barth*, p. 56.

[130] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall tr. (New York: Continuum, 2002), p. 509.

[131] John Webster, "Reading the Bible: the Example of Barth and Bonhoeffer," in *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 2001), p. 93.

[132] Webster, "Reading," p. 95 (original emphasis).

6. Beyond the impasse? divine speech acts

"God is the Lord in the wording of His Word."[133]

The present section revisits these recent proposals concerning the ontological and economic aspects of Scripture in order to resolve the long-standing dispute between evangelicals and Barth concerning the nature of biblical authority. To this end, I employ some categories drawn from speech-act philosophy, categories that help clarify where, and why, evangelicals and Barth diverge. My use of philosophy, like that of Barth's, will be ad hoc. I would therefore like to think that Barth himself would laugh at my proposal, not with derision but delight. We begin, however, by reviewing the main problem Barth's view presents to evangelicals, this time with Nicholas Wolterstorff as guide.[134]

6.1 The Wolterstorff objection: the strange silence of God in the Bible

Although God's speaking appears to be center-stage in Barth's theology, Wolterstorff says that the only thing that can truly be called divine discourse is the person and history of Jesus Christ: "God speaks by way of a human being only if God *is* that human being—Jesus Christ . . . the speech of the witness remains purely human speech."[135] In Wolterstorff's view, what happens when the Bible "becomes" the Word of God has nothing to do with divine speech. On the contrary, "God must so act on me that I am 'grabbed' by the content of what God has already said [in Jesus Christ]. I see no reason to call this action 'speech'."[136]

Wolterstorff's final verdict is that Barth's reputation as the theologian of God's Word is somewhat ironic: "God speaks in Jesus Christ, and only there; then on multiple occasions, God activates, ratifies, and fulfils in us what God says in Jesus Christ."[137] What God has to do to a person to enable the (human) biblical witness

[133] Barth, *CD*, I/1, p. 139.

[134] Wolterstorff is relevant for two reasons: first, as a recent critic of Barth's view of Scripture; second, for his use of speech-act philosophy.

[135] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 70 (order slightly altered).

[136] Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, p. 72.

[137] Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, p. 73.

to become revelatory thus has nothing to do with speaking. In Wolterstorff's view, then, the connection between the Bible and God's revelation in Jesus Christ depends not upon speech acts, but upon an *act without speech*.

Wolterstorff's analysis seems to confirm evangelicals' worst fears. First, that there is a merely arbitrary relation between the Bible and God's communicative act in Jesus Christ. Second, that this *diastasis*, and Barth's emphasis on present rather than past inspiration, leads to "uncertainty about [Scripture's] objective authority."[138] Third, that Barth has confused or conflated inspiration and illumination, hence collapsing the origin (and being) of Scripture into its reception ("to be is to be received"!). Finally, Wolterstorff's analysis accentuates the concern that Barth's understanding of the Spirit's work in the lives of readers today is disconnected with the actual words, and meaning, of the text. If the Spirit's present revealing work is an act without speech, an act in which the Bible is merely an instrument the Spirit uses to present Christ, then it would appear that illumination is less a matter of communication than it is causation. The crucial question, again, is how and why the revelation of the Word of God is tied to just *these* words if their sense alone is inadequate to direct us to their referent. Any attempt to commend Barth to evangelicals must ultimately deal with Wolterstorff's objection that Barth lacks a sufficiently robust view of Scripture as a divine speech-act.

6.2 Once (and again) upon an illocution

To summarize: the Bible appears to be caught in a doctrinal stand-off between Barth's emphasis on God's sovereign freedom on the one hand and evangelicalism's emphasis on a fixed and authoritative propositional revelation on the other. There is little to be gained, however, by pitting the living Word against the word written. If a house divided against itself cannot stand, how much less can the Word!

I believe that speech-act philosophy can mediate and help move the conversation beyond this theological stalemate.[139] In this regard,

[138] Bromiley, "Authority," p. 291.

[139] See the seminal work by J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975) and the more systematic presentation in John Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

it is significant that Barth himself comments that "the personalizing of the concept of the Word of God . . . does not mean its de-verbalizing"[140] and that Barth himself describes revelation as a divine speech-act (*Rede-Tat*).[141] The notion that the Bible is caught up in divine discourse casts new light both on Scripture's ontology and its role in the economy of divine revelation.

The principal insight of speech act philosophy is that speakers do things in and by speaking. Luther had earlier said something similar: "God's works are his words . . . his doing is identical with his speaking" (*opera Dei sunt verba eius . . . idem est facere et dicere Dei*).[142] There is thus no reason to oppose persons and propositions: persons do things with words and propositions.[143] Speaking is a form of locution, a matter of making meaningful sounds (or in the case of writing, meaningful signs). An *illocution*—the essential discovery of speech act philosophers—is what one does *in* saying something (e.g. promising, commanding, stating, greeting, etc.). And a *perlocution* is what someone does *by* or *through* one's locutions and illocutions and refers to the effects of one's speech (e.g., persuading, encouraging, consoling, etc.). It goes without saying that speech acts are also *interlocutionary*: communicative interactions between persons. In this regard, it is interesting to note that J. L. Austin, the father of speech-act philosophy, lists "making a covenant" as an example of a commissive speech act.[144]

[140] Barth, *CD*, I/1, p. 138.

[141] Barth, *CD*, I/1, p. 150.

[142] As cited in William Pauck's introduction to the Library of Christian Classics edition of *Luther: Lectures on Romans* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), p. xxxiii. Note that the actual citation is from Luther's WA, vol. 3, p. 152, line 8, rather than 154, 7 as Pauck has it.

[143] Every speech act has a propositional component (i.e. content), though most speech acts do more than simply convey content. The transmission of information is a necessary component of speech acts, but not the whole picture. For example, warning and promising and commanding transmit information, but the intent of these speech acts goes beyond merely informing: the speech agent in each case is *doing* something above and beyond merely informing.

[144] David Gibson argues that Barth needs to recognize that the Bible is not only a witness to Christ but the document of the covenant, a witness that "binds" God to the text, and to his people, in a more intimate fashion than Barth allows. See his "The God of Promise: Christian Scripture as Covenantal Relation," *Themelios* 29 (2004), pp. 27–36.

The differences between Barth and evangelicals on the matter of the Bible being the Word of God stem from mutual misunderstandings that can be accounted for in terms of speech-act theory. Speech-act philosophy pinpoints the crucial equivocation: does "communication" (i.e. revelation) include the reader's response or not? The dictionary is no help here, for it admits both possibilities. A "communication" may be "the act of imparting propositions" or "the proposition communicated." Barth tends towards the first definition, evangelicals towards the second. Thus Barth tends to emphasize the necessity of the interlocutionary and perlocutionary dimensions of revelation (viz. the Spirit's illumination of readers in the present), whereas evangelicals tend to emphasize its locutionary and illocutionary dimensions (viz. the Spirit's inspiration of the authors in the past).

Is the Bible the word of God or is it not? Does it *communicate* Jesus Christ or does it not? We can avoid falling prey to these fateful either/ors by parsing communicative action in terms of locutions, illocutions, and perlocutions alike. The Bible *is* the word of God insofar as its inspired witnesses—which is to say the inspired locutions and illocutions—really do present Jesus Christ. Yet the Bible also *becomes* the word of God when its illumined readers receive and grasp the subject matter by grace through faith, which is to say, when the Spirit enables what we might call illocutionary uptake and perlocutionary efficacy. The full measure of Scripture as a communicative act of God, then, involves the-Spirit-testifying-about-Jesus-through-Scripture-to-the-church.[145]

We can do justice to Barth's basic concern to preserve God's sovereign freedom in revelation even while viewing the Bible as divine discourse. What may be known about God in Jesus Christ is there, in the plain sense of the biblical text plainly to be seen, yet readers need the Spirit's illumination before they can acknowledge the plain sense for what it is and follow its illocutions and perlocutions where they lead. This view also does justice to the basic concern of evangelicals to preserve the status of what is written as the word of God. God in his freedom has tied himself to the biblical texts: his word is true, trustworthy, and reliable, even when readers do not acknowledge it as such.

[145] I am here amending Joseph L. Mangina's description of the word of God in his *Karl Barth: Theologian of Christian Witness* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), p. 46. For further development of these points, see my "God's Mighty Speech Acts," esp. pp. 148–57.

These speech act categories do not do away with or reduce the mystery of God's word but enable a deeper appreciation of it. They also enable us to appreciate the respective contributions of Barth and evangelicals to the doctrine of Scripture. Barth helps evangelicals to avoid marginalizing (or excluding altogether) the role of the Spirit's illumination—what Ramm calls an "abbreviated Scripture principle." Evangelicals who have a healthy respect for both inspiration and illumination should have no problem parsing the economy of God's communicative action in terms of locutions, illocutions, and perlocutions. Barth serves as a reminder not to neglect the perlocutionary dimension in our doctrine of Scripture. Conversely, evangelicals serve as a reminder to Barthians that perlocutions depend on illocutions and that illocutions depend on locutions.[146] The ultimate communicative effect—understanding—cannot be had apart from the verbal (e.g. locutionary) content of the illocutionary act. Calvin acknowledges as much when he says that God "sent down the same Spirit by whose power he had dispensed the Word, to complete his work by the efficacious confirmation of the Word."[147]

Is there any textual evidence that Barth might agree with this proposed resolution? Are there grounds for hoping that, with regard to the doctrine of Scripture, the Barthian lion might one day lie down next to the evangelical lamb? I believe there are. Barth insists that the Word written "has its own divine power no matter what may be its effect on those who hear or read,"[148] thereby tacitly recognizing the distinction between what we have termed illocutions and perlocutions. He also implicitly admits that perlocutionary effects depend on the prior locutionary and illocutionary acts: "If now it is true in time, as it is true in eternity, that the Bible is the Word of God, then . . . God himself now says what the text says . . . That is the right and necessary truth in the concept of verbal inspiration."[149] Whether Barth would in fact be happy to view the Word of God as *bound* to the text is, of course, ultimately beyond our ability to say; nevertheless, I have argued that, thanks to speech-act concepts, he *could* do so consistently.

[146] For a fuller development of this point, see William Alston, *Illocutionary Acts and Sentence Meaning* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), esp. p. 170.

[147] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (2 vols. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), I.ix.3.

[148] Barth, *CD*, I/1, p. 110.

[149] Barth, *CD*, I/2, p. 532.

In conclusion: evangelicals and Barth can agree, at the very least, that the Bible is a central ingredient in the economy of God's self-communication. As to ontology, Scripture is divine-human communicative action: the Bible has its *being* in its locutions and illocutions, yet the Bible *becomes* what it is when the illuminating Spirit ministers those locutions and illocutions in order to bring about the divinely intended perlocutionary effects.

Can such conceptual fine-tuning of what is involved in discourse help to overcome the stand-off between evangelicals and Barth over the Scripture principle? Should evangelicals espouse Barth's way of thinking about and interpreting Scripture? In the final analysis, it is not so much a matter of becoming Barthian but of learning whatever there is to learn about how better rightly to view and handle the Scriptures. Whatever is true in Barth's doctrine of Scripture, if there is anything worthy of praise, think on these things . . . [150]

[150] My thanks to Dan Treier and Mark Bowald for their helpful comments on an earlier draft.