

Retreat and Restructuring: Karl Barth's Strategic Use of John's Gospel in the Church Dogmatics

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This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except where specifically indicated in the text.

The dissertation is 78,498 words long, including footnotes but excluding bibliography. It therefore does not exceed the limit of 80,000 words set by the Degree Committee of the Faculty of Divinity.

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Abstract

This thesis explores Karl Barth's use of John's Gospel in the *Church Dogmatics*. It seeks to read John with Barth, tracing the roles which the Fourth Gospel plays in his theology, while identifying gaps and distortions in Barth's use of John. Another interpreter of John, Rudolph Bultmann, is also significant: despite early parallels, much of Barth's theology is shaped by his deep disagreement with Bultmann.

The first two chapters therefore discuss the beginnings of dialectical theology. Bultmann and Barth *retreat* from systems of thought which have overwhelmed theology and have changed its subject matter. They look to the scriptures in seeking to develop theology which is genuinely about God, but hold different assumptions about the place and form of revelation.

Chapter 3 considers Bultmann's existentialist interpretation of John. Chapters 4 to 9 examine a series of different aspects of Barth's use of the story of Jesus in John's Gospel. Although Barth emphasises the picture of Jesus Christ shown through his actions, he is more of a strategist than a story-teller. He presents the Word made flesh in a way which allows him to *restructure* the whole of theology so that it looks towards Jesus Christ rather than fitting in with human systems of ideas. His emphasis on divine decision and his exploration of the content of theology contrast with Bultmann's focus on individual human decisions. The role of other characters is diminished, and the narrative sequence of the story is compressed and distorted by Barth's emphasis on the paramount significance of God's decision to be incarnate. The dualism of John's Gospel, which becomes a dualism of human decision in Bultmann's theology, becomes a dualism of knowledge and falsehood in the *Church Dogmatics*, in which the real drama of the story is not the interactions between the characters but the struggle to proclaim the truth.

Chapter 10 contains some concluding reflections on the wider implications of John's Gospel, showing how Barth's retreat and restructuring could be followed by a process of *reengagement* with all areas of truth and experience.

Introduction

The area of research

Watson comments that ‘from beginning to end, Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* is nothing other than a sustained meditation on the texts of Holy Scripture.’¹ Barth himself insists that his aim is to make people students of the Bible rather than students of himself.² It is curious, therefore, that within what has been called the ‘flourishing academic Barth-studies industry’,³ relatively few attempts have been made to follow him into the detailed exploration of specific biblical texts which is at the heart of his approach to dogmatics.

Thorough analyses of Barth’s methods, assumptions and approaches to specific doctrines are easy to find. McCormack, for example, describes Barth’s ‘critically realistic dialectical theology’;⁴ Nimmo writes about Barth’s ‘actualistic ontology’;⁵ Jüngel analyses the ‘Trinitarian being of God in the theology of Karl Barth’⁶; Kreck examines the ‘Basic decisions in Karl Barth’s Dogmatics’;⁷ Menke-Peitzmeyer describes the ‘Subjectivity and self-interpretation of the triune God’ in Barth’s theology;⁸ and Gunton discusses ‘Platonism and exemplarism in Barth’s Christology’.⁹ There are many who seek to distil from the *Church Dogmatics* some set of theological or methodological principles. It is unusual, however, to come across an author whose aim is to look in depth at particular passages of scripture with Barth, comparing Barth’s exegesis with the text itself and with the work of biblical scholars.¹⁰ Few focus on the kind of sustained encounter with the specifics of the text of scripture which Barth sought for himself and his readers.

¹ Watson, 2000, p. 57

² Quoted by Busch, 2004, p. ix-x

³ Higton and McDowell, 2004, p. 2

⁴ McCormack, 1995

⁵ Nimmo, 2007, p. 1

⁶ Jüngel, 2001

⁷ Kreck, 1978, my translation

⁸ Menke-Peitzmeyer, 2002, my translation

⁹ Gunton, 2007, p. 187-200

¹⁰ A rare example is Ticciati, 2005, writing on Barth and Job. I refer to works on Barth and John later in this introduction.

Perhaps the main reason for this imbalance is the compartmentalised structure of academic theology, within which Barth has mostly found an audience among systematic theologians rather than biblical scholars. Bauckham writes:

In the modern period, but especially in the last few decades, the disciplines of biblical studies and systematic theology have grown so far apart as to seem hardly within shouting distance of each other. The two disciplines are natural partners who have lost the means of effective communication with each other, so absorbed have they become in their own issues.¹¹

That division is well illustrated by my shelf of commentaries on John, in which Barth's name is never mentioned. A book of papers from a conference on the Gospel of John and Christian Theology, attempting to bridge the gap identified by Bauckham above, is highly unusual in referring to Barth eight times.¹² A comment elsewhere from Wright expresses the widespread lack of interest in Barth from the world of biblical scholarship:

Few if any of the systematic or philosophical theologians of the last couple of generations have written serious works on scripture itself; that is, on what the text actually says... Perhaps theologians have been warned off by the example of Karl Barth, who provided a great deal of exegesis within his *Church Dogmatics*, not much of which has stood up to sustained examination.¹³

There are, indeed, some serious problems and limitations in Barth's use of John's Gospel, as will be described in this thesis. In contrast to Wright, however, I believe that Barth's approach to John's Gospel contains important and valid insights into the theological significance of that text. Furthermore, in contrast with most scholars of Barth, it seems to me that the most fruitful way to study Barth and to get to the heart of his approach to theology is to seek to read specific texts of scripture with him. This process aims to accompany Barth in what he himself says that he is doing, and is what he himself asks of those who study him.

My research has centred on a careful reading of the *Church Dogmatics*, in which I have highlighted and considered all the places where Barth refers to John's Gospel,

¹¹ In Bauckham and Mosser, 2008, p. x

¹² Bauckham and Mosser, 2008 (from the first St Andrews Conference on Scripture and Theology, held in 2003)

¹³ Wright, 2005, p. 10

or uses Johannine themes such as light and glory, or uses descriptions such as 'Word made flesh'. I have also marked these references on a large copy of the text of the Gospel in order to identify the passages, verses and phrases which Barth focuses on and those which he neglects.

I have found that Barth makes considerable use of John, especially John's descriptions of Jesus Christ, his incarnation and his relationship to the Father. Barth uses John's Gospel to support a strategic restructuring of theology, so that all areas of theology look towards Jesus Christ. However, Barth's theology is extensive, complex and multi-faceted, and the limited observations in this thesis do not amount to a claim to have discovered the one master key that unlocks the whole of the *Church Dogmatics*. There are many patterns in Barth's work, and this thesis does not seek to compete with those who have found other ways of understanding its shape as a whole.¹⁴ Nor is this a claim that John's Gospel becomes the most significant part of scripture for Barth. The *Church Dogmatics* refers to every book of the Bible, including frequent engagements with Paul's letters and the Synoptic Gospels. To compare the significance and extent of Barth's use of John with that of any other single text would require further research of a similar scale to this.

In looking at Barth's use of John, I have made comparisons with the work of Bultmann, which is unique in having made a significant impact both on modern systematic theology and on Johannine studies, bridging the gap mentioned above. Unlike Barth, Bultmann is mentioned frequently in commentaries on John, and is usually the modern writer referred to most often by later commentators. Furthermore, Barth's rejection of Bultmann's existentialism plays a significant role in shaping his own interpretation of John. For these reasons, Bultmann has been an obvious and useful third person to include. Although I make occasional references to other New Testament scholars, there is no attempt here to survey the whole field of modern New Testament scholarship, or to explore Barth's interactions with it, or to bring Barth into further dialogue with it. Such research, though interesting, would again be beyond the scope of this thesis. Although I examine some of the background to the work of Barth and Bultmann in order to explore their relationship and the

¹⁴ E.g. Hunsinger, 1991 and Berkouwer, 1956

strategic issues they were facing, this thesis does not seek to engage in debates about different phases in the development of Barth's thought. The *Church Dogmatics* itself is the focus of this research, and I have not sought to compare it with the lectures on John first given by Barth in 1925.¹⁵

Previous writing on Barth and John's Gospel

It is surprising how little appears to have been written about Barth's use of John's Gospel in the *Church Dogmatics*.¹⁶ A paper written by Parker in 1957 comments that, by the time Barth had started to write the *Church Dogmatics*, John's Gospel 'had become one of the chief factors determining his thought.'¹⁷ However, Parker's twelve pages provide scope for little more than a survey of Barth's use of John 1.14 in Volume I.2. More recently, Cunningham provides a short exploration of Barth's use of Ephesians and John in the doctrine of election.¹⁸ There has been some work on Barth's lectures on John, such as an article by Plasger,¹⁹ although his focus is on hermeneutical issues rather than the specific theological implications of John.

By far the longest analysis of Barth's use of John in the *Church Dogmatics* is the published version of Denker's PhD thesis, *Das Wort wurde messianischer Mensch: Die Theologie Karl Barths und die Theologie des Johannesprologs*.²⁰ Denker's work comments on many of the places in the *Church Dogmatics* on which John 1.1-18 has a significant influence. However, his analysis is dominated by his distinctive interest in Jewish-Christian dialogue. His focus on the Jewishness of John's Gospel causes him to ignore Barth's own concern to develop an authentically Christian theology centred on the divine and human Jesus Christ. When, for example, Denker adapts John 1.14 to say that the '*Dabar* of *JHWH* became Jewish flesh',²¹ he is able to draw on Barth's strong sense of the importance of the Old Testament and John's use of Old Testament

¹⁵ Barth, 1976

¹⁶ My searches have included use of the Barth Literature Search Project at http://webserver.thuk.nl/barth/index_Eng.htm and the ATLA Religion Database at <http://web.ebscohost.com>

¹⁷ Parker, 1957, p. 52

¹⁸ Cunningham, 1995

¹⁹ Plasger, 2000

²⁰ Denker, 2002

²¹ Denker, 2002, p. 248; translations of Denker's German here are my own

imagery, but his agenda pulls him away from an attentive tracing of Barth's own strategic aims.

Krötke's review of Denker's book notes his avoidance of important Christological issues and his description of God's dwelling with his people as something constantly coming and beginning, rather than as a unique completed event.²² Denker correctly identifies the fact that John 1.1-18 is important for Barth's whole theology;²³ however, his subsequent attempt to use the pervasive theological influence of the prologue to lever the whole of Christian theology into a form which is more harmonious with Judaism is of little relevance to my own research. Denker stresses the 'horizontal' dimension of history, nation and promise over the 'vertical' dimension of a 'paradoxical God-becomes-human Christology', calling for the early Church's doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation to be reformulated in that context.²⁴ However, this vertical dimension is very significant for both Barth and John, while Barth's theology prioritises the doctrine of the Trinity without any apparent concern for inter-faith dialogue. Denker's focus on the interpretation of the prologue as a Jewish-Christian document rather than on the whole text of John's Gospel also leaves his work somewhat detached from the particularities of Jesus' life, crucifixion and resurrection. His work shows a creative way of seeking to adapt Barth's theology to facilitate discussions between Jews and Christians, but I have not found it to be a helpful guide to Barth's theology itself.

My own research has led in a different direction, seeking to understand Barth's use of John in terms of the issues he himself was facing. This thesis therefore begins with a discussion of the beginnings of dialectical theology, setting the scene for the origins of the work of both Bultmann and Barth. It describes how they both make a retreat away from systems of thought which have previously overwhelmed theology, seeking to hear the authentic Word of God. It goes on to show how John's Gospel is especially significant for both of them in seeking to bear witness to that Word in very different ways. Barth's use of John is, above all, strategic, moving from his initial

²² Krötke, 2006, p. 83-85

²³ Denker, 2002, p. 1

²⁴ Denker, 2002, p. 155, 167

retreat to an ambitious, tactical and defensive restructuring of theology which is dependent on John's account of the Word made flesh.

I Losing the battle

1.1 Karl Barth (1886-1968), the master strategist

A significant aspect of Barth's character which is often overlooked is shown in this description of his childhood: 'Until I was sixteen, I lived and dreamed of military exploits. My brothers and I would play with lead soldiers for hours on end and did so with great seriousness.²⁵ It was only Barth's poor eyesight which exempted him from military service as an adult, but he had by then enjoyed four years of 'passionate involvement in the exercises and route marches of the Berne cadet corps.'²⁶ He always maintained an interest in military history. Reflecting on his time opposing the rise of National Socialism in Germany, this Swiss theologian wrote:

In forming my opinions and defending them I paid very close attention to both German and... Prussian history – from Bismarck's life and speeches to the military actions of Frederick the Great and Moltke and the campaigns of the present century... I could give as good an account of the details in this sphere as many of the German nationalists.²⁷

Barth's interest in military history was surprisingly wide-ranging. Soon after retiring, he visited America, where one of his main objectives was to see the battlefields of the American Civil War, which he had studied in depth. He said that in Gettysburg 'a smart young officer showed me and explained to me all the things that I knew from books.'²⁸

Scholars of Barth often refer to his disapproval of the Kaiser's war policy in 1914, and his opposition to the Nazis as stated in the *Barmen Declaration*. His responses can then appear to us simply to be those of a peaceful academic theologian who just happened to find himself in the midst of an era of exceptional political upheaval and military conflict. But such a view misses something of central importance about the workings of Barth's own mind. He was a man who understood military tactics clearly, and took great delight in analysing them.

²⁵ Quoted in Busch, 1994, p. 16

²⁶ Quoted in Busch, 1994, p. 26

²⁷ Quoted in Busch, 1994, p. 217

²⁸ Quoted in Busch, 1994, p. 460

In this thesis, I will show that Barth's approach to theology resembles the work of a great military strategist. He is like a general whose penetrating gaze can take in the shape of a whole campaign; a man who makes plans on a vast scale and who oversees their implementation with an iron will and with unyielding precision. In his *Church Dogmatics*, Barth manipulates the whole shape of theology like a great tactician deploying his troops. He can see the high ground where his units will be strongest, and he knows where he must set up his supply lines in order that his forces may function reliably. He knows how to seize territory and how to defend it. He knows where his soldiers would be vulnerable. He knows when it is necessary to withdraw from battle, and he knows how to regroup and rebuild in the most strategic location so that he may seize power again.

1.2 Theology which is not about God

Barth began his work on dialectical theology with an awareness that a great battle was being lost. Once, the whole of human knowledge had been seen in the context of an understanding of scripture and Christian tradition. God had been perceived as sovereign over the normal world of nature, human history and experience, so that theology could exist securely and authentically in that world. Beliefs about the world were placed in the context of beliefs about God, without conflict. But, with the rise of modernity, the understanding of that realm had been conquered by powerful new forms of human rationality and investigation, which were able to operate without reference to ideas about God. Theology, still attempting to operate in that same realm but no longer ruling it, had become the servant of human culture and was being transformed into its image.

Friedrich Gogarten (1887-1967), sharing similar views, is remembered especially for the challenge he laid down in his article *Between the Times* in 1920:

Now is the hour of decline. We see the disintegration in everything. That means we are acutely sensitive to the human element. We feel how it has asserted itself today in everything – including the most refined concept of God. And we raise the question, in all seriousness, whether today there are any men who can really conceive of God... We are

so deeply immersed in humanity that we have lost God... None of our thoughts reach beyond the human sphere.²⁹

Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) summarised the changes in the nature of theology as a result of the Enlightenment, showing how it had been turned into branches of other areas of human knowledge:

In the course of the nineteenth century and by the beginning of the twentieth, theology became essentially the science of religion. The biblical sciences became branches of the history of religion, and the same was true of church history insofar as it did not become simply profane history. Systematic theology became the philosophy or psychology of religion (Ernst Troeltsch and Rudolf Otto), and practical theology was now simply religious folklore, psychology of religion, and education.³⁰

Barth was critical of the assumptions of the Enlightenment, and of the liberal theology which had followed it. He disapproved of what he saw as modernity's arrogant absolutism: 'a system of life based upon the belief in the omnipotence of human powers,'³¹ a shift to an 'anthropocentric' view of the universe.³² This, he believed, had profoundly distorted Christian theology. 'Humanisation had to mean, if not the abolition, at least the incorporation of God into the sphere of sovereign human self-awareness.'³³

From Barth's perspective, a battle was being lost. The human race had developed 'a capacity for thinking which was responsible to no other authority.'³⁴ Theology was being forced to fit in with humanist assumptions, to the point where talk about 'God' was simply functioning as a way of talking about human values and experiences. Barth condemned this, saying: 'One can *not* speak of God simply by speaking of man in a loud voice.'³⁵

His first series of lectures in dogmatics, given in Göttingen in 1924-5, therefore began with the insistent call to this essential principle for theology: 'We have to

²⁹ Gogarten, 1968, p. 279

³⁰ Bultmann, 1984, p. 50 (written in 1941)

³¹ Barth, 2001a, p. 22 (from lectures given in 1932)

³² Barth, 2001a, p. 24

³³ Barth, 2001a, p. 70

³⁴ Barth, 2001a, p. 25

³⁵ Barth, 1935, p. 196 (written in 1922)

consider the fact that in some way we have to speak about *God*.³⁶ He went on to observe, sharply:

Is it an insignificant matter that this whole discipline bears the name *theology*? Or do modern theologians really think that man and his religion are the first datum, self-grounded and ultimate, and that God simply relates to these as predicate to subject, a predicate that is posited later, and can only be posited later?³⁷

Bultmann expressed similar views at that time: 'The subject of theology is *God*, and the chief charge to be brought against liberal theology is that it has dealt not with God but with man.'³⁸

The problem Barth identified was not only the obvious matter of a shift in authority during modernity, a decrease of the role of the inheritance of faith recorded in scripture and the tradition of the Church, and an increase in the respect for the power of human reason and investigation. The problem also included a change in the identity of the *subject matter* of theology. He claimed that modern theology was no longer concerned with God, which was as critical and damning as claiming that modern geology was no longer concerned with rocks.

Instead of describing God and then showing the divine purpose, context and nature of all that exists and of all rationality, theology had adopted subsidiary positions within humanist systems of knowledge. Theology had become, for example, a way of talking about morality and values, or exploring human feelings, or studying human cultural history, filling in whatever gaps could be found within modern systems of thought.

Barth addressed the General Assembly of the Union of Reformed Churches in 1923, summarising this transformation in Christian thought and preaching: 'We had lost the wonder of *God*, and now we had to learn to eke out an increasingly difficult and miserable existence by asserting the wonder of the *world*, the miracle of history and of the inner life (all equally questionable!).'³⁹

³⁶ Barth, 1991, p.6

³⁷ Barth, 1991, p. 81

³⁸ Bultmann, 1969, p. 29 (written in 1924)

³⁹ Barth, 1935, p. 246

Barth's allegations shocked many of his teachers and colleagues. Liberal theologians believed that they had been making important and meaningful progress by uniting theology with the most advanced discoveries of modern thought, observation and experience. Adolf von Harnack (1851- 1930) protested to Barth in 1923:

'Whatever is true, honourable, just, gracious, if there is any excellence, anything worthy of praise, think on these things' – if this liberating admonition still stands, how can one erect barriers between the experience of God (*Gotteserlebnis*) and the good, the true and the beautiful, instead of relating them with the experience of God by means of historical knowledge and critical reflection?⁴⁰

Liberal theologians assumed that the advances of modern culture and the discoveries of great minds would bring a deeper knowledge of God. German protestant scholarship appeared to be flourishing, as many academics worked persistently and creatively to weave together Christianity and modern thought. This synthesis was threatened by the dialectical theologians. As Rumscheidt observes, Harnack 'feared for the good conscience theology had finally achieved in its successful struggle to establish harmony between faith and the world, between the teaching of Jesus and the wisdom of Goethe and Kant, between the kingdom of God and the policies of Kaiser Wilhelm II.'⁴¹

To Barth, it seemed that this harmony had been achieved at the price of surrender to the ideologies of the modern world. Theologians had adapted their ideas to fit in with a powerful changing culture, accepting whatever roles they could maintain within it. Such a strategy resembles that of a once-great nation which submits to the power of a neighbouring empire and becomes a vassal state. This kind of submission allows some of the trappings and traditions of independence to be maintained, and appears preferable to being obliterated, but it is still an enslavement. A theology which capitulates to modernity inevitably loses most of its power and authenticity. It has changed its very nature and, as Barth observed, is no longer talking about God.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Rumscheidt, 1972, p. 30

⁴¹ Rumscheidt, 1972, p. 18

1.3 Theology as ethics

The shift in the subject matter of theology is shown especially clearly and decisively in the work of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Kant's philosophy focused on human reason and perception, allowing no place for traditional Christian metaphysics or natural theology or revelation. Kant believed that the human mind has no access to things as they are in themselves, so that it is impossible to obtain knowledge of God directly or through the natural world. Nor, in Kant's view, is God seen as an active, personal agent who has done what is necessary to make himself known reliably to human beings. Kant still assumed the existence of God and the relevance of faith, but the only space for God in his thought was in support of the human exploration of principles of morality and duty. The real subject matter of theology, under Kant's influence, was now ethics.

Barth's strategic survey of the modern theological landscape attributed great importance to Kant's lasting significance, and to the tactical implications of the various possible responses to him. Barth had great respect for Kant, saying that in him and in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, 'the eighteenth century saw, understood and affirmed itself in its own limitations.'⁴² Barth saw Kant standing at the 'turning-point of his age', a figure to whom all subsequent thinkers would have to respond. Kant had analysed accurately both the power and the limitations of human reason, in a way which had huge implications for theology. Barth wrote: 'From now on theology would no longer be able to formulate its tenets, no matter on what foundation it might base them, without having acquired a clear conception of the method of reason.'⁴³

Barth partly agreed with Kant, sharing the view that human reason had no direct access to God. He also rejected the classical assumption that theology could be founded on metaphysical principles deduced from nature, as McCormack summarises:

The problem with classical metaphysics, in Barth's view, was that it believed that the 'spiritual world' was simply a 'higher, supernatural counter-world or world behind' the

⁴² Barth, 2001a, p. 252

⁴³ Barth, 2001a, p. 259

natural world. But such a 'world' was merely the counter-pole of the natural world. Rather than escaping from the natural world, such a conception of the 'spiritual world' still belonged to it.⁴⁴

Barth therefore agreed with Kant's sense of the limitations placed on human reason and on theology *if* there is assumed to be no kind of special revelation from God. Barth believed that Kant's work accurately identified the strategic possibilities open to subsequent theology. He characteristically described this development in terms of military power and strategy, commenting in 1932 on 'the dictation of peace terms with which Kant, commandingly enough, advanced upon theology'.⁴⁵ He summarised the 'Kantian enterprise' in the following statement: 'If the reality of religion is confined to that which, as religion within the limits of reason alone, is subjected to the self-critique of reason, *then* religion is that which is fitting to the ideally practical nature of pure reason, and that only.'⁴⁶

Many theologians had been happy to accept the obvious option and to submit to the terms for peace dictated by Kant. Barth therefore observed that 'theology can take the Kantian premise just as it is as its standpoint'.⁴⁷ Barth saw this strategy leading to the ideas of 'the so-called rationalistic theologians' and of Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889) and Wilhelm Herrmann (1846-1922). This approach is happy to capitulate to Kant's expectation that theology should be 'practical' - an exploration of moral principles which is informed by rational reflection.

Ritschl, for example, saw religious doctrines as value judgements, in contrast to objective, scientific statements. He rejected Christian doctrines which attempted to describe God, such as the Definition of Chalcedon, believing that God himself is not an object of theoretical interest. He followed Kant in removing metaphysics from theology. Instead he emphasised the Church as a moral community of people making the value judgement that their highest good is found in the Kingdom of God. This focus on value judgements gave theology its own special territory within a Kantian framework, removing it from conflicts with philosophy and science. Ritschl

⁴⁴ McCormack, 1995, p. 221

⁴⁵ Barth, 2001a, p. 290

⁴⁶ Barth, 2001a, p. 291

⁴⁷ Barth, 2001a, p. 292

also affirmed the value of historical methods in bringing knowledge of Jesus and the early Church.⁴⁸

Herrmann, similarly, rejected metaphysics and made an absolute distinction between faith and knowledge. He believed that Christianity gave a portrait of Jesus as an exemplary man, an image which would still be valid even if Jesus had not existed. For him, religion was directly experienced by the individual, giving access to a higher realm, above science, which was the self-authenticating experience of being in communion with God. This again removed theology from conflicts with philosophy and science, placing it in its own private sphere. But this left no sense that God had acted to reveal himself publicly to the world.⁴⁹

Barth, in the light of Kant's philosophy, agreed that human reason and natural theology cannot provide us with genuine knowledge of God. He agreed that it is impossible for human beings to construct an objective system of metaphysics. However, contrary to Kant, he proclaimed that God had taken the initiative and had acted in Jesus Christ to make himself known and to redeem us. For these reasons, McCormack labels Barth's dialectical theology as 'critically realistic'.

The 'real' for Barth was not the world known empirically. The truly 'real' is the wholly otherness of the *Self*-revealing God in comparison with whom the empirical world is mere shadow and appearance. Moreover, there is no epistemological way which leads from the empirical world to its divine source.⁵⁰

Barth resisted Kant's transformation of the subject matter of theology into ethics, but he remained interested in the ethical implications of Christianity. Volumes II, III and IV of the *Church Dogmatics* each include lengthy discussions of ethics, but they are placed in the context of divine initiative and action, and follow on from systematic theology rather than driving it.⁵¹

Bultmann, however, fitted much more comfortably into the tradition established by Kant. He followed Kant, Ritschl and Herrmann in rejecting attempts to make objective descriptions of God. He also maintained Herrmann's emphasis on the faith

⁴⁸ See Livingston, 2006a, p. 271-281

⁴⁹ See Chapman, 2000, p. 246-247

⁵⁰ McCormack, 1995, p. 130

⁵¹ CD II.2, III.4 and IV, and see Chapter 8.7 below

and experience of the individual, seeing that as the point at which God acts.⁵² Like Herrmann, he was inclined to look for a realm within modern thought in which theology could operate, and found this in the radical discourse of existentialism.

Bultmann's existentialism kept theology within the practical realm which Kant had indicated. For him, theology still concerned the matter of human decisions about how to live. But Bultmann's strong Lutheran belief in justification by faith contributed to the existentialist slant which he gave to his Neo-Kantian inheritance. Thiselton comments that, for Bultmann, 'neither morality nor knowledge in accordance with law can be other than "works" in the Lutheran sense.'⁵³ For Bultmann, it was not our actions themselves or our discussions of moral principles which were of central theological importance: it was the individual decision to have faith and to live authentically.

For Bultmann, a focus on ethics themselves would have seemed like dangerous objectification and an attempt to rely on human constructs rather than God. Therefore, despite being much closer to Kant than Barth was, he was far less interested in ethical questions. He sought to detach Christianity from culture by taking a much more individualistic approach, as shown in this comment: 'It is thus entirely self-evident that religion is a private matter and has nothing to do with the State.'⁵⁴

He also admitted later that, in contrast to Barth, the First World War 'was not a shattering experience' for him, and that he did not believe it had influenced his theology.⁵⁵ Though his theology concerned the significance of individual choices, he was far less interested in the ethical implications of Christian faith on a larger historical and political scale.

Both Barth and Bultmann accepted the Kantian view that we do not have the capacity to know God as he is in himself, and that we are unable to deduce a true system of metaphysics. Both, however, rejected the idea that theology should be primarily concerned with our rational reflection on ethical ideas. Both, therefore,

⁵² See Fergusson, 1992, p. 11-12 and note 9 on p.25, which refers to Bultmann's frequent quoting of Herrmann's comment: 'Of God we can only say what he does to us.'

⁵³ Thiselton, 1980, p. 212

⁵⁴ Bultmann, 1968b, p. 213

⁵⁵ Quoted by Fergusson, 1992, p. 23

made retreats in which they sought to find God's revelation of himself elsewhere. Barth's retreat was more radical, claiming that real knowledge of God had been given through Jesus Christ, enabling him subsequently to return in force to the area of ethics. Bultmann's retreat was in some ways a capitulation to Kant, finding his own existentialist Lutheran angle on Kant's moral reflections, and narrowing his focus to the realm of individual decisions.

1.4 Theology as feeling

Barth noted that another possible strategy in response to Kant was to accept Kant's methods, but to employ an 'immanent critique'. He wrote: 'It can undertake to broaden and enrich the conception of reason which forms the premise by pointing out that there is yet another capacity *a priori* which is part of the necessities of human reason, apart from the theoretical and practical ones: the capacity of feeling.'⁵⁶

The pioneer of this approach had been Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), whom Barth regarded as holding 'first place in a history of the theology of the most recent times,' and the founder of an era.⁵⁷ Schleiermacher opposed the equation of religion with morality, and any attempt to defend it on the grounds that it was good for individuals and society. He believed that 'to recommend religion by such means would only increase the contempt to which it is at present exposed.'⁵⁸ He insisted: 'Piety cannot be an instinct craving for a mess of metaphysical and ethical crumbs.'⁵⁹

Schleiermacher had been strongly influenced by the Romantic Movement. He warned that Christianity was being 'held in despicable bondage by the scholastic spirit of a barbarian and cold time.'⁶⁰ He therefore distinguished religion from both science and morality,⁶¹ and rooted it instead in feeling and contemplation, attempting to convince his fellow Romantics that it was of paramount importance to them.

⁵⁶ Barth, 2001a, p. 292

⁵⁷ Barth, 2001a, p. 411

⁵⁸ Schleiermacher, 1958, p. 19

⁵⁹ Schleiermacher, 1958, p. 31

⁶⁰ Schleiermacher, 1958, p. 15

⁶¹ Schleiermacher, 1958, p. 35

The contemplation of the pious is the immediate consciousness of the universal existence of all finite things, in and through the Infinite, and of all temporal things in and through the Eternal. Religion ... is a life in the infinite nature of the Whole, in the One and in the All, in God, having and possessing all things in God, and God in all.⁶²

In this way, Schleiermacher elevated humanity's spiritual experiences above particular doctrines and ideas. He saw religious teachings as the results of reflection on such feelings rather as revealed truths. In his view, it was not enough to receive a set of doctrines from others: truly religious people will experience these truths for themselves. 'Not every person has religion who believes in a sacred writing, but only the man who has a lively and immediate understanding of it, and who, therefore, so far as he himself is concerned, could most easily do without it.'⁶³

He set out his theological method clearly in order to give central place to religious experience, writing: 'All doctrines properly so called must be extracted from the Christian religious self-consciousness, i.e. the inward experience of Christian people.'⁶⁴ For Schleiermacher, therefore, the Bible found its importance as a record of human religious experiences rather than as an authoritative form of divine revelation in itself. He believed that God could not be known as he is in himself, but only as he relates to us within our own experience.⁶⁵

As a result, he placed the doctrine of the Trinity in a brief chapter at the conclusion of his weighty book of systematic theology, *The Christian Faith*,⁶⁶ explaining that it was 'not an immediate utterance concerning the Christian self-consciousness'. He described it as the 'cap-stone' of the structure of theology, believing that it depended on many other more fundamental ideas, whereas Barth later treated it as the foundation stone. Schleiermacher also rejected miracles, the efficacy of intercessory prayer and any idea of the supernatural.⁶⁷

Schleiermacher's approach finds a more distinctive, specialised role for Christian belief than Kant's ethics, identifying a different mode of human experience and reflection. It employs theology as a means of articulating and nurturing profound

⁶² Schleiermacher, 1958, p. 36

⁶³ Schleiermacher, 1958, p. 91

⁶⁴ Schleiermacher, 1928, p. 265

⁶⁵ Schleiermacher, 1928, p. 52

⁶⁶ Schleiermacher, 1928, p. 738-751

⁶⁷ Schleiermacher, 1928, p. 178-184

human experiences, centred on the feeling of absolute dependence on God. Christian faith now becomes a means of exploring the poetic, emotional, intuitive aspects of human personality, and thereby gains some sense of its own independence within its own distinctive realm.

However, as in the first strategy, this is a human-centred approach to theology, which again greatly diminishes the objective importance of doctrines about God. Livingston notes that his approach 'led to a purging of all doctrine and practice that failed to find any place in the Christian experience of redemption - e.g., the virgin birth, the Trinity, the second coming of Christ.'⁶⁸ The appearances of the Christian life can be maintained, but much which has usually been regarded as central to Christianity is lost. Although this strategy is more assertive in its response to Kant, it still functions by looking for a congenial space within the framework Kant has imposed. Barth therefore saw this second approach as a strategy of surrender, similar to the approach of regarding theology as ethics. He wrote: 'Both these first possibilities have it in common that theology desires in principle to keep to the Kantian terms for peace, and to enter into negotiations, merely, with their dictator.'⁶⁹

Barth believed that such theology could not be defended against the allegation made by Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) that it was simply anthropology, the result of the projection of subjective human feelings. Feuerbach had asserted that 'consciousness of God is self-consciousness; knowledge of God is self-knowledge.'⁷⁰ Barth commented:

Human self-awareness, determined namely as pious self-awareness, was doubtless for Schleiermacher the central subject of his theological thought. In the very places where the theology of the Reformation had said 'the Gospel' or 'the Word of God' or 'Christ', Schleiermacher, three hundred years after the Reformation, now says 'religion' or 'piety'.⁷¹

Barth therefore observed that the theme of Schleiermacher's 'anthropocentric' theology was human 'religious consciousness.'⁷² For Barth, this was a fatal flaw in a

⁶⁸ Livingston, 2006a, p. 105

⁶⁹ Barth, 2001a, p. 292

⁷⁰ Feuerbach, 1957, p. 12

⁷¹ Barth, 2001a, p. 444

⁷² Barth, 2001a, p. 449

theology, meaning that it focused on a dimension of human experience instead of on God. He wrote:

With all due respect to the genius shown in his work, I can *not* consider Schleiermacher a good teacher in the realm of theology because, so far as I can see, he is disastrously dim-sighted in regard to the fact that man as man is not only in *need* but beyond all hope of saving himself; that the whole of so-called religion, and not least the Christian religion, *shares* in this need;⁷³

Barth disagreed deeply with Schleiermacher, but did so with great respect, looking closely at the details of his work. He wrote that 'it is impossible to consider Schleiermacher thoroughly without being very strongly impressed.'⁷⁴ Barth regarded Schleiermacher not as someone who could be easily dismissed, but as someone whose flawed theology was sophisticated and highly attractive. He called him 'the great Niagara Falls' to which the theology of two centuries was inexorably drawn.⁷⁵ Schleiermacher, as the father of modern protestant theology, had exerted a pervasive influence, and Barth was thorough in seeking to avoid his errors.

Schleiermacher's emphasis on human experience amounted, as Hart describes, to a claim that 'all humans are naturally fitted for an encounter with Infinity,'⁷⁶ an idea which Barth carefully and systematically rejected. Much of Barth's work therefore involved trying to steer theology far away from a solution which had seemed so promising to many, but which he believed led to ruin. For Barth, theology had to focus on the ways that God had actually revealed himself, not on any faculty or potential or experience found within human beings.

Bultmann, by contrast, thought much more highly of Schleiermacher's approach. His theology kept Schleiermacher's emphasis on the experience of the individual and affirmed Schleiermacher's belief in the importance of hermeneutics.⁷⁷ At times he did appear to share Barth's wariness of the danger of turning theology into a study and affirmation of an aspect of human personality. He insisted in 1924 that 'God

⁷³ Barth, 1935, p. 195-196

⁷⁴ Barth, 2001a, p. 412

⁷⁵ Quoted by Gerrish, 1984, p. 6

⁷⁶ Hart, 2000b, p. 39

⁷⁷ See Bultmann, 1984, p. 71

represents the radical negation and sublimation of man.'⁷⁸ However, in focusing on the divine challenge to the individual, he gave an account of the event of revelation which seemed to Barth like a study of human religiosity rather than the Word of God. Looking back in 1968, Barth commented:

No wonder that the closeness, and even the alliance, which once supposedly existed between us, could only be something apparent and transitory, as later became painfully evident: Bultmann was and is a continuator of the great tradition of the nineteenth century, and thus in new guise, a genuine pupil of Schleiermacher.⁷⁹

1.5 Theology as human progress

In an era of unprecedented scientific, intellectual, industrial and economic progress, many theologians were drawn to equate that progress with the coming of the Kingdom of God and with the work of the Holy Spirit in the world. Instead of moving into the specialist areas of ethics or feelings, such theologians embraced the whole triumphant advance of German civilisation and labelled it as divine.

This tendency owes much to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), who had reinterpreted Christianity to describe the progress of Spirit within human history through a dialectical process involving conflicting and advancing ideas. God, for Hegel, was dissolved into history, within which the Spirit was actualised through the progress of ideas in all areas of human thought, culminating in Hegel's own philosophy. Hegel saw this as the true meaning of Christianity, but his interpretation was a radical shift away from a theistic view of a transcendent God.⁸⁰

Barth described Hegel's philosophy as 'the philosophy of *self-confidence*',⁸¹ commenting:

This is what makes for Hegel's genius, what makes him typically modern, and suited to his time: the fact that he dared to want to invent such a method, a key to open every lock, a lever to set every wheel working at once, an observation tower from which not only all

⁷⁸ Bultmann, 1969, p. 29

⁷⁹ Barth, 1982, p. 270

⁸⁰ See Singer, 2001, p. 105-108

⁸¹ Barth 2001a, p. 377

the lands of the earth, but the third and seventh heavens, too, can be surveyed at a glance.⁸²

Although Barth disagreed strongly with Hegel's assumptions, he defended him against those who later ridiculed him, seeing that Hegel had given an honest voice to the absolute confidence of modern thought. In Hegel's system, it was clear to see that theology had become the study of human thought and culture. Barth wrote: 'Hegel's living God – he saw God's aliveness well, and saw it better than many theologians – is actually the living man.'⁸³

Those who thought in this way assumed that the progress of civilisation was the main expression and revelation of God, and indeed a part of God's own identity, which led German protestant theology to a dangerous position in the Wilhelmine era. Moses describes it as follows:

It was not so much the activity of God in the Bible that claimed their attention as God's tangible and visible accomplishments with and for the German people between 1870 and 1914... The author of the universe could only be conceived of in relation to divine self-revelation, indeed God's Reich on earth. For the German theologians, this Reich was without doubt the Prusso-German Empire.⁸⁴

Inspired by Hegel's philosophy, a view developed that the competition between nations, with their desire to expand and to dominate, was an expression of *Geist*. This was then seen by many in Germany as a normal, morally acceptable part of human life and progress, and as compatible with Christianity. This attitude was shown vividly in August 1914, when 93 German intellectuals, including Harnack and Herrmann and others of Barth's theological teachers, produced a declaration supporting the Kaiser's war policy.

We are indignant to see that the enemies of Germany, England foremost among them, want to make a distinction – allegedly to our advantage – between the spirit of German science and what they label 'Prussian militarism'. There is no spirit in the Germany army that is different from that of the German nation, for both are one and we, too, are part of it... We believe that for European culture on the whole salvation rests on the victory

⁸² Barth, 2001a, p. 392

⁸³ Barth, 2001a, p. 405

⁸⁴ Moses, 1999, p. 8

which German 'militarism', namely manly discipline, the faithfulness, the courage to sacrifice, of the united and free German nation will achieve.⁸⁵

Christian virtues, echoes of Christian soteriology, a theology of progress, and rampant aggression are here woven seamlessly together. For Barth, this was like 'the twilight of the gods', as he saw his teachers and heroes 'hopelessly compromised by... their failure in the face of the ideology of war.' He wrote: 'A whole world of exegesis, ethics, dogmatics and preaching, which I had hitherto held to be essentially trustworthy, was shaken to the foundations.'⁸⁶

For Barth, it was clear that God was outside the German war machine, judging and opposing it. German theologians, in equating God with German progress, had changed the subject matter of theology. Barth's determination to hear the true Word of God, even when that Word was in total contradiction to human culture, set the direction for much of his work. It led to his bitter dispute with Harnack, who found Barth's rejection of the carefully-designed synthesis of German culture and Christian thought baffling and indefensible. It also equipped him for his role in opposing the influence of the Nazis on the German churches.

Bultmann, similarly, rejected Hegel's triumphant overview of history. He opposed the way that both Hegel and Marx had 'supposed they knew the end of history and on this basis interpreted the course of historical events.'⁸⁷ As Gilbertson comments, Bultmann sought meaning not by claiming to understand the 'broad sweep of history,' but rather by finding 'Christ's summons to decision in the present.'⁸⁸ Here, as in other ways, he followed the approach pioneered by Kierkegaard, who had reacted strongly against the confident, overarching systems of Hegel and his followers.⁸⁹

Bultmann's main interest in the matter of human progress was in its hermeneutical consequences, leading to his attempt to demythologise the New Testament in order to separate the message from the ancient world-view.⁹⁰ But he,

⁸⁵ In Rumscheidt, 1972, p. 202-3

⁸⁶ Quoted by Busch, 1994, p. 81

⁸⁷ Bultmann, 1984, p. 137

⁸⁸ Gilbertson, 2003, p. 10

⁸⁹ See, for example, Kierkegaard, 1985, p. 43

⁹⁰ See Chapter 6.3

like Barth, also sought to disengage theology from allegiance to any set of supposedly objective cultural ideas. God, for him, was not to be found in the advance of human civilisation, but in the challenging call to faith heard by the individual. Nor could God be found through the methods of historians, in some supposedly objective discoveries about the past.

1.6 Theology constrained by history and science

Much of the liberal protestant theology of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had placed a strong emphasis on the importance of historical investigation. Ritschl's method had involved attempts to reconstruct the values of Jesus and the first Christians. Harnack had set out to trace the history of Christian dogma, and to recover the Gospel of the early Church. David Strauss (1808-1874) had claimed that the miraculous elements of the New Testament related to the mythology of the day rather than to actual events. The History of Religions School had tried to study the Bible in the context of discoveries about the background of the cultures of the time.

These approaches shared the assumption that the Church's understanding of Jesus Christ, and its grasp of true Christian faith, could be increased by the work of historians. Historians were building up a more detailed picture of the whole of human history, giving a framework within which both Jesus Christ and the modern Church could be placed, supposedly giving a greater understanding of both and of the relationship between them. This historical method was assumed to provide a bridge which could connect modern people with authentic Christianity.

This was a reasonable assumption, as the Christian faith is rooted in particular events which the scriptures portray within human history. The Bible can be regarded as a historical source, from which the truth can be reconstructed by experts. However, this approach opens up difficult questions about the relationship between the current faith and experience of the Church and the historical conclusions of such a reconstruction. If the accounts of miracles which pervade the biblical narrative are to be rejected as contrary to the modern view of the universe, then how can we use this source to deduce reliably what actually happened? Would such a reconstruction bring us closer to the message of the text for us today? And how reliably can

historians successfully reconstruct the messianic consciousness of Jesus, or the beliefs of the early Church?

There were many creative attempts to give Jesus a continuing privileged place in history, at the same time as using modern historical methods and abandoning a traditional understanding of the divinity of Christ. Ritschl described Jesus in this way:

He himself made God's supreme purpose of the union of men in the Kingdom of God the aim of his own personal life; and thereby realised in his own experience that independence toward the world which through him has become the experience of the members of his community. This ideal, the true development of the spiritual personality, cannot be rightly or fully conceived apart from contemplation of him who is the prototype of man's vocation.⁹¹

Such approaches sought to make Jesus Christ accessible to historians at the same time as maintaining an absolute and normative significance for the identity of the founder of Christianity. But the historical method brought no lasting, convincing convergence on a definitive portrait of Jesus. As Schweitzer noted, those who sought to uncover Jesus as he really was tended to see a reflection of their own views and ideals, a Jesus of their own making.⁹² Their theology was not about God, but about their own culture. Similarly, Bultmann protested:

Historical research can never lead to any result which could serve as a basis for faith, for *all its results have only relative validity*. How widely the pictures of Jesus presented by liberal theologians differ from one another! How uncertain is all knowledge of 'the historical Jesus'! Is he really within the scope of our knowledge? Here research ends with a large question mark – and here it *ought* to end.⁹³

Another critical perspective had come from Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923), who had rejected the ways in which Ritschl and other modern theologians had continued to try to give Jesus Christ and Christianity a privileged place in history. He wrote:

⁹¹ Ritschl, 1900, p. 387

⁹² Schweitzer, 1910, p. 399

⁹³ Bultmann, 1969, p. 30 (written in 1924)

There no longer exists any means by which one may isolate Christianity from the rest of history and then, on the basis of this isolation and its formal signs, define it as an absolute norm.⁹⁴

Troeltsch believed that Christianity could be investigated in the same way as any other part of human history, so that the varied manifestations of the Church through history could be analysed sociologically and understood within their own diverse cultural contexts. No particular experience or expression of faith, whether first century, sixteenth century or twentieth century, could be given absolute significance. There was still plenty to keep scholars busy, but this exploration of human culture and of religious and social ideas was, from the perspective of the dialectical theologians, nothing to do with talking about God.

Troeltsch had seen an 'analogy' between current experience and the events of history: 'Agreement with normal, customary, or at least frequently attested happenings and conditions as we have experienced them is the criterion of probability for all events that historical criticism can recognise as having actually or possibly happened.'⁹⁵ This connection means that the events described in the Bible should be questioned if they do not fit in with our present experience. It also means that our theological understanding of the present may be altered at any time by the investigations of historians. Gilbertson comments that Bultmann responded defensively to this marriage of history and faith by introducing a series of dualisms:

He embraced wholeheartedly the principles of historical investigation set out by Troeltsch, yet sought to protect faith from the rigours of such investigation by postulating a fundamental discontinuity between the world of contingent historical events on the one hand and divine reality on the other. Thus, faith could be isolated from the ambiguities and uncertainties of historical criticism.⁹⁶

For Bultmann, Troeltsch's work showed the futility of any theology which was concerned with the past and with sets of ideas about God. For Barth, Troeltsch's work was a cul-de-sac which illustrated the pointlessness of any attempt at theology

⁹⁴ Troeltsch, 1972, p. 48

⁹⁵ Troeltsch, 1991, p. 13-14

⁹⁶ Gilbertson, 2003, p. 5-6

which sought to deduce the truth about God from our present experience and knowledge, and which was not based on God's revelation of himself.

Both theologians saw revelation as an event, a divine action, but Bultmann wanted the emphasis to be on a present event, the action of God in the experience of the individual who is confronted by the Gospel. He wrote:

In the proclaiming word and in the faith that is open to this word, God's act in Christ continues to take place... Faith is not taking notice of an event of the past that is mediated by historical tradition, but rather itself belongs to the eschatological occurrence by virtue of the proclamation in which this occurrence continues to take place.⁹⁷

The Christian message, for Bultmann, was therefore not a set of ideas which could be isolated and scrutinised by historians. Bultmann emphasised the continuing proclamation of the Church and the encounter with God which occurs today by faith. He was also critical of any attempt to gain settled, confident knowledge about God from the natural sciences, seeing this as a similar enterprise.

And thus we are just not entitled to consider nature and history as God's revelation in this sense of their giving us rest and confidence, but in the sense that God speaks to us through them in such a way as constantly to make us keep within our limitations, and constantly shatters our self-assurance and our self-glorying. This, then, is the constant revelation of God in nature and history – that it teaches us that we do not, in fact, *possess* the revelation, and that in what we are and have we are of no account in God's sight.⁹⁸

Bultmann took history and science seriously: he devoted much attention both to the history of the New Testament and to the need to avoid basing theology on an ancient cosmological system.⁹⁹ However, he was totally opposed to any conception of theology as an objective set of ideas about God. For him, it was the present encounter with God which mattered, and he perceived God to be one who radically challenges our ideas. Human confidence in both history and science in themselves would be misplaced, as would any supposedly objective worldview. Seeking later to explain himself to his critics, Bultmann wrote:

⁹⁷ Bultmann, 1984, p. 54 (written in 1941)

⁹⁸ Bultmann, 1955b, p. 118 (written in 1941)

⁹⁹ See Chapter 6.3

Faith needs to be emancipated from its association with every world view expressed in objective terms, whether it be a mythical or scientific one...

The framework of nature and history is profane, and it is only in the light of the word of proclamation that nature and history become for the believer, contrary to all appearance, the field of the divine activity.¹⁰⁰

Bultmann also thought that human systems of thought and investigation could not define the most important aspect of human existence, the existential possibilities of the present moment:

The 'moment' has a richer content than what can be established by measurement and calculation since it is rich in possibilities for joy and gratitude, pain and repentance, duty and love – rich in possibilities demanding decision in the present, a decision from which no science can detract, but one in which man loses or gains his real existence.¹⁰¹

Rejecting all objective worldviews and frameworks of ideas, Bultmann sought to point towards God, whom he believed to be radically contradicting and challenging all human securities. This involved a retreat from the normal realm of human ideas to a realm of existential possibilities, where Bultmann believed God was to be found at work.

Barth similarly opposed all attempts to deduce theological ideas by historical or scientific methods. He believed that God was beyond the grasp of historians, and he rejected natural theology. He believed, like Bultmann, that we can only know anything about God if God chooses to reveal himself to us. However, rather than locating that revelation in the individual's experience of being confronted by the message of the gospel, he saw it in Jesus Christ and the content of the scriptures. Here he saw a revelation which occurred in history, but was not of history, a revelation which occurred in the midst of deep concealment.

To be sure, Christian revelation and Christian faith are historical. But they are not so in the way that is commonly depicted today. The stock phrases about a turning point in world history with Christ's birth, and his supposed historical effects and impact, may well be true, but they have nothing whatever to do with the revelation of God in the incarnation or with faith in it. To me a revelation that is a turning point in *world* history

¹⁰⁰ Bultmann, 1964a, p. 210-211

¹⁰¹ Bultmann, 1955b, p. 17 (written in 1931)

would be too tidy a revelation. Where would be the concealment? Where the need for faith in it, and for faith alone? Where its qualitative distinction from other turning points?¹⁰²

In Barth's view, the Bible shows us Jesus Christ's revelation of God within human history, but it is not an ordinary historical source which fits into our normal assumptions about the workings of history. Jesus' identity, incarnation, miracles and resurrection stand out from history as the revelation of something entirely different which contradicts the world. They are within history, but beyond the grasp of the historian because they are unique acts of the transcendent God. As Higton notes, they are not the result of some deeper worldly possibility, and there is nothing within ourselves or our world which could explain them.¹⁰³

In his response to history, Barth's retreat was less radical than Bultmann's, but more complex. Bultmann severed the link between faith and history, while Barth believed that God's revelation could be seen within history, through faith. Nevertheless, without the gift of faith, God would always remain beyond the reach of the historian.

1.7 Conclusion

Both Barth and Bultmann objected to the ways in which theology had been absorbed into modern frameworks of ideas, taking on whatever shape it was permitted in those frameworks rather than pointing to the action of the transcendent God. Both believed that this surrender to human systems of ideas meant that theology was no longer authentically talking about God.

Barth protested against the transformation of theology into ethics, following Kant, or into the exploration of human religious feelings, following Schleiermacher. Bultmann, however, maintained a much more prominent place for human choices and experiences in his theology, but only when they were considered at the level of the human individual rather than in terms of shared systems of thought.

¹⁰² Barth, 1991, p. 148 (from lectures given in 1924-5)

¹⁰³ Higton, 2004a, p. 165, commenting on Frei

Bultmann made a more radical protest against any connection between faith and history. He stressed the present experience of the individual rather than any ideology of human progress or any attempt to find the truth about God from the study of history. Barth similarly rejected a Hegelian view of the presence of God within the development of human thought and culture. However, he believed that God had made himself known within time in ways which were outside the normal patterns of human history and natural science and which could only be understood through faith.

Both Barth and Bultmann believed that theologians had become preoccupied with human ideas and had ceased to be attentive to the voice of the transcendent God. Surrounded by these various capitulations to modernity, within a battle which was being lost, they saw the need to retreat from important land that was under enemy control. They began to treat the normal human world of culture, experience, historical enquiry and scientific investigation as if it were dangerous occupied territory. They believed that the truth about God could not be discovered by people within this realm, and that theology should refuse to function as a dimension of contemporary culture. As long as it continued to do so, it would not be talking about God. Barth and Bultmann were not content to assume that modernity's ideas about rationality, the world and its history were in some way Christian. Instead, they believed that God was radically different from human culture and was in fact speaking in judgement against human arrogance and error. They therefore began to seek a retreat away from human ideas to find a place where God was truly still making himself known.

2 The retreat

2.1 *Barth's retreat to Jesus Christ*

When considering the various responses to Kant made by theologians, Barth noted that there was still one approach which 'was not taken seriously throughout the whole of the nineteenth century'. This response was the rejection of the Kantian premise that religion should operate within the limits of reason. Barth wrote: 'This third possibility would, in a word, consist in theology resigning itself to stand on its own feet in relation to philosophy, in theology recognising the point of departure in revelation.'¹⁰⁴

Barth agreed with Kant that there was no certain metaphysical basis for the Christian faith, but insisted that God had acted to make himself known. In 1924, he said: 'If we reject the possibility of a science of God in the sense of philosophical or metaphysical speaking about God, then speaking about God can refer only to an original speaking by God, or to the impress of the knowledge of God that God himself has revealed to us in his Word.'¹⁰⁵

Barth set out to shift the focus of theology towards the absolute priority of God's action in speaking to us, and away from any idea of a human capacity to know God. This revelation was not part of the normal flow of human history and experience:

*God is always the subject, and God the subject, in this concealed and singular address which is not in continuity with other events. Only revelation in the strict sense overcomes the dilemma which haunts all religious philosophy, namely, that the object escapes or transcends the subject. Revelation means the knowledge of God through God and from God. It means that the object becomes the subject.*¹⁰⁶

Barth's determination to hear the word of God had led him to rediscover what he called in 1916 'the strange new world within the Bible',¹⁰⁷ and that world set the direction for his retreat. Barth found that the word of God he heard in scripture was not a comfortable reflection of his own society and values, but gave a judgement

¹⁰⁴ Barth, 2001a, p. 293

¹⁰⁵ Barth, 1991, p. 12

¹⁰⁶ Barth, 1991, p. 61

¹⁰⁷ Barth, 1935, p. 28-50

upon it from a very different perspective. He saw the Bible as a place for the 'standpoint of God', rather than for human 'religious self-expression'.¹⁰⁸ Barth's view of the strange new world of the Bible became famous in 1922, when the second edition of his commentary on Romans caught many people's attention. In the preface, Barth wrote: 'If I have a system, it is limited to a recognition of what 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 art on earth."' ¹⁰⁹

Where liberal theology had stressed human progress and the presence of God within Christian civilisation, Barth stressed the strangeness and transcendence of God, and the gulf between sinful mortal humanity and the eternal God. Torrance writes: 'The emphasis was quite definitely on what became known as *diastasis*, the distance, the separation, between God's ways and man's ways, God's thoughts and man's thoughts, between Christianity and culture, between Gospel and humanism, between Word of God and word of man.'¹¹⁰

Barth's retreat involved a bold disengagement of theology from other forms of human thought. He insisted: 'To suppose that a direct road leads from art, or morals, or science, or even from religion, to God is sentimental, liberal self-deception.'¹¹¹ Barth proclaimed instead: 'The Word of God is the transformation of everything that we know as Humanity, Nature, and History, and must therefore be apprehended as the negation of the starting-point of every system which we are capable of conceiving.'¹¹²

This revolutionary step removes God from the grasp of the historian, the scientist, the philosopher, and from any human-centred system of thought. It places God far above the realm of ordinary human experience and achievement, including the speculations of academics in supposedly-Christian nations. Barth wrote:

Revelation is not objectively possible except by God's incarnation. Now God's revelation in any case means God's revelation in his concealment. It means the radical

¹⁰⁸ Barth, 1935, p. 44

¹⁰⁹ Barth, 1933, p. 10, quoting Ecclesiastes 5.2

¹¹⁰ Torrance, 2000, p. 49

¹¹¹ Barth, 1933, p. 337

¹¹² Barth, 1933, p. 278

dedivinisation of the world and nature and history, the complete divine incognito, revelation by law and limit, by distance and judgement.¹¹³

In this way, Barth moved Christian theology out of the precarious position where it had been subject to human historical and psychological analysis, restoring a sense of the absolute necessity of revelation. It is now the world, being under judgement, which is in a precarious position. Barth's first strategic move is therefore a retreat from the realm of human culture, ideas, history, science and experience towards the revelation of the transcendent God brought by Jesus Christ. That realm was the realm of divine initiative and action, knowable only by a revelation which is centred on Jesus Christ. Barth wrote:

Jesus Christ our Lord. This is the Gospel and the meaning of history. In this name two worlds meet and go apart, two planes intersect, the one known and the other unknown... In so far as our world is touched in Jesus by the other world, it ceases to be capable of direct observation as history, time or thing.¹¹⁴

Whereas liberal protestant theologians had looked carefully for ways to make Christianity fit in with contemporary philosophy and culture, Barth now began to do the opposite. He emphasised those aspects of the historic Christian faith which showed the distinctive character and activity of God. Doctrines such as the Trinity, the incarnation and the resurrection, which had seemed difficult or embarrassing or irrelevant to others, now came to the fore. Barth saw God as a real, unique, active agent, unlike any other, whose distinctive and unique actions and self-revelation were of prime importance, especially where they contradicted the assumptions of contemporary culture. For theology to speak about God, it had to be attentive to the distinctive ways in which God had actually made himself known.

Barth's retreat led him to a greater sense of the unique significance of Jesus Christ and the incarnation. As he wrote in the Barmen Declaration:

Jesus Christ, as he is attested to us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death. We reject the false teaching, that the church could and should acknowledge any other events and powers,

¹¹³ Barth, 1991, p. 144

¹¹⁴ Barth, 1933, p. 29

figures and truths, as God's revelation, or as a source of its proclamation, apart from or in addition to this one Word of God.¹¹⁵

Instead of a view of God deduced by human reason, Barth emphasised a distinctively Christian Trinitarian, incarnational understanding of God. Whereas Schleiermacher had relegated the doctrine of the Trinity to the last few pages of *The Christian Faith*,¹¹⁶ Barth gave it great prominence in his *Göttingen Dogmatics* of 1924-5. He declared that the 'treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity belongs to dogmatic prolegomena,'¹¹⁷ saying: 'Here the dogma of all dogmas is established, the doctrine of God's subjectivity in his revelation.'¹¹⁸ He also asserted that, for the Trinity, 'manifestation and essence, economic being and immanent being' were 'one in revelation rather than two'; he believed that God 'to all eternity and in the deepest depth of his deity' was 'one in three'.¹¹⁹

When we see the way that God has acted and revealed himself in the history of our salvation, we see the way that God genuinely is, the way he has chosen to be God for us. The revelation we find in the Bible is all about God actively and truthfully revealing himself to us. Jüngel describes Barth's approach in this way: 'As *interpreter* of himself, God corresponds to his own being.'¹²⁰ Barth wrote: 'The content of revelation is God alone, wholly God, God himself. But as God solely and wholly reveals himself, he makes himself known in the three persons of his one essence.'¹²¹

Barth therefore also positioned his detailed discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity in the first volume of his *Church Dogmatics*, which Jüngel describes as 'a hermeneutical decision of the greatest relevance'.¹²² He began by talking about the Word of God, seeking the ways in which God had acted to reveal himself. In this theology, Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word, became decisive and central. As will be shown in Chapters 4 to 9, Barth's theology in the *Church Dogmatics* is about God because all areas of theology look towards the Word made flesh, and no separate

¹¹⁵ Barth, 2001b, p. 499

¹¹⁶ See Chapter 1.4

¹¹⁷ Barth, 1991, p. 96

¹¹⁸ Barth, 1991, p. 103

¹¹⁹ Barth, 1991, p. 101, and see Chapter 5.6 below for discussion of Barth's view of the immanent and the economic Trinities in the *Church Dogmatics*

¹²⁰ Jüngel, 2001, p. 36

¹²¹ Barth, 1991, p. 87

¹²² Jüngel, 2001, p. 17

alleged sources of theological knowledge are allowed to compete. In this retreat, John's Gospel has immense significance.

However, Barth's retreat came at a price. From the perspective of many of his teachers and colleagues, he was abandoning much that was precious. The interweaving of liberal protestant theology with German philosophy and culture had been a colossal and magnificent undertaking, which had taken many decades to achieve. Barth now wished to abandon this, disengaging theology from a highly-respected partnership. To many, this approach seemed narrow, misguided and irrelevant. Harnack responded to Barth in 1920: 'This sort of religion is incapable of being translated into real life, so that it must soar above life as a meteor rushing to its disintegration.'¹²³ From Harnack's perspective, theology belonged at the frontiers of human knowledge, connected with the finest scholarship, the latest discoveries and the highest forms of German culture and civilisation. Commenting on Harnack's opposition to Barth, Kucharz writes:

In the following of Schleiermacher stood a good century of serious theological efforts not to allow the knot of history to come apart so fatally, nor to fuse Christianity and science or Christianity and the modern era together completely, but still to set them in the correct, and if possible reconciled, relationship.¹²⁴

Harnack found Barth's retreat incomprehensible and intolerable. As the debate continued, he wrote to Barth in 1923: 'You say that "the task of theology is at one with the task of preaching"; I reply that the task of theology is at one with the task of science in general.'¹²⁵

In seeking to refocus theology on God, Barth's retreat abandoned much that had appeared valuable and wise. Criticism has continued ever since. Bockmuehl, for example, writing in 1985, declares that Barth and Bultmann 'evacuated God from the danger zone of philosophical debate' and alleges that they left behind them a 'vast school of theological opinion... which had consistently removed the things of God from the reality of time and space in which we live.'¹²⁶

¹²³ In Rumscheidt, 1972, p. 15

¹²⁴ Kucharz, 1995, p. 113, my translation

¹²⁵ In Rumscheidt, 1972, p. 36

¹²⁶ Bockmuehl, 1988, p. 2

Such an evacuation can be regarded as yet another capitulation to modernity: theology ceases to engage with ordinary human life, and finds itself an obscure home, in which it is only of interest to a small minority of enthusiasts. Grenz and Olsen comment: 'If there are no intelligible bridges connecting theology with other disciplines or with common human experience, how can Christian belief appear to outsiders as anything but esoteric?'¹²⁷

Although Barth's retreat was indeed costly and controversial, it was a necessary and wise strategy. Barth's diagnosis that theology had concerned itself with matters other than God was a correct one. In Chapters 4 to 9 of this thesis, I shall show how Barth's retreat enabled him to engage deeply with the distinctive account of Jesus Christ in John's Gospel. He was able to reconstruct an authentically Christian portrayal of God, restoring the true central subject matter of theology.

Yet, as the criticisms above indicate, this retreat had serious limitations. A study of Barth's use of John's Gospel will expose significant gaps in his use of that text. His theology fails to do justice to the scope of the vision of the Gospel. His work of retreat and reconstruction, unless supplemented, is over-protective in keeping theology at a distance from many areas of human knowledge and experience.

In Chapter 10, I shall therefore suggest the further strategic move of *reengagement*. I shall discuss ways in which his work could be taken further, finding connections with all other areas of reality and rationality and placing them in their true theological perspective.

2.2 Bultmann's retreat to existentialism

Bultmann, although immersed in the detailed historical analysis of the New Testament, joined Barth in rebelling against the assumption that God could be found within the world of human ideas, culture and history. Barth and Bultmann briefly appeared to be moving in parallel in the early 1920s. Their objections to contemporary theology and their aims were similar. They exchanged a warm correspondence and took a great interest in each other's work.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Grenz and Olson, 1992, p. 75

¹²⁸ Bromiley and Jaspert, 1981

The second edition of Barth's commentary on Romans gained Bultmann's approval, which Barth described as 'the strangest episode in the history of the book.'¹²⁹ Bultmann was by then an influential scholar who had produced a major work on form criticism and, as Smart describes, had 'established his reputation as a highly competent New Testament scholar and a ruthless pioneering critic.'¹³⁰ He wrote an extended review of *Romans*, giving Barth enough support to lend credibility to his work and bringing it to the attention of a wider audience.

Barth, in his view, was fighting 'against the psychologising and historicising concept of religion... against all cults of "experience", against every concept which sees in religion an interesting phenomenon of culture, which wishes to understand religion in the context of psychic historical life.'¹³¹

Bultmann, like Barth, emphasised the otherness and strangeness of God. He wrote elsewhere that 'the meaning and power of this divine life are experienced as other-worldly in relation to both nature and culture'.¹³² Bultmann therefore agreed about the need for a retreat away from a view in which God is found by human reflection on our shared history and culture. He agreed that we can only know God if God reveals himself.

However, Bultmann believed that such revelation was to be found in the faith and the decisions of the individual. He made much use of Heidegger's existentialist philosophy, which discussed the way that the human individual, cast into the world in time, must make a choice between authentic and inauthentic existence. Bultmann believed that each person, confronted by the proclamation of the Gospel, can choose to respond to God in faith, depending on God rather than on the world. The revelation of God is found in this individual existential experience.

In taking this approach, Bultmann's break with liberalism was not as decisive as Barth's. He followed Schleiermacher in saying that 'religion is the feeling of absolute dependence.'¹³³ He also wrote in 1926: 'I perceive my position as an ally of Barth and

¹²⁹ Barth, 1933, p. 16

¹³⁰ Smart, 1967, p. 117

¹³¹ Bultmann, 1968a, p. 100

¹³² Bultmann, 1968b, p. 217

¹³³ Bultmann, 1968b, p. 210

Gogarten in no way as the crossing over to a new theology, but as the consistent continuation of what I have learned from Herrmann.’¹³⁴

Each theologian began a retreat away from the world of human culture into a realm in which they believed that God’s revelation would be apparent. Each theologian used dialectic, stressing the absolute difference between God’s revelation and our normal realm of human ideas. Each theologian looked to the Bible. But they disagreed about whether to focus on Jesus Christ himself or on the decisions of the people who are confronted by the message of the Gospel, and therefore set up different kinds of dialectic. Barth contrasted all human religion, thinking and experience with the transcendent, free action of God in revelation and salvation through Jesus Christ. For Bultmann, however, the real contrast was between all systems of human thought and the authentic existential encounter with God in the life of the individual.

Therefore, whereas Barth sought to describe the transcendent God’s revelation of himself, Bultmann focused on the individual decision of faith: ‘Absolute dependence is possible only where man encounters a power to which his inner being unfolds itself freely, into whose arms he throws himself in freedom and release, to whom he subjects himself in open self-surrender.’¹³⁵

Most significantly, he believed that the authentic experience of God was not something that could ever be put accurately into words, so that it would never be possible for true religion to consist of a set of ideas and doctrines of any kind. He wrote:

There can be no history of religion, just as there can be no history of such mental events as trust, friendship, and love, since their essence is not available in objectification or in representation but only in their fulfilment, in realisation, in action. No man would think of writing a history of trust... Religion exists only in the existence of individual life.¹³⁶

The danger of all culture is that it idolises and absolutises one particular cultural position and thus empties man’s self.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Quoted in Fergusson, 1992, p. 24

¹³⁵ Bultmann, 1968b, p. 210

¹³⁶ Bultmann, 1968b, p. 214-215

¹³⁷ Bultmann, 1968b, p. 219

A key part of Bultmann's rejection of culture, and his retreat to the world of the individual's encounter with God, was this rejection of any tendency to 'objectify' or 'absolutise' any description of that encounter. This was the reason for the separation between Bultmann the historian and Bultmann the theologian,¹³⁸ and for Bultmann's separation of the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith. It also caused much of his conflict with Barth. When Barth described Christ in *Romans* as the revelation of God, Bultmann responded in his review: 'Here I confess that I simply do not understand him. Here I can discover only contradictions.'¹³⁹ Making a figure in history any kind of objective revelation of God was totally unacceptable to Bultmann. Bultmann preferred to say that '[Jesus] is a symbol for the fact that God's revelation is present always unhistorically and supra-historically, always unnaturally and supra-naturally, always only in a definite now.'¹⁴⁰

Bultmann especially objected to Barth's diversion of attention away from individual existential decisions. He agreed that faith was a miracle brought about by the action of God, rather than just an aspect of human personality. But, for him, the event of the individual's decision of faith was itself the location of God's revelation, the place of paramount importance to which theology should retreat. He could not accept an approach to theology which treated individual experience and decision as non-existent or irrelevant.

Is faith, when it is divorced from every psychic occurrence, when it is *beyond consciousness*, then anything at all real? Is not all talk of this faith only speculation and at that an absurd one...? What is the point of this faith of which I am not conscious and of which I can at most believe that I have it?¹⁴¹

From Bultmann's perspective, Barth's retreat was in the wrong direction: focusing on doctrines rather than on the individual human existential experience of God. Barth's theology therefore contained much that Bultmann would dismiss as the objectification of God, the reduction of a life-changing encounter to a set of ideas.

¹³⁸ Smart, 1967, p. 99

¹³⁹ Bultmann, 1968a, p. 115

¹⁴⁰ Bultmann, 1968a, p. 118

¹⁴¹ Bultmann, 1968a, p. 110

Barth was determined, as McCormack relates, 'to negate every attempt to make the knowledge of God a human possibility', while also establishing 'the knowledge of God as a divine possibility'.¹⁴² Bultmann's interest in the individual decision of faith seemed to Barth to be pointing in the wrong direction, and moving dangerously close to the long-established liberal tendency to see God as a dimension of human personality and culture. In 1952, writing in *Rudolf Bultmann – An Attempt to Understand Him*, he commented:

How can I understand and explain my faith, of all things, unless I turn away from myself and look to where the message I believe in calls me to look? How can the understanding of the New Testament be an 'existential' act, except in the sense that I am compelled to renounce any understanding and explanation of myself, thus finding it contradicted everything I thought I knew about myself.¹⁴³

Fergusson compares the two approaches, commenting that 'while for Barth the primary task was to elucidate the *content* of what is believed (to do this Barth revitalised the study of Christian dogmatics), for Bultmann the task was to elucidate the *character* of belief (to do this Bultmann found in Heidegger's existentialism a useful tool).¹⁴⁴ Vogel describes how a shared belief in the necessity of revelation soon led in two very different directions:

Gogarten - and with him Bultmann - devoted himself to the understanding of human existence when addressed by God; this is how they came to the area of concept formation and prolegomena. Barth, by contrast, directed himself from the beginning towards Holy Scripture as a witness to the revelation of God. This allowed him increasingly to devote himself to the material aspect of doctrine. This in turn was not limited by him to soteriology. Barth gave the doctrine of God its own weight.¹⁴⁵

For Barth, theology could only be about God if it focused on the scriptural record of God's revelation of himself, rather than on any form of human possibility. For Bultmann, true theology concerned the impact of the message of the scriptures on the individual, rather than any set of ideas in itself. For Barth, there was a clear contrast between theology which was actually anthropology and theology which focused on

¹⁴² McCormack, 1995, p. 264

¹⁴³ Barth, 1962, p. 86

¹⁴⁴ Fergusson, 1992, p. 23

¹⁴⁵ Vogel, 2000, p. 133, my translation

God's revelation of himself: theology's focus was either us or God. For Bultmann, there was much more of a sense that true theology showed the truth about God in and through the truth about the authentic individual. Commenting on Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman in John 4.1-30, Bultmann observed: 'The fact that Jesus has shown the woman the truth of her own situation, leads her to suspect that he is the Revealer. Only by man's becoming aware of his true nature, can the Revealer be recognised. The attainment of the knowledge of God and knowledge of self are part of the same process.'¹⁴⁶

Barth, however, regarded knowledge of self as of far less significance. He saw the truth about humanity as following on from the truth about God, and made sure that the latter was firmly established long before any attention could be permitted for the former.¹⁴⁷

2.3 The place of philosophy

The differences between the retreats made by Barth and Bultmann include a disagreement over the use of contemporary philosophy. Bultmann believed that the assumption of some set of philosophical presuppositions was an inevitable part of the theological and hermeneutical process. He wrote: 'It will be clear that every interpreter brings with him certain conceptions, perhaps idealistic or psychological, as presuppositions of his exegesis, in most cases unconsciously.'¹⁴⁸

Bultmann shared this concept of preunderstanding (*Vorverständnis*) with Heidegger¹⁴⁹ and perceived that Heidegger's existentialist philosophy was relevant to his approach to hermeneutics. He believed that the action and revelation of God in the call to faith experienced by the individual was illuminated by Heidegger's existentialist analysis of the individual decision to live authentically.

Bultmann was clear about his use of Heidegger's philosophy, and his declaration of his philosophical principles is helpful to the reader. However, Barth did not accept that this philosophy had any useful connection with the New Testament. In his view,

¹⁴⁶ Bultmann, 1971, p. 188

¹⁴⁷ See Chapter 6.7

¹⁴⁸ Bultmann, 1960a, p. 48

¹⁴⁹ see Fergusson, 1992, p. 65-66

Heidegger's assumptions were alien to the Bible and would distort the interpretation of its message. He wrote: 'There is one thing, and only one thing which he does not get from Heidegger, and that is his description of the transition as an act of God... With this single exception, the whole of his positive presentation of the New Testament message is encased in the strait jacket of this prior understanding.'¹⁵⁰

He never accepted this counter-argument which Bultmann had made to him in a letter in 1928: 'If the critical work of philosophy, which is ongoing, and which is being done today with renewed awareness and radicalism, is ignored, the result is that dogmatics works with the uncritically adopted concepts of an older ontology. That is what happens in your case.'¹⁵¹

Barth continued to be deeply critical of Bultmann's presuppositions. He was especially troubled by the assumption 'that a theological statement is valid only when it can be proved to be a genuine element in the Christian understanding of human existence.'¹⁵² Barth admitted that theological statements 'have a certain bearing on human existence', but he insisted: 'Primarily, they define the being and action of the God who is different from man and encounters man; the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. For this reason alone they cannot be reduced to statements about the inner life of man.'¹⁵³

Bultmann protested that Barth had misunderstood him, saying that his existentialist analysis was not the kind of anthropology identified by Feuerbach. He maintained: 'Such analysis seeks to grasp and understand the actual (historical) existence of human beings, who exist only in a context of life with "others", and thus in encounters.'¹⁵⁴

Bultmann wished to show that his interest in human experience came entirely from an interest in the real action of God, the living God who is encountered by us when he calls us to faith. This individual, present encounter was precisely the place, for him, where the transcendent God could be seen to act. But, from Barth's perspective, Bultmann was perilously close to Schleiermacher's exploration of the

¹⁵⁰ Barth, 1962, p. 114

¹⁵¹ In Bromiley and Jaspert, 1981, p. 39

¹⁵² CD III.2 p. 445

¹⁵³ CD III.2 p. 446

¹⁵⁴ Bultmann, 1984, p. 89

inner life. Bultmann, however, had good grounds for complaining in return about Barth: 'The demand to make of Barth is that he give an account of his own conceptuality.'¹⁵⁵

Barth never gave a detailed account of his own methods and philosophical assumptions, and this can appear as a significant weakness which makes his work harder to understand and to assess. However, when considering how God could become known within human understanding, he did admit that our existing systems of thought have an inevitable place. He declared that 'if we are not to dispute the grace and finally the incarnation of the Word of God, we cannot basically contest the use of philosophy in scriptural exegesis.'¹⁵⁶ He insisted that, it would be a 'false asceticism' for members of the Church to be unwilling to apply their own particular modes of thought to this task. Nevertheless, he was careful to stress the supremacy and freedom of the Word over any set of ideas. He insisted that 'the use of our philosophy for this end can have only the fundamental character of a hypothesis.' It should always be employed in a provisional way, with an openness to the discovery of insights brought through the use of other philosophies in the interpretation of the Bible.¹⁵⁷ He warned of the dangers of letting any one philosophy become 'an end in itself'. Barth's strategic approach therefore allowed a place for a continuing process of tentative and changing philosophical enquiry, without permitting any particular system to be treated as a fixed and essential foundation for theology. He insisted:

As exponents of Scripture, we should not allow any understanding of reality to impose itself as the normal presupposition for the understanding of the reality of the Word of God. How can we bind ourselves to one philosophy as the only philosophy, and ascribe to it a universal necessity, without actually positing it as something absolute as the necessary partner of the Word of God and in that way imprisoning and falsifying the Word of God?¹⁵⁸

Barth wished to focus on the Bible's account of the action and revelation of God, in all its complexity and strangeness, not on any human method for supposedly finding the truth. Nevertheless, even if he was unwilling to describe and justify them, Barth

¹⁵⁵ Bultmann, 1984, p. 89

¹⁵⁶ CD I.2, p. 729-730

¹⁵⁷ CD I.2, p. 731

¹⁵⁸ CD I.2, p. 733

did have his own conceptuality, his own special assumptions and his own unique methods. The exploration of his use of John's Gospel in Chapters 4 to 9 will seek to uncover and assess some of those implicit ideas.

The different views of philosophy held by Barth and Bultmann caused Hans Frei to place them in different places in his typology of modern Christian thought. Frei's typology shows the interaction between theology and modernity, by asking whether theology is seen as 'a philosophical discipline within the academy'¹⁵⁹ (the first type), or as 'exclusively a matter of Christian self-description' in which 'external descriptive categories have no bearing on or relation to it all'¹⁶⁰ (the fifth type), or a view taking one of three positions in between.

This typology does not directly concern the subject matter of theology. It is, rather, an analysis of how a conversation takes place between two different viewpoints. It asks which side is setting the rules for the conversation, and whose language is being used. It presents, therefore, a different use of spatial imagery from my discussion of the subject matter of theology. My account of a retreat made by Barth and Bultmann does not correspond directly to a movement along Frei's scale of five points. However, Frei's typology is a helpful way of exploring the methods of these two theologians.

Frei placed Barth at the fourth point on his scale. This gives priority to Christian self-description, but restates doctrinal statements in the light of cultural and conceptual change.¹⁶¹ Barth's retreat was not an attempt to turn back the clock to some supposed theological golden age: he was deeply aware of his 20th century context and of the challenges of modernity. He accepted Kant's analysis of the limits of human perception and his rejection of metaphysics, for example. Barth brought Christianity into a conversation with modernity in a way which aimed to allow Christianity to criticise modernity, a way which sought to show how the Word of God was judging and challenging the world. Christianity is the dominant partner in this conversation. The fourth position on Frei's scale corresponds well to the kind of

¹⁵⁹ Frei, 1992, p. 2

¹⁶⁰ Frei, 1992, p. 4

¹⁶¹ Frei, 1992, p. 4

tactical stance I have been describing: seeking to give priority to an authentic expression of Christianity, with a keen awareness of its current strategic context.

Bultmann's retreat had similar aims. However, Frei placed Bultmann at the second point on his scale because of his use of Heidegger's existentialist philosophy. Frei, as Ford explains, placed theologians there who sought 'the consistent reinterpretation of Christianity in terms of some contemporary idiom or concern.'¹⁶²

This is an interesting judgement to pass on a dialectical theologian, and it is one which Bultmann himself might have found uncomfortable. At first glance, it suggests that Bultmann, rather than retreating to a strategic point of safety, was cooperating with the enemy. This is a perspective on Bultmann which Barth would have shared.

The situation is more complex, however, since Bultmann's chosen philosophy, existentialism, developed as a way of breaking free from all-embracing systems of thought.¹⁶³ Bultmann was deeply opposed to the modern attempt to make Christianity fit in with grand structures of absolute beliefs. He believed that it was the individual response to the gospel message which mattered, not any supposedly objective system of ideas. This was, for him, an expression of his Lutheran emphasis on justification by faith, which led him to declare that 'the hearing of the word of the Bible can take place only in personal decision.'¹⁶⁴

When Bultmann used existentialism, he did not believe that he was working to justify Christianity in terms of alien concepts, or forcing theology to fit in with something very different from itself. Bultmann believed that existentialism could be used as a theological resource because its very nature was so closely related to the true nature of Christianity. He insisted that 'existentialist philosophy can offer adequate conceptions for the interpretation of the Bible, since the interpretation of the Bible is concerned with the understanding of existence.'¹⁶⁵ He also noted the influence of Christianity on the history of existentialism. He wrote to Barth in 1952: 'Existential philosophy has learned from theology or the NT to perceive the

¹⁶² Ford, 2005, p. 3

¹⁶³ See, for example, the opposition to Hegel's 'System' shown in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* (1985, p. 11, 43)

¹⁶⁴ Bultmann, 1960a, p. 57

¹⁶⁵ Bultmann, 1960a, p. 57

phenomenon of existence, as may be seen in the significance that Paul, Augustine, Luther, and Kierkegaard have had for Heidegger and Jaspers.’¹⁶⁶

Bultmann used existentialism not because he was consciously surrendering to dictates of the modern world, but because he thought that this was the philosophical resource which would enable Christianity to be expressed most authentically within and against the modern world. Yet Bultmann’s retreat is less dramatic and revolutionary than Barth’s. For Bultmann, speaking of God meant speaking of a possibility which confronts people here and now. But Barth went to extraordinary lengths to disengage theology from any sense of being a human possibility. From Barth’s perspective, Bultmann remained in a vulnerable and foolish position, simply making yet another capitulation to a modern philosophy rather than an effective retreat.

Furthermore, from today’s perspective, Bultmann’s theology has not stood the test of time as well as Barth’s. In Bultmann’s view, existentialism pointed to the true significance of the Bible, so that the two belonged closely together; but his approach has not borne fruit in a way which has continued to convince many scholars or churchgoers. Existentialism and biblical exegesis are not now usually assumed to be closely connected. Morgan comments: ‘Bultmannian ghosts still haunt a few theological faculties, but religious and theological vitality is to be found elsewhere.’¹⁶⁷

As interest in existentialism has waned since the late 1960s, so too has interest in a theology which cannot function without it. Morgan therefore notes ‘the vulnerability of any theology which borrows from the prevailing culture in order to make the biblical message intelligible.’ Robinson writes:

Bultmann’s heavy reliance on the philosophy of Heidegger’s existentialism as a replacement for the mythological world-view was historically, and indeed geographically, conditioned. It never did take on in England, and one wonders whether it will not be seen to belong rather distinctively to the post-war Continental scene.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ In Bromiley and Jaspert, 1981, p. 98

¹⁶⁷ Morgan, 1997, p. 83

¹⁶⁸ Robinson, 1984, p. 151

Bultmann's theology now appears to have been closely tied to a contemporary philosophy in a way which justifies its position in the second part of Frei's typology. Barth's theology, however, is still gaining a growing audience from those who find that it offers a compelling account of central Christian truths. Nevertheless, Chapters 3 to 9 of this thesis will show that Bultmann's approach to John does engage with aspects of John's Gospel which Barth's approach misses. The existential moment of personal decision has a significant place within that text.

2.4 The whale and the elephant?

By 1952, Barth and Bultmann appeared to have moved a long way apart from each other. Barth wrote to Bultmann, producing a memorable image to describe their relationship:

It seems to me that we are like a whale... and an elephant meeting with boundless astonishment on some oceanic shore. It is all for nothing that the one sends his spout of water high in the air. It is all for nothing that the other moves its trunk now in friendship and now in threat. They do not have a common key to what each would obviously like to say to the other in its own speech and in terms of its own element.¹⁶⁹

Chapters 3 to 9 of this thesis will show that Barth and Bultmann highlight very different themes within John's Gospel, sometimes even within the same verse. Their two interpretations pass each other without intersecting, like the journeys of the whale and the elephant. However, there is still a real interaction. As will be seen in Chapters 4 to 9, there is an unusual shape to Barth's theology which only makes sense when we understand that he was trying to steer clear of Bultmann's existentialism. Although Bultmann is rarely spoken of by name in the *Church Dogmatics*, his shadow falls across many of its pages. Barth admitted in the foreword to Volume IV that he was in an 'intensive, although for the most part quiet, debate with Rudolph Bultmann.'¹⁷⁰

Meanwhile, Bultmann warned Barth that any 'objectifying' way of speaking about the New Testament's account of God would be an attempt to find certainty in human

¹⁶⁹ Bromiley and Jaspert, 1981, p. 105

¹⁷⁰ Barth: CD IV.1, p. ix

thought. Bultmann saw this as contrary to the true purpose and meaning of the New Testament, which conveys an existential challenge to the individual and shatters our certainty.¹⁷¹ Barth's approach was part of the territory which Bultmann was careful to avoid.

Barth's amusing image of the whale and the elephant fails to communicate the fact that he and Bultmann came to have no point of contact because of the way that they each saw the other's theology as part of the problem. This is no random parting of the ways, or the helpless mutual incomprehension of two different species. There was no common ground because they deliberately went in different directions.

Barth and Bultmann both sought to find theology's authentic, safe home territory, to retreat and rebuild in a refuge which was the true centre of divine revelation. Both men retreated for similar reasons, wanting to encounter the living God and to hear his word. Both men looked towards the scriptures, to Jesus Christ and to the proclamation of the Gospel for answers, but the directions they moved in were very different. Both men ended up exploring the theological implications of John's Gospel and using their conclusions to support distinctive and revolutionary approaches to the whole of Christian theology. Both men sought to allow 20th century Christian theology to be an authentic witness to the judgement and the transforming grace of God, rather than simply an expression of human culture. Both men had a huge impact on the theology of their time and on those who followed them. A closer look at their use of John's Gospel will reveal much about their differences and their similarities in this endeavour, and will point to ways in which the same tasks could be continued today.

¹⁷¹ Bromiley and Jaspert, 1981, p. 91-92

3 Bultmann's existentialist interpretation of John's Gospel

3.1 Introduction

Pauline theology had a very significant early influence on both Barth and Bultmann. The Lutheran understanding of Paul's doctrine of justification by faith was important for Bultmann, while Barth's early writing included his commentary on Romans. However, although Paul helped to get them both started, John's Gospel became the focus of Bultmann's mature writing and, as I shall show in Chapters 4 to 8, became highly significant for Barth.

Both Barth and Bultmann worked extensively with John's Gospel, using their distinctive forms of dialectical theology to interpret it. Their contrasting sets of theological assumptions led them to use John in very different ways, highlighting different themes within it. Barth's *Church Dogmatics* depends heavily on his use of John for its Christology, which is of central importance. Bultmann found that his existentialist theology and his exploration of the history of the New Testament converged fruitfully in his study of John, culminating in his influential commentary. As Fergusson states, 'Bultmann's interpretation of the fourth gospel is probably the outstanding achievement of his life's work.'¹⁷² Ashton, discussing modern commentators on John, says: 'over them all Rudolf Bultmann, unmatched in learning, breadth, and understanding, towers like a colossus.'¹⁷³

Bultmann's writing on John tackles a wide range of theological, historical, hermeneutical and literary questions in great detail, drawing on his expertise in those areas, and presenting a coherent, unified and consistent set of answers to those questions. Anderson comments that 'it was the combination of his exegetical acuity and his theological insight that gave the work its genius.'¹⁷⁴ Bultmann's existentialist approach to Christianity provides the vision which inspires and unifies his

¹⁷² Fergusson, 1992, p. 94

¹⁷³ Ashton, 1991, p. 45

¹⁷⁴ Anderson, 2008, p. 318

understanding of these different themes. As a result, Ashton praises Bultmann's '*penetration* – the peculiar ability to see John clearly and to see him whole.'¹⁷⁵

Kelsey describes Bultmann's approach to scripture by saying that he 'construes God's presence in the mode of an *ideal possibility*.'¹⁷⁶ He writes: 'God is taken to be present in and through existential events that are occasioned by scripture's kerygmatic statements which announce the possibility of authentic existence.'¹⁷⁷ This is a judgement about the basic nature of Christianity: the subject matter of theology and the place where God is revealed. Bultmann, as a dialectical theologian, stresses the importance of divine revelation as something which challenges, judges and undermines human ideas and human culture. Revelation is found in the existential challenge experienced by the individual in the present, rather than in theological ideas themselves as they are shared and discussed within churches and universities and passed down through history.

Bultmann is therefore in the paradoxical position of seeking to affirm the fact and the reality of revelation, whilst avoiding definitive statements of its content. Revelation, for Bultmann, is the challenge to the individual, who experiences the action of God in the call to faith. God is made known in the existential moment of individual decision and response, not in any kind of public theology. The real purpose of the Gospels and of all Christian proclamation is to present this challenge to the authentic life of faith, rather than to deliver an objective account of dogmas, ideas or events.

Bultmann's existentialist approach is in many ways well suited to John, delivering fascinating insights into the meaning and purpose of the text. For example, it fits well with the realised eschatology found in much of John: individuals are judged in the present by their response to Jesus Christ,¹⁷⁸ which in existentialist terms means that their choices determine whether or not they accept the opportunity to live authentically. As will be seen, Bultmann highlights a genuine Johannine emphasis on decision which Barth neglects, whilst himself marginalising other aspects of the text.

¹⁷⁵ Ashton, 1991, p. 45

¹⁷⁶ Kelsey, 1999, p. 162

¹⁷⁷ Kelsey, 1999, p. 161

¹⁷⁸ e.g. John 5.24

3.2 *Existentialism and the Gnostic redeemer myth*

Bultmann seeks to establish his existentialist approach to John's Gospel by employing a set of historical and literary theories. These include a detailed reconstruction of the history of the text which enables him to present its purpose and meaning in a new light.

In seeking to bring out the true purpose of the text, Bultmann advocates a process of 'demythologisation', believing that the New Testament was written within an ancient worldview which could no longer be accepted. His concern about the 'mythology' of the New Testament, such as 'the conception of the world as being structured in three stories, heaven, earth and hell',¹⁷⁹ is that it now prevents modern people from hearing the call to faith. Bultmann believes that it is necessary, therefore, to demythologise the New Testament in order for modern people to get past the archaic distractions. This, he claims, is demanded by the text itself: 'The motive for criticising myth, that is, its objectifying representations, is present in myth itself, insofar as its real intention to talk about a transcendent power to which both we and the world are subject is hampered and obscured by the objectifying character of its assertions.'¹⁸⁰

Furthermore, part of his interest in John's Gospel comes from the belief that there the process of demythologising can be uncovered within the text itself. He writes: 'The eschatological preaching of Jesus was retained and continued by the early Christian community in its mythological form. But very soon the process of demythologising began, partially with Paul, and radically with John.'¹⁸¹

Bultmann claims that one of the main sources for the Gospel is a Gnostic text which has been adapted and demythologised by the Evangelist, which therefore justifies and directs a demythologising approach to its interpretation today. Bultmann believes that he finds a kindred spirit in the Evangelist, sharing a unity of purpose and method. For him, an existential challenge is found clearly in John, while the remaining mythological structures, the results of first-century cosmological ideas,

¹⁷⁹ Bultmann, 1960a, p. 15, and see Chapter 6.3 below

¹⁸⁰ Bultmann, 1984, p. 10

¹⁸¹ Bultmann, 1960a, p. 32

can be easily pushed into the background. This step is described by Ashton as follows: 'By assigning the mythical elements of the Gospel to a source, he allows the evangelist himself to do his own demythologising.'¹⁸²

The hypothetical Gnostic source text was, Bultmann says, a source of cosmological information, a 'redeemer myth' whose purpose had been to impart understanding about the human condition. Bultmann summarises its message as follows:

From the World of Light, a godlike figure is sent down to the earth, which is ruled by demonic powers, in order to liberate the sparks of light, which had come from the World of Light and were imprisoned in human bodies because of a trap in ancient times. The one sent takes human form and does on earth the works instructed to him by the Father, and he is not separated from the Father. He reveals himself in his speeches ('I am the shepherd' etc) and carries out the separation between the seeing and the blind, to whom he appears as a stranger. His own people listen to him, and he awakens in them the memory of their home of light. He teaches them to recognise their real selves and teaches them the way home, to which he himself, a redeemed redeemer, again ascends.¹⁸³

There are obvious similarities between this hypothetical text and John's Gospel. However, in Bultmann's theory, the Evangelist has eliminated most of the information content of the myth. There is no longer an emphasis on a true cosmological and anthropological understanding which is brought by the redeemer, and which could theoretically have been delivered in many other ways. There is no longer the presentation of a description of humanity and the cosmos which itself has the power to liberate people by reminding them of their true nature and destiny. What remains, Bultmann claims, is the bare fact of the revelation itself, and the presence of the one who reveals, rather than its content. He writes: 'The encounter with the Incarnate is the encounter with the Revealer himself; and the latter does not bring a teaching which renders his own presence superfluous; rather *as* the Incarnate he sets each man before the decisive question whether he will accept or reject *him*.'¹⁸⁴

Bultmann points out that Jesus, in John's Gospel, talks extensively about his own significance, rather than teaching about matters such as the Kingdom of God or

¹⁸² Ashton, 1991, p. 59

¹⁸³ Bultmann, 1959, column 847, my translation

¹⁸⁴ Bultmann, 1971, p. 65-66

questions of the Law, as in the Synoptic Gospels.¹⁸⁵ He also makes the fascinating observation that, although Jesus talks repeatedly about his role in reporting what he has seen or heard from the Father, there is a lack of examples of him actually doing this.¹⁸⁶ Here, Bultmann believes, we see the work of the Evangelist in removing the cosmological details from the original Gnostic source. His conclusion is radical: 'Thus it turns out in the end that Jesus as the Revealer of God *reveals nothing but that he is the Revealer*... John, that is, in his Gospel presents only the fact (*das Dass*) of the Revelation without describing its content (*ihr Was*).'¹⁸⁷

He maintains that 'Jesus is the truth; he does not simply *state it*,'¹⁸⁸ seeking to show that the Christian life involves an encounter which is far more significant than the mere assent to a set of doctrines. This allows him to interpret Jesus' words in John's Gospel as follows:

Not as words which bring new dogmas, but as words which destroy dogma; as words which question man's natural understanding of himself, and which seek to transform his hidden and distorted knowledge of God and his desire for life into a true and authentic knowledge and life... What is demanded of man is a faith which experiences Jesus' words as they affect man himself.¹⁸⁹

The reader may wish to object that John still appears to contain much dogmatic material. Ashton explains:

If one were to protest that the Jesus of the Gospel does in fact reveal more about himself than Bultmann allows (for instance that he is the *Son* of God and has been *sent* by him) Bultmann would no doubt reply that 'mission' and 'sonship' are mythological concepts taken over by the evangelist from his Gnostic source. It is true that he clothes his message in these concepts, but they no more belong to the essence of what he has to say than figurative expressions like 'living water', 'bread of life', 'the Shepherd', and 'the Vine'.¹⁹⁰

Bultmann invites people, therefore, to see the Evangelist's message as one which is expressed using a set of first-century Gnostic images and concepts but is not in any way tied to it. Others are meant to continue the process of demythologising which

¹⁸⁵ Bultmann, 1959, column 844-5

¹⁸⁶ Bultmann, 1959, column 848

¹⁸⁷ Bultmann, 1955a, p. 66

¹⁸⁸ Bultmann, 1971, p. 606

¹⁸⁹ Bultmann, 1971, p. 390-391

¹⁹⁰ Ashton, 1991, p. 63

the Evangelist himself has begun, and which will lead them to grasp the essence of the Gospel, the call to respond to the challenge of the Revealer and to live authentically. For example, Bultmann interprets Jesus' teaching about the Spirit in John existentially, showing a possible way of life open to human beings rather than giving an objective description of God: 'πνεῦμα refers to the miracle of a mode of being in which man enjoys authentic existence, in which he understands himself and knows that he is no longer threatened by nothingness.'¹⁹¹

For Bultmann, the power of John's Gospel is therefore not in the delivery of information about a divine person who descends from heaven, dies, rises and ascends again, since those ideas are simply part of the landscape of first-century mythology. The true significance of John's Gospel is timeless and existential: 'Jesus' words are not didactic propositions but an invitation and a call to decision.'¹⁹²

However, Bultmann relies on a theory about the use of a Mandaean source which is highly conjectural, based on texts which come from centuries after John. Ashton comments that scholars have not found any further evidence to support his ideas.¹⁹³ There is no evidence that the kind of text he suggests existed at the time John was written, nor is there any widespread scholarly opinion that such a text ever existed. It is assumed to exist because Bultmann needs it to. Ashton remarks that Bultmann's 'fantastic apparatus of Mandaean Gnosticism' is 'reminiscent to an English eye of one of Heath Robinson's more extravagantly constructed machines.'¹⁹⁴ In the introduction to his commentary, Brown summarises the situation as follows:

One cannot claim that the dependence of John on a postulated early Oriental Gnosticism has been disproved, but the hypothesis remains very tenuous and in many ways unnecessary... OT speculation about personified Wisdom and the vocabulary and thought patterns of sectarian Judaism, like the Qumran community, go a long way toward filling in the background of Johannine theological vocabulary and expression. Since these proposed sources of influence are known to have existed, and the existence of

¹⁹¹ Bultmann, 1971, p, 141

¹⁹² Bultmann, 1955a, p. 21

¹⁹³ Ashton, 1991, p, 60

¹⁹⁴ Ashton, 1991, p. 66

Bultmann's proto-Mandean Gnostic source remains dubious, we have every reason to give them preference.¹⁹⁵

The evidence therefore suggests instead that the distinctive features of the Fourth Gospel are much more deeply rooted in its Jewish context than Bultmann assumes. Bauckham writes: 'The Dead Sea Scrolls... apparently revealed a world of Palestinian Jewish thought with parallels precisely to those aspects of Johannine theology – especially its “dualism” – that had been thought to require Hellenistic or Gnostic sources.'¹⁹⁶

If Bultmann's hypothetical Gnostic source text was ever found, and the kind of textual relationship that exists between Mark and Matthew was apparent between that text and John, it would provide strong evidence for Bultmann's theories about the history of the Fourth Gospel, the demythologising work of the evangelist and his existentialist purpose. However, such evidence has never been established and the connections appear more to run in the opposite direction: Bultmann's textual theories are inspired by his existentialism and by the existentialist themes which he finds within the Fourth Gospel.¹⁹⁷ His work on the significance of later Mandaean texts for the interpretation of John's Gospel dates from the 1920s, at the same time as the development of his commitment to existentialism,¹⁹⁸ and these two key elements of his thought are closely associated. Ashton sees Bultmann's existentialism as the prior assumption which he brings to the text. Commenting on Bultmann's view of John as a call to decision, he writes: 'It is here perhaps more than anywhere else in Bultmann's exegesis that one can detect a theological *parti pris*, an option the exegete makes before even opening the book he is to expound.'¹⁹⁹

It is not the case that the textual evidence itself shows that the true meaning of John is an existentialist one; it is more that Bultmann's interest in the existentialist aspects of John inspires a set of theories about the history of the text which connect with his initial judgement about the nature of revelation.

¹⁹⁵ Brown, 1966. p. LVI

¹⁹⁶ Bauckham, 2007, p. 23

¹⁹⁷ These themes are explored in Chapter 8

¹⁹⁸ See Bultmann, 1967, p. 55-104 (article published in 1925), and Fergusson, 1992, p. 65

¹⁹⁹ Ashton, 1991, p. 63-64

3.3 Textual history and the ecclesiastical redactor

Bultmann describes John's Gospel as having a very complex history, of which the hypothetical Gnostic text is just one part. The Gnostic source allegedly focuses on the role of the Revealer and is the origin of sections such as the seven 'I am' sayings. There is also a collection of miracle stories, the source of the seven signs described in the Gospel, and there is an account of the crucifixion and resurrection.²⁰⁰

Bultmann believes that the Evangelist has combined his sources skilfully, but he is alert to various apparent inconsistencies or stylistic surprises in the text. For example, the end of John 14 appears to show Jesus ending a long discourse with these words: 'Rise, let us be on our way.' However, Jesus then continues his monologue until chapter 18. Bultmann concludes that the intended order of the text has been disturbed, perhaps through pages being mixed up,²⁰¹ and attempts to reconstruct the Evangelist's original work.²⁰² Here he shows a thorough knowledge of the details of the text but his solution to the puzzle has not been widely accepted in its entirety. As Beasley-Murray comments, 'few have followed Bultmann in his elaborate reconstruction of the Gospel, but many scholars have considered that some reordering of the text is necessary.'²⁰³ Lincoln continues to affirm Bultmann's commentary as the 'classic example of this approach,'²⁰⁴ but does not regard it as conclusive. He, like Brown and others, follow Bultmann in speculating about different stages of editing in the history of the text, but prefer to address their commentaries to the received text rather than to any attempted reconstruction. Brown warns: 'If one indulges in extensive rearrangement, one may be commenting on a hybrid that never existed before it emerged as the brain child of the rearranger.'²⁰⁵

More controversial however, as Bultmann himself admits,²⁰⁶ is his theory of a final 'ecclesiastical redactor'. Bultmann believes that John's Gospel's relatively infrequent

²⁰⁰ Bultmann, 1959, col. 842-3

²⁰¹ Bultmann, 1959, col. 841

²⁰² See Smith, 1965

²⁰³ Beasley-Murray, 1991, p.xliii

²⁰⁴ Lincoln, 2005, p. 51

²⁰⁵ Brown, 1966, p. xxvii

²⁰⁶ Bultmann, 1959, col. 841

references to futurist eschatology must be the work of a later editor. Similarly, he regards the authentic parts of the Gospel as being free from sacramentalism: it is the Revealer himself who is the bread of life and who gives the water of life. Allusions to sacraments must also, Bultmann deduces, be editorial additions. Jesus' statement that 'those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day'²⁰⁷ is a verse which Bultmann regards as a later addition on both grounds.

Bultmann suggests that the ecclesiastical redactor has edited John's Gospel to make the document acceptable to the Church. The Evangelist himself, Bultmann believes, would not have wanted to endorse the sacramental system of an institution, or a focus on a future salvation, since both are a distraction from the importance of the individual's present decision to respond to Jesus Christ in faith.

Here, Bultmann has found a second strategy for making John's Gospel fit his theological assumptions, but it has been widely criticised. Lindars comments that Bultmann's theory of the ecclesiastical redactor is 'purely arbitrary, dependent on his identification of the Johannine doctrine with Gnosticism.'²⁰⁸ Brown similarly warns against 'a form of circular reasoning where one rather arbitrarily decides what fits the theological outlook of the evangelist and attributes what is left to the redactor.'²⁰⁹ He believes instead that the verses disputed by Bultmann 'bring out more clearly the latent sacramentalism' of the rest of the Gospel.²¹⁰ As Brown and Lindars show, it is not convincing to accept a text insofar as it agrees with one's opinions and methods, and then to claim that those elements which contradict them must have been added by someone other than the real author.

3.4 *The Marburg sermons*

Like Barth,²¹¹ Bultmann stresses the importance of preaching. However, he does so in a different way, believing that a focus on the content of the Christian faith

²⁰⁷ John 6.54

²⁰⁸ Lindars, 1981, p. 57

²⁰⁹ Brown, 1966, p. xxx-xxxi

²¹⁰ Brown, 1966, p. xxxviii

²¹¹ See Chapter 8.8

would be in danger of absorbing God into human history and culture. Barth sets preaching within the context of an exploration of the threefold form of the Word itself (revealed, written and proclaimed); Bultmann emphasises the individual experience of being challenged by the proclamation of the Word. His approach to John is intended to equip the preacher to communicate the challenge of the Gospel authentically, free from the baggage of mythology. His views on the realised eschatology of John's Gospel are connected with his belief that we encounter Christ in the present through preaching, which is also to be understood as the current action of the Holy Spirit. He writes:

It is characteristic of John that Jesus as a fact of history is not an objective fact of the past which would be present only in its effects on history... But the living Jesus – that is, Jesus as eschatological fact – is not visible at all to the world (John 14.22)... The true way of making present the historical fact of Jesus is therefore not historical recollection and reconstruction, but the proclamation. In the proclamation Jesus is, so to speak, duplicated. He comes again; he is always coming again... The helper, the Paraclete, who continues Jesus' revelation in the world, is the Word preached in the Christian community.²¹²

Writing on John 15.26, Bultmann maintains that 'the knowledge bestowed by the Spirit is to have its activity in the *proclamation*, in *preaching*.'²¹³ Bultmann's understanding of the Trinity is therefore focused on divine activity in the present moment, an encounter with God in which the Word is proclaimed through the action of the Spirit and the challenge of Jesus Christ is revealed to the individual. This dynamic view of the Word meant that Bultmann insisted that each new situation demanded a new sermon, and it was only with great reluctance that he allowed a volume of his sermons from Marburg to be published.²¹⁴ It is significant that 4 of the chosen 21 biblical texts in this book, which shows how Bultmann's theology was expressed within the life of the Church, are from John.

Speculation about Gnostic sources and ecclesiastical redactors does not appear in this preaching. Instead, Bultmann gets on with the practical task of applying suitable texts from John to provide a challenge to his hearers. The sermons were mostly

²¹² Bultmann, 1969, p. 177

²¹³ Bultmann, 1955a, p. 90

²¹⁴ Schmithals, 1968, p. 47

preached at the time of the Second World War and make frequent references to anxiety as a defining part of the human condition. Bultmann refers often to John's negative view of the world, presenting the world as the source of worry and deception. This allows a retreat from the military and political turmoil of the day, into a realm which is presented as higher and more real: the place of the individual response to God. There is no mention of any prophetic calling to challenge the Nazi regime in particular, merely an attempt to detach the hearers from their worldly context in general. Preaching on John 16.5-15, Bultmann declares: 'The Spirit opens our eyes to the invisible working of God, which is veiled by the visible events taking place in the world. For the ultimately real and true is not what intrudes itself on our notice... what stuns us with terror or perhaps may thrill us with its magnificence.'²¹⁵

Bultmann avoids being drawn into the specifics of his situation, but uses John to emphasise that the whole world and all human schemes stand under the present judgement of God.

Jesus does not move in the world as belonging to it, but he confronts it as the one who wills to save it from the illusion of its self-sufficiency and who for that reason must be its accuser...

The 'prince of this world' is the peculiar domination which this world of possibilities, gifts and tasks can achieve and exercise over the minds of men. Whoever surrenders himself to it experiences this peculiar domination which aspires to master him, which gains a tyrannous hold of him in work, in pleasure and in pain, with the result that his whole outlook, his thoughts and desires are fettered and can no longer gain freedom from this tyranny.²¹⁶

Whereas the world is the source of illusion and anxiety, it is the individual's encounter with God which can bring truth and salvation. Preaching on John 14.27 ('Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives.'), Bultmann remarks:

One thing alone can save us from the world and from ourselves: that we truly place ourselves before God as the one who alone has the right to judge us, who overthrows the

²¹⁵ Bultmann, 1960b, p. 59

²¹⁶ Bultmann, 1960b, p. 61

verdict of our own self-examination by his judgement which humbles us far more deeply than our own, because it is the judgement of love which is spoken to us in Jesus.²¹⁷

Bultmann emphasises that the encounter with Jesus is nothing to do with worldly values but is of direct relevance to the human condition. Preaching on John 8.12, Bultmann declares:

The 'light of life' would mean that life for us gains transparent clarity, that the oppressive problems, the torturing mysteries of our life come to an end; that we are no longer afraid of what is to come, of what threatens, that we are no longer strangers to ourselves, that, so to speak, everything has become self-explanatory.²¹⁸

Bultmann, of course, does not then attempt to explain the facts of the mysteries of life on the basis of this revelation, but to direct his hearers to find their own encounter with Jesus. This is a challenge to make a decision, and so Bultmann finds great relevance in John's description of the human tendency to hide from the light in the darkness (John 3.19). Speaking like an evangelist, he encourages his hearers to make a definite choice here and now for the light of Christ instead of the dark world.

Are we really ready, when the beyond, when God confronts us, to surrender the world?
Hence are we truly ready, when God confronts us in the figure of Jesus, to become his disciples and to allow the world to be simply the world?

Here is the decisive issue which Jesus puts before men. The light which he sheds is the light of the eternal world; the joy which he bestows is supernatural joy. Truly to desire this light and this joy, hence to be his disciple, means to live as though one no longer really belonged to this world. Do we desire this with all our hearts?²¹⁹

Bultmann uses John to justify repeated negative references to the world, and the need for 'an attitude of inner detachment from the world, so that we move in it as though we did not belong to it.' He declares that we should instead have 'the consciousness of living in the fullness of a power which streams from supernatural, ultimate reality.'²²⁰ He praises the experience of standing alone before God, confronted by him, surrendering to him, no longer belonging to the world but

²¹⁷ Bultmann, 1960b, p. 98

²¹⁸ Bultmann, 1960b, p. 114

²¹⁹ Bultmann, 1960b, p. 116

²²⁰ Bultmann, 1960b, p. 117

nevertheless still open to all that God may send us in the world.²²¹ Preaching on John 16.22-33, Bultmann declares: 'To experience "that day" means: in following Christ to take up his cross and to penetrate to that depth of life where we are alone in God's presence, and thus to become as one who no more belongs to this world. To such a one the right way of prayer is granted.'²²²

In these sermons, Bultmann omits many of the themes which other preachers have found in John's Gospel, for reasons which he gives in his theological writings on John. Preaching *about* God and God's past and future actions is mostly absent. However, Bultmann is able to use some of John's main themes powerfully and provocatively, challenging his hearers to make a decision now, rejecting worldly anxieties and responding authentically to God. He makes much use of the dualism of light and darkness in John, in his own distinctive way. This is not an objective account of an actual struggle between Jesus and the devil within the world, or a call for the whole Christian community to be distinctive and holy within the world, but a challenge for the individual to reject the deceits, distractions and anxieties of the world and to embrace the possibilities offered by God.

3.5 Conclusion

Bultmann's preaching highlights some Johannine themes which fit his existentialist approach to John. His intention is to call for an authentic Christian faith which is based on a genuine encounter between the individual and God in the present and which involves the decision to live a radically transformed life rather than the reception of a set of doctrines. However, to most readers, John's Gospel seems at least in part to be trying to present a series of complex ideas about the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Many would feel that the element of challenge to the individual *comes from* John's description of the objective significance of Jesus, and from the detailed ideas about the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit which are set forth in John. These statements function as an invitation and as a call to decision precisely *because* of their majesty and their universal significance as didactic

²²¹ Bultmann, 1960b, p. 194

²²² Bultmann, 1960b, p. 198

propositions. Ricoeur insists that, even when a text calls for 'personal appropriation', the reader comprehends the meaning of the text as a separate 'threshold of understanding', prior to the moment of existential decision. He writes: 'The entire route of comprehension goes from the ideality of meaning to existential signification. A theory of interpretation which at the outset runs straight to the moment of decision moves too fast.'²²³

By focusing attention on individual decisions, Bultmann's approach may in fact undermine the power of the text to call the reader to a decision, since that power comes from the text's account of the identity and action of God. In seeking to isolate personal responses from any doctrine of God, Bultmann is in great danger of failing to proclaim any real challenge.

Furthermore, Bultmann's attempt to show Jesus' significance for us by separating him from the culture and worldview of the first century is also a controversial way to approach an ancient text, setting Jesus adrift from his real connections with the world. Wright protests about Bultmann's presentation of 'Jesus the preacher of timeless (and non-Jewish) truths.'²²⁴ He comments that 'Bultmann's demythologised Jesus simply does not belong in the first century,' a mismatch which suggests that Bultmann has misunderstood the Gospel's historical context.²²⁵ For Wright, the proper understanding of John should take its historical setting much more seriously, including the identity of Jesus as the Messiah. The strangeness of the first-century world is, for Wright, part of the way in which the text is able to challenge us.

However, since Bultmann believes that divine revelation is not to be found in the world of shared human ideas and culture, he deliberately uses the two ingenious historical theories described above to support his claim that the text's true meaning is an existentialist one which can be detached from its context. Firstly, any verse which seems to point towards dogmatics can be dismissed as the mythological language of the Gnostic source, part of the background rather than the real message. Then secondly, any verse which seems to point towards sacramentalism or the expectation of a future divine act of salvation can be dismissed as an intervention by the

²²³ Ricoeur, 1981, p. 68

²²⁴ Wright, 1996, p. 91

²²⁵ Wright, 1996, p. 658

ecclesiastical redactor. It is ironic that a theology which calls for an openness to the challenge of divine revelation communicated through the scriptures ends up taking such extreme measures to protect itself from anything which does not fit its assumptions.

It is also interesting that Bultmann's lengthy commentary on John contains no preface. There is no account of his assumptions, or even an explanation of the idiosyncratic order which the commentary follows. His ideas form a tidy, enclosed circle, carefully cross-referenced, in which they justify each other. Despite all the meticulous historical and textual details of the footnotes, there is no clearly labelled way in from the outside, no trail of evidence proceeding from historical investigation. Kelsey's comment that the use of scripture in theology is 'shaped by an act of the imagination that a theologian must necessarily make prior to doing theology at all'²²⁶ is especially relevant here. The reader must either make the same imaginative leap as Bultmann or be left outside in puzzlement. Ashton comments: 'If Bultmann's argument is not to remain completely incomprehensible (especially to the more traditionally minded Christian) one must allow oneself to fall under his spell, to be intellectually seduced by him.'²²⁷ A step of faith in Bultmann's understanding of the mode of God's presence in scripture is required for his theology to function.

Nevertheless, Bultmann's work does allow some of John's main themes to speak clearly, enabling a style of preaching which can present a powerful challenge to its hearers. John's dualism, in which he presents the light of Christ as opposing the darkness of the world, comes across clearly, along with the urgent importance of the decision of the individual in the present moment. Bultmann may have been rather over-zealous in clearing other material out of the way, but the result is that some central aspects of the message of the Evangelist are clearly highlighted. These themes are a challenge to Barth who, as will be seen, tends to neglect them.

There are also some striking parallels between Bultmann and Barth, as my analysis of Barth's use of John's Gospel will later show. Both theologians were struck by how some aspects of John could strengthen and develop their understanding of God's

²²⁶ Kelsey, 1999, p. 170

²²⁷ Ashton, 1991, p. 55

revelation and its conflict with human systems of thought. Both saw how those particular themes in John could be used powerfully in Christian proclamation. And both have developed strong, self-enclosed theologies which are capable of defending their position against powerful opposition, and in doing so have found ways of ignoring those sections of John which might challenge their assumptions.

4 Introduction to Barth's use of John's Gospel

4.1 Story and strategy

John's Gospel is a story.²²⁸ It is a coherent, structured narrative describing the history of a central character and his interactions with others. It contains dramatic tension, struggle, conflict, friendship, love, misunderstanding, loss, sorrow, betrayal and victory. It has a declared purpose, an intended effect on the reader: 'These things are written that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through him you may have life in his name.'²²⁹

Barth and Bultmann are both drawn to John's portrayal of Jesus Christ, each seeking to proclaim a theology which is genuinely about God. Bultmann's focus is on the possibilities opened up for the reader by the message of Jesus Christ, the invitation to have authentic life in his name. Barth's emphasis, however, is on the identity and action of that central character, the Messiah, the Son of God. Barth's approach, like Bultmann's, highlights some themes within John's Gospel but neglects others.

In the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth seeks a theology which is faithful to the ways that God has acted and revealed himself in Jesus Christ. He affirms the doctrine of the Trinity and gives a central place to Christology and to God's decision to be incarnate for us. Barth's theology is designed to show the full significance of the central character, the Word made flesh, so that all theological thought is directed towards him instead of any other alleged source of truth. As I shall show, Barth relies frequently on John's story of Jesus Christ in pursuing these goals.

Barth's use of the Gospel stories is described by Kelsey, who identifies one of Barth's main ways of construing scripture as that of 'rendering an agent'. He notes:

Narrative can 'render' a character. A skilful storyteller can make a character 'come alive' simply by his narration of events, 'come alive' in a way that no number of straight-

²²⁸ See Stibbe, 1993

²²⁹ John 20.31

forward prepositional descriptions of the same personality could accomplish. He can bring one to know the peculiar identity of this one unique person.²³⁰

In Ford's view, similarly, Barth approaches the Bible as if it were a 'realistic novel'²³¹, seeing it as portraying the character of God through narrative. Frei believes that Barth develops a 'figural' approach to the many characters found in scripture, showing that the distinctive central character of Jesus Christ illuminates and fulfils the rich complexity of human history.²³² A key part of Barth's approach to the Bible is, therefore, to see it as the reliable and definitive portrait of a person who has taken the initiative in acting to reveal his distinctive character.

However, as I shall show, Barth's approach is more that of a strategist than a storyteller. His understanding of the central importance of Jesus Christ leads him to restructure the whole of Christian dogmatics, changing the logical priority of key doctrines (such as creation, sin and incarnation) away from the obvious chronological order of the biblical narrative of salvation. Instead, Barth writes of 'the necessary connection of all theological statements with that of John 1.14,'²³³ anchoring all other doctrines, from the creation of the universe to the sanctification of the individual, to the revelation of the Word made flesh. As Torrance describes, Barth can be seen 'recasting the foundations of theological understanding and bringing it into close alignment with the incarnation of the Word of God.'²³⁴ This is partly a constructive manoeuvre, establishing Jesus Christ as the true centre for our knowledge of God and keeping theology focused on the way that God has acted to reveal himself; it is also partly a defensive manoeuvre, for it enables Barth to defend theology from other approaches which he believes would distort it.

Barth rejects a central emphasis on human beings, including Schleiermacher's focus on experience. He also has Bultmann's existentialist theology in mind, being deeply opposed to the way that Bultmann places individual human decision at the centre of his understanding of Christianity. The shape of Barth's theology is, in some ways, like Bultmann's turned inside-out: the divine decision to be incarnate is placed

²³⁰ Kelsey, 1999, p. 39

²³¹ Ford, 1979, p. 76

²³² See Higon, 2004a, p. 155-176

²³³ CD I.2, p. 123

²³⁴ Torrance, 1990, p. ix

at the centre and individual human decisions are cast far out onto the margins. Their use of John is therefore very different.

Barth also rejects the idea that the human intellect can be established as judge of all things so that human beings can deduce the truth about God from their own observations and rationality. Throughout the *Church Dogmatics*, he opposes human systems of thought whenever they might seek to take precedence over God's revelation of himself. He aims, as Hartwell notes, 'to free his theology from any philosophical or anthropological elements which might serve as its basis.'²³⁵ His goal is always to understand God in the way that God had actually revealed himself: to separate the Word of God from any purely human word.

Webster comments that the entire *Church Dogmatics* is directed against the error of 'God in general'.²³⁶ God, for Barth, is always God in particular: God as he has revealed himself in the person and story of Jesus Christ, human and divine. Such 'particularism' is one of the six motifs in the *Church Dogmatics* which Hunsinger notes.²³⁷ The trouble with 'God in general', as Webster describes, is that he is 'an open field for the exercise of the speculative arts.'²³⁸ Here Barth finds dangerous human arrogance and ignorance at work. Instead of allowing God to introduce and explain himself to people, they work out what they think he ought to be like and then give him a place in philosophical systems of their own devising. Barth insists:

As its very name suggests, Christian theology has to do with Jesus Christ, with the history of the covenant of grace as it leads up to him and has its source in him, and therefore with the almighty operation of God governing all cosmic occurrence as it is revealed at this point. It does not first consider the creature and its activity in general, then work out a concept of the supreme being, then confer upon this being the name of God.²³⁹

²³⁵ Hartwell, 1964, p. 13-14

²³⁶ Webster, 2000b, p. 89, quoting CD II.2 p 52

²³⁷ Hunsinger, 1991

²³⁸ Webster, 2000b, p. 89

²³⁹ CD III.3, p. 141

Balthasar observes: 'Nothing was more repugnant to Barth than the neutrality of the abstract, in which man continually tries, whether covertly or openly, to exalt himself over God's own particularity.'²⁴⁰

Barth attacks modernity's claims to be able to establish neutral, objective knowledge in the realm of theology. He seeks instead to focus on God's action in revealing himself. As I describe Barth's use of John's Gospel, I will show how he therefore seeks to make all areas of dogmatics look towards the revelation of the Word made flesh, aiming to protect them from rival claims to truth. Torrance, quoting John's Gospel, affirms Barth's approach in this way:

[Theology]... rests upon God's decision to give himself to man as the object of his knowledge and upon the content of that gift. This is the epistemological significance of the incarnation, for Jesus Christ himself is the way and the truth and the life, and theological thinking is grounded in the objectivity of the concrete act of God in him, and is thinking that is wholly determined by its object, God become man, the Word made flesh, full of grace and truth.²⁴¹

My research has involved examining the whole of the *Church Dogmatics* to find the ways in which Barth uses John's Gospel, while mapping these references onto a large copy of the text of John. I have thereby been able to discover which parts of the text he emphasises and which he neglects. I have tried to read John with Barth and also to look at Barth from a Johannine perspective, holding Barth to account for any ways in which he does not appear to be true to the whole of John's Gospel. Certain verses feature many times in the *Church Dogmatics*, while other aspects of John's Gospel pass by unnoticed. In many cases, the neglected verses do not fit comfortably into his theology, exposing limitations in his strategy of retreat. Often, these unused verses are very significant in Bultmann's theology. In some cases, Barth highlights part of a verse, while the other half fits in better with Bultmann's existentialist approach. I return later to look at some examples in detail.²⁴²

²⁴⁰ Balthasar, 1992, p. 195

²⁴¹ Torrance, 1990, p. 59

²⁴² See Chapter 8.4

4.2 Verses used most often by Barth

A helpful first impression of Barth's use of John can be gained by identifying the verses he uses most often. I have listed below all the verses (or parts of verses) in John's Gospel which Barth refers to six or more times in the *Church Dogmatics*, and have grouped them according to themes. These themes will be addressed in detail in Chapters 5 to 9.

Identity of Jesus

- 1.1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
- 1.3 All things came into being through him
- 1.15 John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.""
- 4.42 'This is truly the Saviour of the world.'
- 5.39 'You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf.'
- 8.12 'I am the light of the world.'
- 10.11 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.'
- 11.25 'I am the resurrection and the life.'
- 14.6 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life.'
- 15.1 'I am the true vine.'
- 20.28 Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!'

Here Barth picks out a distinctively Johannine theme, making much use of the 'I am' sayings and the Prologue in order to establish the identity and universal significance of Jesus Christ, which are of great importance in his theology.

Jesus and the Father

- 1.18 No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.
- 4.34 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.'
- 5.17 'My Father is still working, and I also am working.'
- 5.26 'For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself.'

- 5.30 'I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me.'
- 5.36 'But I have a testimony greater than John's. The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me.'
- 9.4 'We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day.'
- 10.17 'For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again.'
- 10.30 'The Father and I are one.'
- 14.9 'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.'
- 14.10 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me.'
- 17.5 'So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.'

In a closely related area, Barth refers often to the verses in John's Gospel which describe the relationship between the Son and the Father, as did many of the Church Fathers. Barth uses these to show the significance of Jesus Christ, the one who is God and who is the unique revelation of God in the world. He also uses some of them to show that Jesus, in serving the Father, is the pattern for Christian discipleship and the source of our understanding of true humanity.

Jesus and the World, Incarnation

- 1.5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it
- 1.9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.
- 1.10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.
- 1.11 He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him
- 1.14 The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory.
- 1.29 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'
- 12.46 'I have come as light into the world.'

The *Church Dogmatics* relies repeatedly on John 1.14. There are 417 citations of that verse, 582 sentences including 'Word' and 'flesh' and many passages which explore this theme.²⁴³ This description of the incarnation plays a central role in establishing

²⁴³ Found by searching the *Church Dogmatics* in the *Digital Karl Barth Library* at <http://solomon.dkbl.alexanderstreet.com>

the nature and structure of Barth's theology, as will be seen during this chapter. It justifies an understanding of a revelation which has real content but also freedom, which can be heard but never mastered, and which points towards God but does not contain him. It is at the heart of a theology in which the incarnation is asserted at the beginning and which is permeated by Christology. It is the fixed point around which doctrines of creation, election, sin, anthropology and providence are rearranged. Barth writes: 'The saying in John 1.14 is the centre and the theme of all theology and indeed is really the whole of theology in a nutshell.'²⁴⁴ The other verses here support aspects of the same understanding, revelation brought into the world by Jesus Christ.

Salvation

- 1.12 He gave power to become children of God
- 1.16 From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.
- 3.3' No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.'
- 3.5' No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.'
- 3.16 God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.
- 5.24 'Anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgement, but has passed from death to life.'
- 6.51 'The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.'
- 8.36 'So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.'
- 14.18 'I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.'
- 14.19 'Because I live, you also will live.'
- 17.3 'And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.'
- 17.19 'For their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.'

These verses support Barth's understanding of divine initiative and love, and of the universal significance of the salvation brought by Jesus Christ.

Cross, victory

- 12.32 'I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.'
- 15.13 'No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.'
- 16.33 'Take courage, I have conquered the world.'

²⁴⁴ From a letter written in 1952, quoted in Busch, 1994, p. 379-380

19.30 'It is finished.'

These verses enable Barth to emphasise the glorious, completed work of Christ and its significance for the whole world.

The Spirit

1.33 'I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit."'

3.8 'The wind blows where it chooses.'

4.24 'God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.'

6.63 'It is the spirit that gives life.'

14.26 'The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.'

15.26 'When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf.'

16.13 'When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.'

20.22 'When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."'

John 3.8 is important in justifying Barth's emphasis on the freedom of God. John 14.26, 16.13 and 20.22 help Barth to tie the Holy Spirit closely to Jesus Christ, avoiding any extensive separate exploration of the Spirit's identity and role.

The Jews

4.22 'Salvation is from the Jews.'

8.56 'Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad.'

Barth presents Jesus as the fulfilment of the Old Testament, interpreting its meaning through him.

The Christian life

12.36 'Children of light'

13.34 'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.'

15.5 'Apart from me you can do nothing.'

15.10 'If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.'

Barth's analysis of the Christian life points strongly towards Jesus Christ, who is the light of Christians and the vine in which they abide, rather than centring on individual Christians themselves.

Narrative and other characters

13.1-20 These verses describe the washing of the disciples' feet.

Usually Barth uses John's Gospel in large-scale, structural, strategic ways, mostly showing little interest in the details of the narrative. John the Baptist, the witness who points towards Jesus, appears to be Barth's favourite supporting character. However, the account of the washing of the disciples' feet, which is unique to John's Gospel, is of great importance to Barth. This is a defining moment, which shows the love and the humility of the Son of God and is the pattern for Christian service.

4.3 Structure of Chapters 5 to 9

The themes identified above will be explored in more detail in Chapters 5 to 9. I could have presented my work as a commentary in the order of the text of the *Church Dogmatics* or in the order of the text of John, but I have found that a more revealing way of combining and analysing these observations is to consider a number of different aspects of the nature of a story. John's Gospel is a story with a central character (Chapter 5); there is a background to the story and it has a dramatic series of interactions between the central character and others (Chapter 6); it has a narrative which shows a real progression through time (Chapter 7); and it is designed to have a particular effect on its readers (Chapter 8). I shall consider each of these aspects in

turn, before reaching a conclusion about Barth's approach to the drama of John's Gospel (Chapter 9).

5 The central character

5.1 The decision of God

John's Gospel introduces its central character as the Word who was with God in the beginning and who was God. Mark introduces Jesus as a man, Matthew as a baby descended from Abraham, and Luke as a baby descended from Adam, but John takes the distinctive step of presenting him first at the moment of creation. This evidence of the divine identity and priority of Jesus Christ is important for Barth. His longest analysis of any single text from John's Gospel in the *Church Dogmatics* concerns John 1.1-2, and is just one of many references to the Prologue.

It is significant that these five pages of small-print on John 1.1-2 are presented in order to establish those verses as the key text underlying Barth's doctrine of election in Volume II.2.²⁴⁵ McCormack suggests that history will show that 'the greatest contribution of Karl Barth to the development of church doctrine' is 'his doctrine of election'.²⁴⁶ It is widely seen as the most surprising and controversial part of his theology, and here the structural changes which Barth makes to theology are at their most revolutionary. Barth describes himself as being 'driven irresistibly to reconstruction'²⁴⁷ in relation to this doctrine. Chung sees it as 'absolutely innovative and without any precedent in the history of Christian theology.'²⁴⁸ Significantly, it is John's account of the Word who was in the beginning with God and who was God which provides the foundations for Barth's new structure.

Yet John 1 is far from being an obvious text to draw on in an exploration of the doctrine of election. When Calvin looked for 'scriptural testimonies' to confirm his work in this area, he turned primarily to Ephesians 1.4-5, Colossians 1.12, Romans 9-11 and a series of texts from later in John, all of which speak explicitly of God choosing and calling specific individuals and groups of people.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁵ CD II.2, p. 95-99

²⁴⁶ McCormack, 2000, p. 99

²⁴⁷ CD II.2, p. x

²⁴⁸ Chung, 2006, p. 71

²⁴⁹ Calvin, 1960, p. 932-941

However, what Barth now means by election is not a sorting out of human beings into two categories, a division which describes the fate of particular human beings. What Barth means by election is all about Jesus Christ: it is God's free decision from eternity to be incarnate for us and for our salvation, and thereby to be gracious towards us, and to be God who is for us and with us. It is a decision which is at the very heart of Barth's theology, and at the centre of Barth's understanding of who God has freely chosen to be. Jesus Christ is, Barth declares, both the electing God and the elected man; and he is both the rejected man and the elected man. Everything points towards him and has its true meaning and significance in him.

Barth uses the opening verses of John's Gospel in a revolutionary way to justify placing Jesus Christ firmly at beginning and the centre of his theology, claiming: 'In the name and person of Jesus Christ we are called upon to recognise the Word of God, the decree of God and the election of God at the beginning of all things, at the basis of our faith in the ways and works of God.'²⁵⁰ He therefore insists that it is impossible to look behind or before Jesus Christ to find any theological truth which is prior or more significant. He writes:

There is no higher place at which our thinking and speaking of the works of God can begin than this name. We are not thinking or speaking rightly of God himself if we do not take as our starting-point the fact which should be both 'first and last': that from all eternity God elected to bear this name. Over against all that is really outside God, Jesus Christ is the eternal will of God, the eternal decree of God and the eternal beginning of God.

This is an innovative, strategic restructuring of theology, dependent on John 1. Theology, instead of being drawn towards other authorities, or drifting towards other areas of human knowledge, or speculating about God in general, is now firmly anchored to Jesus Christ. Barth insists on the supremacy of Jesus in the revelation of the truth: 'He is the Word of God in whose truth everything is disclosed and whose truth cannot be over-reached or conditioned by any other word.'²⁵¹

In a clear and deliberate contrast to Bultmann's existentialist emphasis on human decision, Barth places the divine decision to be incarnate at the centre of his theology,

²⁵⁰ CD II.2, p. 99; see Chapter 5.4 below for further analysis of Barth's view of the *Logos*

²⁵¹ CD II.2, p. 94

in a way which completely marginalises all human choices. Barth works outwards from this confident centre and demands that all theology must be brought into line with this one great, eternal decision of God. If we are to talk of the election of human beings, it can only be done in harmony with this fundamental gracious decision of God to be incarnate for us. He declares: 'He is God's choice, before which, without with and apart from which God has made no other.'²⁵²

Barth is here planting a flag on what seems to him to be the true, certain centre of theology, around which all his dogmatic forces must be arranged in due order. Jesus Christ is the one, great eternal choice, who is decisive both for all creation and even for God himself. Barth writes: 'Jesus Christ is himself the divine election of grace. For this reason he is God's Word, God's decree and God's beginning. He is so all-inclusively, comprehending absolutely within himself all things and everything, enclosing within himself the autonomy of all other words, decrees and beginnings.'²⁵³

Barth therefore sees Jesus Christ as the one vantage point from which God can be known, and utterly refuses to acknowledge any theological location which is in any way independent from him and could be significant in itself. He insists: 'As this creature – because this is what God sees and wills – he is before all things, even before the dawn of his own time.... At no level or time can we have to do with God without having also to do with this man.'²⁵⁴ This bold strategic manoeuvre depends on John 1.

5.2 *Against the decretum absolutum: Jesus Christ as the electing God*

When Barth reassigns the term 'election' to God's fundamental decision to be incarnate for us and to be gracious to us, elevating that decision above all else, the most obvious casualty of his restructuring is the Calvinist doctrine of double predestination. Although Calvinist theology has a place for God's gracious decision

²⁵² KD II.2, p. 101, my translation (CD II.2, p. 94)

²⁵³ CD II.2, p. 95

²⁵⁴ CD IV.2, p. 33

to be incarnate, it also has a place for another decision, limiting God's grace to certain chosen people and predestining others to damnation, a mysterious and hidden *decretum absolutum*. As Thompson explains, Calvin's view of election had described a hidden place of decision 'behind the back of Jesus Christ, as it were.'²⁵⁵ From Barth's perspective, such a decision would be an intolerable rival, a dark mystery which is at odds with God's gracious decision to be incarnate for us. Barth's strategic work on election involves bringing all other events and choices into line with God's great decision, putting them in their correct subordinate context.

Barth therefore uses John 1.1-2, John 8.56f ('Before Abraham was, I am'), John 12.34 ('The Messiah remains forever') and John 17.5 ('The glory that I had in your presence before the world existed'), along with other verses from Genesis onwards, to emphasise God's eternal gracious choice to live in covenant with us, a decision and commitment which goes back to the beginning. He writes: 'All these passages describe this beginning under the name of Jesus Christ, whose person is that of the executor within the universe and time of the primal decision of divine grace, the person itself being obviously the content of this decision.'²⁵⁶ Barth goes on to declare that the assertion that Jesus Christ is the electing God 'crowds out and replaces the idea of a *decretum absolutum*.'²⁵⁷

Now in the place of this blank, this unknown quantity, we are to put the name of Jesus Christ... How can the doctrine of predestination be anything but 'dark' and obscure if in its very first tenet, the tenet which determines all the rest, it can speak only of a *decretum absolutum*? In trying to understand Jesus Christ as the electing God we abandon this tradition, but we hold fast by John 1.1-2.²⁵⁸

Barth criticises Calvin for separating Jesus Christ and God, 'thinking that what was in the beginning with God must be sought elsewhere than in Jesus Christ.'²⁵⁹ He insists that there can be no dark corner in the mind of God which is separate from Jesus Christ and God's gracious decision to be incarnate for us: 'Jesus Christ is the electing God... In no depth of the God head shall we encounter any other but him...

²⁵⁵ Thompson, 1991, p. 16

²⁵⁶ CD II.2, p. 103

²⁵⁷ CD II.2, p. 103

²⁵⁸ CD II.2, p. 103-104

²⁵⁹ CD II.2, p. 111

There is no such thing as a *decretum absolutum*. There is no such thing as a will of God apart from the will of Jesus Christ.’²⁶⁰

Barth’s opposition to the *decretum absolutum* is not just a dislike of the idea of predestination to damnation in itself, but a sense that this doctrine pulls theology out of its true shape. It distorts and qualifies the revelation of the grace of God in Jesus Christ, and it establishes a rival position of theological significance which challenges the central importance of Jesus Christ. For Barth, God’s gracious decision to be incarnate for us is the supreme central truth and event, and everything else must fall into line with it.

5.3 Against the *λογος ἄσαρκος*: God’s eternal decision to be God for us

Similar to Barth’s rejection of a *decretum absolutum* in Volume II is his repeated rejection of a *λογος ἄσαρκος* in Volumes III and IV.²⁶¹ In both situations, based on his interpretation of John 1, Barth insists that there is nothing prior to or independent of God’s decision from eternity to be incarnate for us. Previous Reformed theologians had written about the form taken by the second person of the Trinity before and separate from the incarnation, and had differentiated the *λογος incarnandus* from the *λογος incarnatus*.²⁶² But, as McCormack notes, Barth denies to the *λογος* ‘a state of being above and prior to the decision to be incarnate in time’.²⁶³

Any interest in a supposed form of the *λογος* which is prior to or separate from the revealed, incarnate Jesus Christ is something which Barth considers dangerous. Calvin himself had stated that the Son of God, when going about on the earth, still ‘continuously filled the world even as he had done from the beginning,’²⁶⁴ a state of existence often called the *extra calvinisticum*; but Barth warns that speculating about this would come close to seeking after a different god.²⁶⁵

²⁶⁰ CD II.2, p. 115

²⁶¹ CD III.1, p. 54; IV.1, p. 52, 181; IV.2, p. 33-34; IV.3, p. 397, 724

²⁶² See Heppe, 1950, p. 418, 452

²⁶³ McCormack, 2000, p. 93-95

²⁶⁴ Calvin, 1960, p. 481

²⁶⁵ CD IV.1, p. 181

In rejecting any interest in a λογος ἄσαρκος, Barth is asserting that we cannot get behind Jesus Christ to any previous divine identity or independent knowledge of God, not just because such a Word is out of our grasp but because there is no prior form of the Word which can be separated from the intention to be incarnate. Instead of picturing the triune God existing mysteriously for unimaginable tracts of time before the event of the incarnation, and speculating about what the second person of the Trinity might have been like then, Barth projects the incarnation backwards onto eternity by insisting on an eternal decision to be incarnate. There is no divine Word which is independent of or prior to that decision. As a result, Jenson comments: 'As God's decision, which is God's eternal reality, Jesus of Nazareth occurred in eternity before all time.'²⁶⁶

This means that the incarnation is not just an event which occurs part-way through time, but a decision which determines God's eternal being. God's gracious choice to be incarnate for us becomes his own free decision about who he always is. McCormack comments: 'What Barth is suggesting is that election is the event in God's life in which he assigns to himself the being he will have for all eternity.'²⁶⁷ Early in his account of 'God with us' in Volume IV.1, Barth writes: 'From all eternity God elected and determined that he himself would become man for us men... Ontologically, therefore, the covenant of grace is already included and grounded in Jesus Christ, in the human form and human content which God willed to give his Word from all eternity.'²⁶⁸

Therefore, for Barth, we cannot speculate about any point in time or eternity when God did not will to be God *for us* and to become flesh for us. There is nothing hidden behind the revelation of God in Jesus Christ for us to discover using any alleged rival source of theological truth. In Barth's theology, this revolutionary doctrinal

²⁶⁶ Jenson, 1969, p. 69

²⁶⁷ McCormack, 2000, p. 98. However, Hunsinger (2008, p. 180) argues that 'Barth nowhere says that God's being is *constituted* by God's act'. While acknowledging Barth's repeated opposition to human speculation about the λογος ἄσαρκος, Hunsinger insists that there is still a necessary place in Barth's theology for the λογος ἄσαρκος to exist (p. 188), as does Molnar (2002, p. 64). These ontological issues are linked with a separate set of Barth's strategic concerns relating to the freedom of God and his view of the economic and immanent Trinities, which will be discussed further in Chapter 5.6 below. In the present discussion, I follow McCormack in emphasising Barth's strategic aim of showing that there is nothing hidden behind the incarnate Christ which could in any way challenge Jesus' central theological significance.

²⁶⁸ CD IV.1, p. 45

manoeuvre protects the central position of the Word made flesh, tying God closely to the ways that his revelation of himself is described in the Bible. Barth's reconstruction of theology allows him to dismiss much speculation about God, including all attempts to deduce the being of God from philosophy. He warns: 'Under the title of a λογος ἄσαρκος we pay homage to a *Deus absconditus* and therefore to some image of God which we have made for ourselves.'²⁶⁹

Barth's rejection of a λογος ἄσαρκος also supports his opposition, in Volume III.1, of natural theology. He emphasises that all things are created through the Word, who is Jesus Christ, and who is to be the centre and source of our knowledge of God. Creation is therefore rightly understood through Jesus, rather than God being investigated by us through our observations of creation in a way which is independent of Jesus.²⁷⁰ Commenting again on John 1, Barth writes: 'The real basis of creation... is that the Word was with God, existing before the world was, and that from all eternity God wanted to see and know and love his only begotten Son as the mediator, his Word incarnate.'²⁷¹

Barth's opposition to a λογος ἄσαρκος similarly supports, in Volume IV.1, the way that he sees creation as serving the purpose of the covenant which is made through the incarnate Word.²⁷² He maintains that, from the beginning, God sees creation as the realm in which his Son would redeem humanity, and sees his Son as the one who would be incarnate because of his love for the cosmos.

In all these discussions of the λογος, Barth is exploring the interpretation and implications of John 1, but he has gone a long way beyond anything that John, or any part of the Bible, declares. He insists: 'It has to be kept in mind that the whole conception of the λογος ἄσαρκος, the "second person" of the Trinity as such, is an abstraction... It is often touched upon in the New Testament, though nowhere expounded directly.'²⁷³ Pannenberg supports Barth, commenting: 'The conception of the *logos asarkos* must be judged as an expression of the fact that the assimilation of

²⁶⁹ CD IV.1, p. 52

²⁷⁰ See Chapter 6.2 for more detailed analysis of Barth's understanding of creation

²⁷¹ CD III.1, p. 54-55

²⁷² CD IV.1, p. 53

²⁷³ CD III.1, p. 54

Hellenistic and Hellenistic-Jewish cosmology by Christian theology did not lead to a total melting down of the alien substance.²⁷⁴

Yet John 1.1-2 does seem to refer to a *λογος ἄσαρκος*, as theologians have observed since the early Church.²⁷⁵ It describes the presence of the Word with God at the beginning, and the Word's role in creation, well before any mention of incarnation. Others note that John is echoing the beginning of Genesis, as well as the Old Testament's accounts of divine Wisdom,²⁷⁶ allusions which would surely invite the reader to reflect on the long history which preceded the appearance of the Messiah. Yet Barth is in a hurry to move our attention forwards to the familiar concrete reality of the incarnate Word. He insists that John 1.1-2 'points to the person who is the theme of the whole ensuing Gospel, and of whom it is said in v. 14: "the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us."²⁷⁷

Barth later refines his argument and seeks to justify his approach by noting that the same Greek words (*οὗτος ἦν*) that appear in John 1.2 concerning the Word ('*He was in the beginning with God*') are used by John the Baptist in John 1.15 concerning Jesus Christ ('*This was he of whom I said...*'), asserting that the former are used as an anticipation of the latter.²⁷⁸ However, these are ordinary and commonly used Greek words and the two occurrences are separated by ten verses. Furthermore, the first occurrence is part of the author's narrative while the second is spoken by the Baptist. Barth's theory is is not a convincing argument and I have been unable to find any Johannine scholars who even mention it – they tend to note instead the connection between John 1.15 and 1.30.²⁷⁹ Pollard does comment that 'it is notoriously difficult, if not impossible, to decide at what exact point in the Prologue St John begins to think of the *incarnate* Logos, Jesus Christ.²⁸⁰' But Barth states confidently: 'The whole Prologue (with the possible exception of the first phrase of v. 1) – although it certainly speaks of the eternal Logos – speaks also of the man Jesus.' Barth also

²⁷⁴ Pannenberg, 2002, p. 455

²⁷⁵ E.g. Athanasius' reference (1995, p. 40) to the 'incorporeal and incorruptible and immaterial Word of God'; also Cyril of Alexandria, quoted by Kelly, 1977, p. 319

²⁷⁶ E.g. Lincoln, 2005, p. 94-98

²⁷⁷ CD III.1, p. 54

²⁷⁸ CD IV.2, p. 33

²⁷⁹ e.g. Brown, 1966, p. 35, who sees vs. 15 as a copy of vs. 30 made by the final redactor

²⁸⁰ Pollard, 1970, p. 13

alleges that his view is supported by the way that John 6.51 equates 'the living bread that came down from heaven' with Jesus' flesh. While others note the reference to the manna eaten by the Israelites in the desert and see an allusion to the Eucharist,²⁸¹ Barth uses the verse to associate the humanity of Jesus with the eternal Logos.

Barth's rejection of a *λογος ἄσαρκος* has been controversial. He describes 'the pre-existing God-man, who, as such, is the eternal ground of the whole divine election,'²⁸² which leads Brunner to complain that 'the Bible contains no such doctrine.'²⁸³ Brunner writes: 'If the eternal pre-existence of the God-man were a fact, then the incarnation would no longer be an *event* at all... In the New Testament the new element is the fact that the eternal Son of God *became* Man.'

However, McCormack describes Brunner's reaction as resting on a 'fairly drastic misunderstanding' of Barth and asserts more carefully: '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.'²⁸⁴

Brunner's concern is that Barth turns the incarnation into a mere demonstration of the eternal being of the God-man, so that it is no longer a real event within time. Following McCormack, however, it can be seen that Barth is exalting the significance of the event of the incarnation within time to such a degree that it becomes decisive for the eternal being of God. It is not that Barth wants people to focus on an image of the *Logos* as having arms and legs at the time of the creation. It is rather that the incarnation is the decisive fact whose significance outweighs all else in time and space and eternity and, most importantly, through which all else must be understood. As Jenson comments: 'The event of Jesus Christ's life, because it is the central event in the life of the eternal God, is the eternal presupposition for all else that happens.'²⁸⁵

Discussing this same area of Barth's theology, Jüngel suggests that 'the being of the man Jesus with God is to be understood in the sense of the doctrine of the

²⁸¹ e.g. Moloney, 1998, p. 223

²⁸² KD II.2, p. 118, my translation (CD II.2, p. 110 fails to translate *praeexistierende*)

²⁸³ Brunner, 1949, p. 347

²⁸⁴ McCormack, 2000, p. 92, 100

²⁸⁵ Jenson, 1969, p. 69

enhypostasis and *anhypostasis* of the human nature of God.²⁸⁶ It is not to be regarded as a 'projection of a temporal existence into eternity'; instead, the human nature of Jesus should be seen as having an existence in time which is entirely dependent on and fully associated with God's eternal decision.

Barth's discussions of the *λογος ἄσαρκος* use John's Gospel in a way which show his strategic concern to establish the strong, defensive centre of his theology. He raises the significance of Jesus Christ above all else and, in doing so, takes John in an unusual direction based on his own assumptions. As Ford notes, in avoiding a *λογος ἄσαρκος*, Barth shows 'knowledge in excess of the story'.²⁸⁷ Despite Barth's assertions, there is nothing in the scriptures to suggest that God's entire being is tied so closely to the history of our redemption and made known to us so comprehensively. Barth is perhaps wise to oppose speculation about details of God's nature which are far beyond us, matters about which God has revealed nothing. But it is an overreaction to suggest that these inaccessible realms of knowledge do not actually exist. There is no passage of scripture which seeks to limit God to his revelation of himself in Jesus Christ. Instead, texts such as Romans 11.33-34 stress the gulf between human understanding and the mind and ways of God, even in the light of his revelation, while 1 Corinthians 13.9 indicates that knowledge of God in the present age can only be partial.

A more consistently cautious approach is taken by Barrett, who comments: 'The Logos exists, but is unknown and incomprehensible apart from the historical figure of Jesus.'²⁸⁸ Barrett directs attention towards the revelation of the incarnate Jesus, which occupies all but the first few verses of John's Gospel. Unlike Barth, his avoidance of speculation about a *λογος ἄσαρκος* requires no claim to any additional knowledge about the nature of God. Barth however, in seeking to defend theology from those who seek knowledge beyond the revelation found in scripture, has engaged in considerable speculation himself.

²⁸⁶ Jüngel, 2001, p. 96, and see Chapter 6.7 below for further implications of the *anhypostasia* and *enhypostasia* of Jesus Christ in Barth's theology

²⁸⁷ Ford, 1981, p. 182

²⁸⁸ Barrett, 1978, p. 155

5.4 The meaning of 'Logos'

Commentaries on John's Gospel find no shortage of ancient sources to inform long investigations into the origins of the idea of the *Logos*. Brown, for example describes a Hellenistic philosophical tradition beginning with Heraclitus in the 6th century BC, who used *Logos* to describe 'the eternal principle of order in the universe'. This tradition continues through Stoic references to the guiding, controlling mind of a 'rather pantheistic God', to Philo and to the Gnostics.²⁸⁹ Bultmann's theories about the Gnostic origins of John have already been mentioned: he looks in detail at the origins of *Logos* in his commentary.²⁹⁰ Brown also describes a series of Old Testament parallels, including references to the 'word of the Lord', and the personification of Wisdom.²⁹¹ Some caution is expressed by Pollard, who looks at the origins of the concept of the *Logos* but writes: 'John uses the Logos-concept, whatever it meant for him, only in order to establish contact with his readers, whoever they were. Once he has identified the Logos (made flesh) with "the only Son" in i.14, he discards the concept, never to use it again.'²⁹²

Barth is even more wary of enquiries into the meaning of *Logos*. Although he is not usually one to avoid lengthy, systematic explorations of important theological matters, he dismisses quickly the background to verses which, as have been seen, are of central importance to his theology. In Volume II.2, when Barth looks at John 1.1-2 in detail, he refuses to get caught up in speculation about the 'historical genetics' of the idea of the *Logos*. He only notes briefly that here are a 'whole host of possibilities, ranging from the Logos of Philo to the personal, semi-personal and impersonal essences of Mandaistic theory.'²⁹³ Without mentioning Bultmann's name, he briefly writes off his rival's work as futile:

Within this medley it will probably always be a waste of time to look for that unknown quantity, the source used by the writer of the Fourth Gospel; for we do not know in what form the author took over this widespread and variously used concept, nor do we know

²⁸⁹ Brown, 1966, p. 520

²⁹⁰ Bultmann, 1971, p. 19-83; Chapter 3.2 above

²⁹¹ Brown, 1966, p. 521-524

²⁹² Pollard, 1970, p. 12-13

²⁹³ CD II.2, p. 96

in what way he transformed this concept, nor finally can we be absolutely certain of the fact that he did take over the concept from some other source.²⁹⁴

Barth is, as always, wary of all forms of speculation which would seem to him to involve fitting Jesus into a set of prior philosophical ideas or historical theories. He uses John's Gospel to place Jesus Christ at the very beginning of all theology, and is therefore cautious of some of the ways in which other theologians have explored the significance and origin of the title of the *Logos*. He asserts that the title is honoured by this use, rather than Jesus being honoured by the title.²⁹⁵ Jesus comes first, not any prior philosophy. Barth considers that when John tells us that Jesus is the *Logos*, he thereby 'rejects all other possible interpretations of the concept in this context, interpretations which would define it primarily and essentially as the principle of an epistemology or of a metaphysical explanation of the universe.'²⁹⁶ He carefully avoids a direct mention of Stoic ideas about the *Logos* as a rational divine principle underlying the cosmos, ideas which to him would seem to be in danger of making Jesus accountable to natural theology.

Barth's cautious approach is at odds with most Johannine scholarship and is unconvincing. *Logos* is a title which was strongly associated with a range of important Hellenistic and Jewish ideas, and it is hard to believe that John used it without the clear intention of alluding to the ways in which he knew his readers would have already understood it.

Returning briefly to this subject in Volume III.1, Barth does acknowledge that there are various Greek and middle-eastern descriptions of a mediator who is the basis of creation and revelation and admits that 'the New Testament authors were referring to this element in the religious world of their day.'²⁹⁷ However, he insists that such a reference to their religious world 'does not mean that what they said was borrowed from it,' preferring to emphasise the significance of the Old Testament's accounts of divine wisdom. He is careful not to allow Jesus to be presented as the one fulfilling a pre-existing need for a mediator, but as the one through whom all things

²⁹⁴ CD II.2, p. 96-97

²⁹⁵ CD II.2, p. 97

²⁹⁶ CD II.2, p. 97

²⁹⁷ CD III.1, p. 52

were created, and the cause of the 'end of all mediating philosophy, theosophy and cosmology.'²⁹⁸

Instead, in Volume II.2, Barth describes what he sees as the meaning of the Johannine *Logos*: 'He is the principle, the inherently divine basis of revelation, God's announcement of himself to people.'²⁹⁹ Barth's understanding of the *Logos* emphasises divine action and initiative, carefully placing Jesus Christ at the beginning of theology, without entangling Jesus in philosophical systems or natural theology or speculation about the history of words. As with Barth's avoidance of a λογος ἄσαρκος, his eagerness to stress the absolute priority of Jesus Christ leads him to place limits around enquiries into the meaning of the Prologue of John. Barth protects Jesus from being absorbed into a philosophical system, but at the price of casting aside a rich set of images and implications which are likely to have been intended by John. If God's free decision has been for Jesus to be revealed as the *Logos* in a first-century Greek-speaking context, then it must be appropriate to look to some degree at the metaphysical and philosophical implications of that revelation.

5.5 John's Gospel and Trinitarian theology

In describing the distinctive nature of his central character, Barth takes the significant step of placing the doctrine of the Trinity close to the beginning of his *Church Dogmatics*, in Volume I.1. Other theologians have tended to reflect on general observations about natural theology, or spirituality, or sin, or the authority of scripture itself before arriving anywhere near the doctrine of the Trinity. Schleiermacher significantly placed the Trinity at the end of his lengthy work on *The Christian Faith*.³⁰⁰ Barth therefore acknowledges that he is 'adopting a very isolated position from the standpoint of dogmatic history.'³⁰¹ But he insists on looking at what is unique and distinctive about the scriptural portrayal of God, which is essential for a Christian understanding of revelation: 'The doctrine of the Trinity is

²⁹⁸ CD III.1, p. 53

²⁹⁹ KD II.2, p. 104, my translation (CD II.2, p. 97)

³⁰⁰ See Chapter 1.4

³⁰¹ CD I.1, p. 300

what basically distinguishes the Christian doctrine of God as Christian, and therefore what already distinguishes the Christian concept of revelation as Christian.’³⁰²

Barth portrays God as a real agent who has acted in the world to reveal his character in specific ways, but he is determined to avoid fitting God into spaces in human philosophical systems. He therefore rejects ‘the practice of placing the doctrine of the Trinity after the development of a concept of the nature and attributes of God in general.’³⁰³ He is careful to give priority to the particularities of the scriptural accounts of how God has chosen to act to reveal himself, making much use of John’s Gospel, and to avoid any sense that God’s nature can be deduced by human rationality. He insists: ‘We are dealing with the concept of the revelation of the God who according to Scripture and proclamation is the Father of Jesus Christ, is Jesus Christ himself, and is the Spirit of this Father and this Son... It is the concept of this God, and this concept alone, that interests dogmatics.’³⁰⁴

McCormack therefore describes Barth’s work as ‘a Christologically grounded, Christocentric theology,’³⁰⁵ while Jenson calls it ‘drastically trinitarian.’³⁰⁶ It is important to note that John’s Gospel has always been the most significant biblical text in the development of those doctrines. Moloney comments: ‘The Christology and theology of this gospel provided the raw material out of which the great Christian doctrines were forged.’³⁰⁷ This influence can be traced back as far as Irenaeus, as Hanson describes:

It is largely owing to the impact upon his mind of the Fourth Gospel that Irenaeus can be regarded as the first great theologian produced by the Christian Church. Henceforward it can almost be said without exaggeration that Christianity will be Johannine Christianity. And henceforward it is inconceivable that the doctrine of the Logos could be suppressed or abandoned as long as Christians are seeking for a Christology.³⁰⁸

John’s Gospel brings Christological issues to the foreground more explicitly than any other biblical text. Pollard, discussing the use of John’s Gospel in the early

³⁰² CD I.1, p. 301

³⁰³ CD II.1, p. 288

³⁰⁴ CD I.1, p. 291

³⁰⁵ McCormack, 1995, p. 328

³⁰⁶ Jenson, 1997, p. 35

³⁰⁷ Moloney, 1998, p. 20

³⁰⁸ Hanson, 1970, p. 426

Church, comments: 'More explicitly and more emphatically than the other New Testament writers does St John declare the divinity of Jesus Christ as eternal Son of God and at the same time the distinction between the Son and the Father.'³⁰⁹ Kealy similarly affirms: 'A study of the surviving writings, from Athanasius, Hilary of Poitiers, Eusebius of Caesarea, Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa shows the key influential role of John's Gospel through the period.'³¹⁰ Wiles writes:

The struggle with Gnosticism... involved a consideration of the right exegesis of the Fourth Gospel over a broad front. Subsequent heresies, and particularly the Arian controversy, involved a similar consideration of the right exegesis of the Gospel on the narrower front of Christological interpretation.³¹¹

Commenting on the influence of biblical texts on the beliefs of the early Church, Hengel notes that 'two towering pillars dominate the entrance to the New Testament: the Gospels according to Matthew and according to John.' He describes the early importance of Matthew in giving a 'strict ethic' which was 'fundamental to catechetical instruction.' But John, he writes, 'determined the Christological thought', with its Prologue providing the 'gateway to Christological truth'.³¹² He declares that 'the Prologue is the most influential Christological text in the New Testament.'³¹³

John's Gospel has also been the main authority for the Christian understanding of the person of the Holy Spirit and, with its accounts of the relationships between Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the main inspiration for the doctrine of the Trinity. Barrett contrasts the 'numerous and striking references to the Spirit' in John with the 'very few' in the Synoptics.³¹⁴ The whole doctrine of the Trinity is strongly dependent on John, as Painter observes:

The teaching about the Paraclete/Spirit of Truth (14.15-17, 25-26; 15.26-27; 16.7-15) also contributed strongly to the ultimate recognition of the Holy Spirit as a third divine person in relation to the Father and the Son. Indeed, John was the Gospel that provided

³⁰⁹ Pollard, 1970. p. 18

³¹⁰ Kealy, 2002, p. 62

³¹¹ Wiles, 1960, p. 112

³¹² Hengel, 2008, p. 266-267

³¹³ Hengel, 2008, p. 289

³¹⁴ Barrett, 1978, p. 88

the resources from which the church constructed its doctrine of the Trinity in terms of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.³¹⁵

Barth, in placing these traditional Christian doctrines at the foundation of his theology, builds on the work begun by the Church Fathers and follows their reliance on John's Gospel. His interest in verses from John which describe the identity of Jesus and his relationship to the Father,³¹⁶ for example, has much in common with the approach of those who first explored Christology. He declares that 'the exegesis of the fourth century must have been on the right track with its doctrine of the *homousion*.'³¹⁷ He endorses the patristic understanding of the '*anhypostasis* and *enhypostasis* of the human nature of Christ.'³¹⁸ This allows him to emphasise that 'Christ's flesh in itself has no existence', so that 'Jesus Christ is the reality of a divine act of Lordship.'³¹⁹ He also affirms the Chalcedonian Definition, while seeking to move from a static to a dynamic account of the two natures of Christ.³²⁰

Barth's use of John can be seen in this passage about the Father: 'God is unknown as our Father, as the Creator, to the degree that he is not made known by Jesus. It is especially the Johannine tradition which expresses this exclusiveness with ever-renewed emphasis: John 1.18; 5.23,37; 6.46; 8.19; 14.6, 17.25.'³²¹ He includes many references to John in his discussion of God the Son in Volume I.1, such as the following:

He can say of himself; ἐγὼ καὶ ὁ πατὴρ ἐν ἑσμέν (John 10.30). He has come from the Father (John 16.28). He has already worked hitherto, as his Father has worked (John 5.17). He has life in himself, as his Father has life in himself (John 5.26). Whoever has seen him has seen the Father (John 14.9). He can say with the Father: Before Abraham was, I am (John 8.58). And he can say to the Father: Thou lovedst me before the creation of the world (John 17.24). For he had glory before the existence of the world (John 17.5).³²²

³¹⁵ Painter, 1999, p. 620

³¹⁶ See Chapter 4.2

³¹⁷ CD II.2, p. 96

³¹⁸ CD I.2, p. 163

³¹⁹ CD I.2, p. 164-5

³²⁰ CD IV.2, p. 63-66, and see Chapter 7.2 below

³²¹ CD I.1, p. 390

³²² CD I.1, p. 401

John's Gospel also features prominently at an early point in Barth's account of the 'Obedience of the Son of God' in Volume IV.1. Barth writes:

Nowhere is the recognition of the divine Sonship more explicit than in the Gospel of John, yet it is this Gospel which causes Jesus to say expressly: 'The Father is greater than I' (John 14.28). And in line with this it is this Gospel which cannot emphasise too much that Jesus does not seek his own glory (8.50), that he does only that which he has been commissioned to do by the Father (14.31, cf. 10.18), that he keeps his Father's commandments (15.10, cf. 8.29), that it is his meat to do the will of him that sent him and to finish his work (4.34, cf. 5.36, 17.4).³²³

Barth uses John to support a discussion which asserts both that the Son is divine and also that there is an eternal obedience which 'belongs to the inner life of God.'³²⁴ He declares that God does not change when giving himself to the world in the work of reconciliation, in which the Son is obedient to the Father. Barth writes: 'He simply activates and reveals himself *ad extra*, in the world. He is in and for the world what he is in and for himself. He is in time what he is in eternity.'³²⁵ In this way, Barth's account of the eternal obedience of the Son supports rather than detracts from his strategic emphasis on the theological significance of Jesus Christ, since Jesus the one who reveals God as he really is in eternity.

Barth again draws widely on John's Gospel in his descriptions of the Holy Spirit, including a stress on the divine initiative involved in revelation: 'This is what Jesus portrays as the special work of the Holy Ghost according to John's Gospel. As the Paraclete the Spirit is the 'spirit of truth' (John 14.17; 15.26; 16.13).'³²⁶ This revelation points clearly towards Jesus: 'John's Gospel again reproduces the meaning of the New Testament as a whole when it has Jesus say of the Spirit: ἐκεῖνος μαρτυρήσει περὶ ἐμοῦ (John 15.26).'³²⁷

Barth turns repeatedly to John to explore the relationship between the Spirit and the Father and the Son. For example, he writes:

³²³ CD IV.1, p. 164

³²⁴ CD IV.1, p. 201

³²⁵ CD IV.1, p. 204

³²⁶ CD I.1, p. 454

³²⁷ CD I.1, p. 453

In John 14.16 the Spirit then appears as the (again future) gift of the Father to the disciples, the gift for which Jesus will ask the Father on their behalf. The Father will send him in Jesus' name (John 14.16). On the other hand in John 15.26 Jesus himself will send from the Father him that proceedeth from the Father... But to this end Jesus according to John 16.7 must first leave the disciples.³²⁸

Following in the footsteps of other western theologians who have explored the implications of John's Gospel, Barth goes on to affirm the Nicene Creed, including the Filioque.³²⁹ In placing the Trinity at the beginning of his theology, Barth builds on a long tradition of theological reflection on John's Gospel and takes it a stage further, emphasising always the significance of the way that God has revealed himself.

5.6 *Revelation and freedom in Trinitarian theology*

Barth's strategic approach to the Trinity seeks to exalt the particular way that God has revealed himself above any human speculation, which requires Barth to be cautious of two opposite sets of dangers. Firstly, there is the danger that the doctrine of the Trinity is not taken seriously as a true revelation of God: regarded perhaps as a human attempt to symbolise something which is far beyond language, or a quirk of theological history, or a choice by God to manifest himself in an incomplete or distorted way in order to suit the human race. Secondly, however, there is the danger that God will be diminished by this doctrine: either seemingly held captive in a set of statements, or regarded as one whose nature is determined by our own perceptions or need for salvation or by our relationship with him.³³⁰ Barth's strategic responses to both sets of challenges introduce different perspectives into his various descriptions of God, with the result that the nature of his view of the immanent and economic Trinities is a matter of current debate, as will be seen in this chapter.

Wary of the first danger, Barth insists that the doctrine of the Trinity shows the way God really is and always has been, not just the way he appears to human beings. God has appeared to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit because that is the way he is.

³²⁸ CD I.1, p. 452

³²⁹ CD I.1, p. 480

³³⁰ See Chapter 8.1 for more discussion of Barth's view of revelation

Barth writes: 'God's triunity is to be found not merely in his revelation... the Trinity is to be understood as "immanent" and not just "economic".'³³¹

On one side of the debate mentioned above, McCormack therefore writes that, for Barth, 'there is no difference in content between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity.'³³² This interpretation corresponds well with Barth's avoidance of a λογος ἄσαρκος³³³ or a *decretum absolutum*.³³⁴ Barth is insisting that there is nothing hidden behind God's revelation of himself: there exists no prior or separate aspect of God about which we could theorise.

Barth's avoidance of a λογος ἄσαρκος or a *decretum absolutum* are consequences of his doctrine of election, in which he establishes God's decision to be incarnate for us as the most significant point of theology. McCormack therefore points out a logical implication of Barth's doctrine of election for his doctrine of the Trinity, which he believes Barth should have followed through. He declares: 'These commitments require that we see the triunity of God logically as a function of divine election.... The *decision* for the covenant of grace is the ground of God's triunity and, therefore, of the eternal generation of the Son and of the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit from Father and Son.'³³⁵

McCormack notes that the Trinity (Volume I.1) precedes election (Volume II.2) in the *Church Dogmatics*, and suggests that Barth should have revised the former in the light of the consequences of the latter. However, he also complains: 'Even after his mature doctrine of election was in place, he continued to make 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.'³³⁶

In the order of my analysis of Barth's strategic use of John's Gospel, I have agreed with McCormack's view of the logical priority of Barth's account of God's eternal decision to be incarnate for us. However, McCormack demands a degree of logical consistency in Barth's multi-faceted theology which it does not claim to have.

³³¹ CD I.1, p. 333

³³² McCormack, 2007, p. 67

³³³ See Chapter 5.3

³³⁴ See Chapter 5.2

³³⁵ McCormack, 2000, p. 103

³³⁶ McCormack, 2000, p. 102

Hunsinger disputes McCormack's claim that Barth could have been more consistent,³³⁷ and stresses that Barth is right to describe a 'dialectic of hiddenness and revealedness in God.'³³⁸

In this way, on the other side of the debate, Hunsinger insists that 'the relationship between the immanent and the economic Trinity' for Barth is 'one of correspondence, not of dialectical identity.'³³⁹ Seeing Barth's response to the second set of dangers, he writes: 'It would be hard to imagine a view more contrary to Barth than one that makes the Holy Trinity a mere function of God's relationship to the world.'³⁴⁰ Similarly, Molnar writes that 'while Barth insisted that the immanent Trinity was identical in content with the economic Trinity, he also made a clear and sharp distinction in order to underscore God's freedom *in se* and *ad extra*.'³⁴¹ It is this approach which leads Hunsinger and Molnar to argue that there is a place in Barth's view of the immanent Trinity for the *λογος ἀσαρκος*.³⁴²

In my view, the unifying theme here is not one supreme doctrine or another, but Barth's strategic caution and his awareness of the threats which come from different directions. Contrary to McCormack's expectation, he will not press home his opposition to a hidden dimension of God when he is at the same time aware that he may be attacked from the rear by those who seek to tie God too closely to our own understanding, or to make God's nature dependent on ours.³⁴³ Wary of this second set of dangers, Barth insists: 'We are not saying, then, that revelation is the basis of the Trinity, as though God were the triune God only in his revelation and only for the sake of revelation.'³⁴⁴ He also affirms that the Trinitarian identity of God is not formed for us or because of us or in an encounter with us:

He is God our Father because he is so antecedently in himself as the Father of the Son.³⁴⁵

³³⁷ Hunsinger, 2008, p. 195

³³⁸ Hunsinger, 2008, p. 190

³³⁹ Hunsinger, 2008, p. 197, note 22

³⁴⁰ Hunsinger, 2008, p. 195

³⁴¹ Molnar, 2003, p. 60

³⁴² See Chapter 5.3, especially footnote 267

³⁴³ I return in Chapter 9 to the question of the degree to which Barth's theology is shaped and determined by his perception of external threats.

³⁴⁴ CD I.1, p. 312

³⁴⁵ CD I.1, p. 384

He is the Son of God who has come to us or the Word of God that has been spoken to us, because he is so antecedently in himself as the Son or Word of God the Father.³⁴⁶

As such he is the Holy Spirit, by receiving whom we become the children of God, because, as the Spirit of the love of God the Father and the Son, he is so antecedently in himself.³⁴⁷

Alongside this move, as Ford notes, Barth also takes great care to emphasise repeatedly the freedom of God, so that he can assert God's transcendence in spite of this 'scandal of particularity'.³⁴⁸ Barth affirms repeatedly both that God has genuinely revealed himself and that God remains free. This strong emphasis on the freedom of God as a key part of Barth's doctrine of God is found especially in Volume II.1, where Barth writes about 'the being of God as the one who loves in freedom.'³⁴⁹ God's actions towards his creation, which reveal his character, are set in the context of his total independence. Furthermore, God's attributes are 'perfections of the divine freedom.'³⁵⁰

Barth carefully maintains this emphasis on freedom even alongside his usual emphasis on incarnation. He resists talking about incarnation as any form of limitation on God's part, even a freely-chosen self-limitation.

The incarnation not only does not mean any curtailment or compromising of the immutable divine nature... it means the revelation of it in its perfection, a perfection which we recognise in God the Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer only because he is the God revealed, present and active in the God-manhood of Jesus Christ.³⁵¹

With this clarification, John's description of the Word made flesh, revealing the Trinitarian God, continues to take a central place in Barth's theology.

5.7 The eclipse of the Spirit

As already seen, the doctrine of the Trinity, developed in the early Church and affirmed by Barth, depends greatly on John's Gospel. John describes the divine

³⁴⁶ CD I.1, p. 399

³⁴⁷ CD I.1, p. 448

³⁴⁸ Ford, 1981, p. 137

³⁴⁹ CD II.1, p. 257-321

³⁵⁰ CD II.1, p. 440-678

³⁵¹ CD II.1, p. 515-516

identity of the Spirit and the Son especially clearly, along with the relationships between the persons of the Trinity. In addition, as Caird observes, the 'personal distinctness of the Spirit is clearer in John' than elsewhere in the New Testament.³⁵² Williams, commenting on the differences between John and Luke, notes: 'Not the least important of these is the firm and consistent application (in John 14-16) of straightforwardly personal language to the Paraclete conceived as, in some sense, "over against" Jesus and the Father.'³⁵³

However, when Barth looks specifically at the Spirit, John's Gospel is not his main inspiration, and such personal distinctness is not prominent in the *Church Dogmatics*. Instead, referring to 2 Corinthians 13.13 and Romans 12.5, Hunsinger notes: 'An overview of Barth on the Holy Spirit can be gained by seeing that he regards the Spirit as "the mediator of communion".'³⁵⁴ Following Augustine, as Hunsinger observes,³⁵⁵ Barth describes the Spirit as follows: 'He is the commonality, or better, the community, the act of communion, of the Father and the Son.'³⁵⁶

In affirming the western form of the Nicene Creed, Barth comments: 'The Filioque expresses recognition of the communion between the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit is the love which is the essence of the relation between these two modes of being of God.'³⁵⁷ Barth tends, therefore, to describe the Spirit as an attribute or action of the other two persons of the Trinity. For example, he refers to the Spirit as the 'awakening power of the Word made flesh.'³⁵⁸ Moltmann criticises Barth's view of the Spirit, writing:

The Father and the Son are already one in their relationship to one another, the relationship of eternal generation and eternal self-giving. In order to think of their mutual relationship as love, there is no need for a third person of the Trinity. If the Spirit is only termed the unity of what is separated, then he loses every centre of activity. He is then an energy but not a Person. He is then a relationship but not a subject.³⁵⁹

³⁵² Caird, 1995, p. 212

³⁵³ Williams, 2000, p. 119

³⁵⁴ Hunsinger, 2000, p. 179

³⁵⁵ Hunsinger, 2000, p. 180

³⁵⁶ KD I.1, p. 493, my translation (CD I.1, p. 470)

³⁵⁷ CD I.1, p. 480

³⁵⁸ CD IV.1, p. 652

³⁵⁹ Moltmann, 1981, p. 142

Similarly, Pannenberg observes that Barth 'does not do justice to the Spirit's personal independence in the trinitarian life of God and therefore in the economy of salvation.'³⁶⁰

However, Barth emphasises those verses in John which link the Spirit to Jesus Christ, such as the breathing of the Spirit on the disciples in John 20.22, about which he comments: 'We cannot say more of the Holy Spirit and his work than that he is the power in which Jesus Christ attests himself, attests himself effectively, creating in man response and obedience.'³⁶¹

He also refers nine times to John 14.26, which describes the Holy Spirit's task of reminding the disciples of the teachings of Jesus. And it is interesting to note his approach to John 16.7, which describes Jesus' promise to send the Spirit. Barth uses this to focus on the Son as the one who sends the Spirit;³⁶² but he fails to note the status which this verse gives to the Spirit, being the one whose presence Jesus declares will be more advantageous to the disciples than his own.

Overall, Barth says little about the Spirit himself. Williams comments that 'Barth's doctrine of the Spirit is, notoriously, one of the least developed areas of his system.'³⁶³ Barth does express an interest, towards the end of his life, in the development of 'a theology predominantly and decisively of the Holy Spirit,'³⁶⁴ and the unwritten fifth volume of the *Church Dogmatics*, on the theme of redemption, would have contained pneumatology. But, in common with many other theologians,³⁶⁵ it is clear that his priorities have been elsewhere.

Barth is preoccupied with continuing worries about the place of human experience and decision. For Barth, talk of the Holy Spirit is dangerously close to talk of human spirituality, subjective experience and personal choice. This is a point of leverage which his enemies could use to pull theology back into a human-centred shape. From his point of view it is vital that even the third person of the Trinity is positioned precisely within a Christological framework. Rosato describes Barth's long struggle

³⁶⁰ Pannenberg, 2004, p. 5

³⁶¹ CD IV.1, p. 648

³⁶² e.g. I.1, p. 452

³⁶³ Williams, 2000, p. 107

³⁶⁴ Barth, 1982, p. 278

³⁶⁵ See Hunsinger, 2000, p. 177

to appreciate, and depart from, Schleiermacher. This, he says, leads to 'one haunting impasse – Spirit theology'.³⁶⁶ Barth has to resist the danger that pneumatology will blur into anthropology if the Spirit is given any independent role in human experience. Rogers observes that Barth is motivated by a 'fear of Schleiermacher', and as a result 'allows the Son to eclipse the Spirit'.³⁶⁷

Barth uses John 3.8 to emphasise that the Spirit is the wind which blows where it chooses.³⁶⁸ He insists that 'he is not man's own spirit and he never will be,' and that 'neither the Christian community nor the individual Christian can subjugate or possess or control him.'³⁶⁹ But, much of the time, he simply directs our attention elsewhere, which can be a baffling experience for the reader. There are 720 pages (in German) in Volume IV which claim to be on the theme of the Holy Spirit (consisting of six sections entitled 'The Holy Spirit and...'), and yet, on the whole, Barth is talking about other things. He uses occasional mentions of the Holy Spirit as a way of making his analysis of the Church and of faith, hope and love point always towards Jesus Christ. Rogers comments on one instance of this curious phenomenon: "'The Promise of the Spirit" in CD IV/3.1 (p. 274-367) takes 20 pages to mention the Spirit, abandons it for another 50 pages, and finally reaches the title topic on page 351, just for 18 pages out of 93, or less than 20 per cent. The same could not be said for Barth's treatments of Jesus Christ.'³⁷⁰

Rogers observes that this is one of a number of places in the *Church Dogmatics* where Barth 'performs the rhetorical manoeuvre of announcing one topic and pursuing another.' In this case, the real topic is the resurrection. Barth's method here is to sandwich the coming of the Spirit tightly between the resurrection and second coming of Jesus Christ, with the creative approach of labelling them all as three forms of the *parousia*. John's Gospel, which often brings judgement into the present and which describe the whole history and future of Jesus Christ in terms of glory, is crucial here. Barth comments: 'Oepke is surely right when he says of the so-called

³⁶⁶ Rosato, 1981, p. 3

³⁶⁷ Rogers, 2004, p. 173

³⁶⁸ CD IV.1, p. 648

³⁶⁹ CD IV.1, p. 646

³⁷⁰ Rogers, 2004, p. 174; and see Chapter 8.1 below

last discourses in John that in them the “coming of the Resurrected, the coming in the Spirit and the coming at the end of the days merge into one another.”³⁷¹

Barth is therefore able to spend most of his alleged discussion of the Spirit talking about the decisive completed action of the resurrection and its significance for the whole human race. In order to prevent theology becoming anthropology, Barth has used a questionable interpretation of John, which barely touches on what John has to say about the Spirit.

Barth ties the Spirit so closely to the Son that he even takes the extraordinary step of understanding the Spirit through the incarnation. Barth insists that the Spirit does not come only ‘in the power of his pure deity’, but is the presence of the both the divinity and humanity of Christ. He writes: ‘Even in the promise of the Spirit, however, he is this one, and as such the hope of the world. He is the incarnate Word of God, not abandoning this flesh of ours, not leaving it behind somewhere (even in heaven, in the mystery of God), but acting, speaking and revealing his glory in the flesh.’³⁷²

Rosato comments:

Although Barth plans to fashion an experientially based trinitarian theology and in fact does commence with the Father’s historical, self-revealing act in Jesus Christ, he soon becomes so fixated with the theological implications of this one act for the triune God’s inner life, that the original role of the generating Father and the equal place of the mission of the Spirit in salvation history are eclipsed.³⁷³

Barth’s approach, as Rogers describes, is to ‘deliberately and forcibly and therapeutically to turn every question about the Spirit into a question about Christ’.³⁷⁴ Rosato therefore accuses Barth of ‘needlessly suppressing pneumatology for the sake of Christology’ and blames this on ‘Barth’s preference for an unmitigated Logos Christology’.³⁷⁵ But Barth’s strategic understanding of the Holy Spirit has the purpose of defending theology from the danger of becoming anthropology by giving

³⁷¹ CD IV.3.i, p. 294

³⁷² CD IV.3.i, p. 357

³⁷³ Rosato, 1981, p. 138

³⁷⁴ Rogers, 2004, p. 177

³⁷⁵ Rosato, 1981, p. 174

absolute priority to the central place of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. There is, nevertheless, a cost to this defence, which Webster observes:

Barth's move is to make the metaphysics of God, nature, history and morals consequent on Christology, rather than vice versa. Barth over-corrects, forcing Christology to undertake work which it is not intended to do, expanding it in such a way that there are casualties both in the doctrine of the Trinity and in the understanding of the place and function of creaturely reality.³⁷⁶

I return in Chapter 6.7 to the subject of creaturely reality, which Barth positions firmly in a Christological framework. It is important to note here, however, that by focusing so strongly on Christology, and by trying so hard to avoid questions of human experience, Barth has underused John's account of the distinctive person of the Spirit in his descriptions of the Trinity.

5.8 *The rejected and elected human*

While Bultmann's existentialist interpretation of John puts individual human decision at the centre of his theology, Barth intentionally and systematically does the opposite. In his discussion of election, having argued that there is no divine decision which could marginalise Jesus Christ, Barth also insists that neither is there any human decision which could do so. He refuses to embrace any kind of Arminianism or synergism and diverts our attention far away from Bultmann's existentialism. Barth redefines the significance of the human experience of salvation by placing Jesus Christ in the position of both the rejected and the elected human being. He uses John's Gospel to justify his statement that Jesus is the elected person as well as the electing God: 'All the Johannine passages which speak of his mission, of his doing the will and works of his father, of his submission, and of the submission of his people to the rule of the Father, really point to this aspect of the matter.'³⁷⁷

Barth therefore asserts that there can be no analysis of any individual elected person which does not point towards Jesus Christ, and which is not contained within the identity of Jesus Christ. The same is true also of rejected persons. Remarkably,

³⁷⁶ Webster, 2000a, p. 138

³⁷⁷ CD II.2, p. 117

Barth places even Judas' betrayal of Jesus in the context of the incarnation and the fact that Jesus came to be rejected: 'The real and original handing-over of Jesus is clearly the fact that the Word became flesh (John 1.14).'³⁷⁸ For a similar reason to his rejection of a *decretum absolutum* or a λογος ἄσαρκος, Barth insists: 'The act of Judas cannot... be considered as the manifestation of a dark realm beyond the will and work of God.'³⁷⁹

The full range of human experience, from the heights of faith and obedience to the depths of betrayal and cruelty, are encompassed by the life and death which Jesus Christ has already experienced on our behalf. And whatever choices may be made by us, or even by God, are seen in the context of his choice to live that life on our behalf and of his identity as the rejected and elected man. There is no human experience or decision which can have its own rival independent significance.

Any decision open to the individual is merely a faint echo of the real decision already made by God to be gracious to us in Jesus Christ. Human decisions do not have real significance in terms of the futures they open up for individuals, but only in terms of the completed divine actions to which they testify. Christians are those who bear witness to the salvation brought by Jesus Christ. And those who do not have faith, who cling to the illusion of the life of the rejected person which Christ has already lived for them, are thereby still pointing towards him. Barth writes:

This, then, is how the elect and others differ from one another: the former by witnessing in their lives to the truth, the latter by lying against the same truth.³⁸⁰

Believers 'are' the elect in this service so far as they bear witness to the truth, that is, to the elect man, Jesus Christ, and manifest and reproduce and reflect the life of this one elect. The godless 'are' the rejected in the same service so far as by their false witness to man's rejection they manifest and reproduce and reflect the death of the one rejected, Jesus Christ.³⁸¹

All human choices and utterances are in this way absorbed into Barth's understanding of Jesus Christ, who is both the elect and the rejected, rather than displaying a separate meaning of their own. Barth diverts all attention away from

³⁷⁸ CD II.2, p. 490

³⁷⁹ CD II.2, p. 502

³⁸⁰ CD II.2, p. 346

³⁸¹ CD II.2, p. 347

any questions about the eternal destinies of specific individuals.³⁸² Barth's aim is to focus all our attention on Jesus Christ as being the one decisive figure, the location of the one decision which really matters. This is a strategic aim which prevents any other place from having more significance, and so Barth places every aspect of human and divine action in the context of this one great decision.

Barth's approach relies heavily on parts of John's Gospel. However, as Bultmann's work highlights, there is a prominent existentialist dimension to John which Barth has carefully avoided mentioning. In Chapter 8.4, I look at the details of the ways in which Barth and Bultmann highlight different sections of the text of John, and look more closely at Barth's neglect of its existentialist aspects

5.9 All truth contained in one living person

Barth's emphasis on a detailed account of the central character, Jesus Christ, contrasts with the approach taken by Bultmann, for whom Jesus reveals only that he is the revealer.³⁸³ Barth believes that authentic Christian theology is concerned with Jesus Christ and determined by Jesus Christ, who is its true 'criterion'. This means not only that Christology must have the central place in dogmatics, but also that it must influence and permeate the whole. The central character is not just the focus of the story, he expands to encompass the whole story. Barth insists: 'A church dogmatics must, of course, be Christologically determined as a whole and in all its parts.'³⁸⁴

Barth sees the constant emphasis on Jesus Christ, rather than any doctrine, as the one way to ensure that the whole of theology is authentic. He comments:

The Christian heresies spring from the fact that man does not take seriously the known ground of divine immanence in Jesus Christ, so that from its revelation, instead of apprehending Jesus Christ and the totality in him, he arbitrarily selects this or that feature and sets it up as a subordinate centre: perhaps the idea of creation, or the

³⁸² See Chapter 8.1 for a discussion of Barth's avoidance of many forms of questioning

³⁸³ Bultmann, 1955a, p. 66

³⁸⁴ CD I.2, p. 123

sacraments, or the life of the soul, or even the kingdom of God, or the regeneration of man, or the creeds or doctrine.³⁸⁵

He insists that Christology cannot be a separate compartment of theology, or simply one stage in a sequence of theological ideas. He points out: 'In the New Testament there are many Christological statements both direct and indirect. But where do we find a special Christology...? And at what point do the New Testament writers leave their Christology behind?'³⁸⁶

The Prologue of John's Gospel is therefore essential to Barth's understanding of the structure of theology. He insists on 'the necessary connection of all theological statements with that of John 1.14.'³⁸⁷ That one verse has an extraordinary influence on Barth's theology, having a meaning which connects with every part of his understanding of dogmatics. Discussing the Word made flesh, he comments: 'The importance of this truth and its recognition extends not only over the whole of Christian proclamation but also over the whole of Church dogmatics. It is not to be circumvented, forgotten, or disdained in any quarter where there is a duty to speak correctly about God and about man.'³⁸⁸

For Barth, the Word made flesh is the key to the correct understanding of how God has made himself known in the world. He quotes five passages from John (John 1.18, 5.37, 6.46, 8.19, 10.14f) to stress that God is hidden and can only be known through Jesus Christ.³⁸⁹ John 1.18 fits his theme especially well: 'No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.' There can be no other route to the knowledge of God than the Word himself. Commenting on John 14.6, Barth declares: 'The Church must be severely vigilant to see that it expects everything from *Jesus Christ*, and from Jesus Christ *everything*; that he is unceasingly recognised as the way, the truth and the life.'³⁹⁰

Nevertheless, Barth elsewhere shows that he is wary of all attempts to choose a central Christian idea to be used as the foundation for a theological system, however

³⁸⁵ CD II.1, p. 319

³⁸⁶ CD IV.1, p. 124

³⁸⁷ CD I.2, p. 123

³⁸⁸ CD I.2, p. 133

³⁸⁹ CD II.1, p. 50

³⁹⁰ CD II.1, p. 320

correct and admirable that idea might be. Barth declares: 'In a Church dogmatics the position usually occupied in dogmatic systems by an arbitrarily chosen basic view belongs by right to the Word of God, and the Word of God alone. It does not belong to a conception of the Word of God.'³⁹¹ Not even the finest Christological statement would be sufficient for such a task: 'The Word of God is not to be replaced by any definition of the "essence of Christianity", no matter how full and deep and, in its way, well-founded, not even only as a representative.'³⁹²

Barth's understanding of the Word made flesh seems to give him both a mandate for a Christologically-determined theological system and a reason for avoiding theological systems altogether. This is another example of his strategic approach to revelation, seeking to avoid two different dangers at the same time.³⁹³ The result of these two factors is a vast work with a content which is driven by Christology but which also testifies to its own provisionality. Barth writes:

If, then, there is no *a priori* basic view in dogmatics, but, as its foundation and centre, only the Word of God which presupposes itself and proves itself by the power of its content, it is quite evident that there can be no dogmatic system. Rightly understood, it is the material principle of dogmatics itself which destroys at its root the very notion of a dogmatic system.³⁹⁴

Barth's theology therefore does not take the form of a fixed structure in which a central axiom is used to deduce and prove a larger set of certain truths. Barth's lengthy examinations of theological ideas relentlessly approach any one subject from many different angles. They seek to point beyond themselves to the Word of God, and to acknowledge their own limitations. Instead, Barth works strategically, aiming to show that each area of human thought must submit to the authority and power of the Word of God. He writes: 'Dogmatic method consists simply in this: that the work and activity of God in his Word are honoured and feared and loved (literally) above all things.'³⁹⁵

³⁹¹ CD I.2, p. 866

³⁹² KD I.2, p. 964, my translation (CD I.2, p. 862)

³⁹³ See Chapter 5.6 and Chapter 8.1

³⁹⁴ CD I.2, p. 868

³⁹⁵ CD I.2, p. 867

The purpose of Barth's work is to hold at bay all other ideas and forces which might claim to have a higher authority, including any theology which might have acquired a life of its own. He is constantly seeking to point towards the Word made flesh, and to show why that Word is supreme, not to present any particular theory as perfect and unassailable. He declares: 'Dogmatics certainly has a basis, foundation and centre. But – and we must remember this point, especially when are thinking of the autonomy of dogmatics – this centre is not something which is under our control, but something which exercises control over us.'³⁹⁶ Revelation is therefore not primarily a set of ideas, but is a person who makes himself known through what he does. Barth declares:

The Christian message does not at its heart express a concept or an idea, nor does it recount an anonymous history to be taken as truth and reality only in concepts and ideas... it declares a name, binding the history strictly and indissolubly to this name and presenting it as the story of the bearer of this name.³⁹⁷

He is seeking to put Christ at the centre, not Christology. There is a sophisticated and strategic structure to his work, but it is one which is aiming to show that structures are not the real point. Even though Barth explores dogmatics in multiple volumes through different themes, he rejects any attempt to establish any set of ideas as fundamental. For example, he insists it would be wrong to say that the Word is the Word of atonement and to build a system on that basis.³⁹⁸ Nor should creation be made central, so that 'the idea of Jesus Christ dissolves into a concept of grace, completing the law of creation as variously interpreted.'³⁹⁹

Revelation is Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, whose story is told for us in scripture. Barth insists, therefore, that dogmatics is not a process whereby this living Word is turned into infallible doctrinal statements. He takes the creeds extremely seriously, but he does not believe that the Word of God is something which can be progressively crystallised into perfect sentences. This approach sets Barth in opposition to the Roman Catholic Church's history of producing authoritative

³⁹⁶ CD I.2, p. 866

³⁹⁷ CD IV.1, p. 16

³⁹⁸ CD I.2, p. 871

³⁹⁹ CD I.2, p. 874

theological proclamations, and to the approach of many Protestants. Barth objects also to the introductory words of the Athanasian Creed, which declare that assent to that creed is necessary for salvation. He protests about the 'fixing of saving faith by a human and to that extent disputable theologoumenon.'⁴⁰⁰ The Word of God cannot be made into a system of authorised statements which demand our acceptance. Here, again, Barth's argument relies heavily on the Prologue to John's Gospel:

The equation of God's Word and God's Son makes it radically impossible to say anything doctrinaire in understanding the Word of God. In this equation, and in it alone, a real and effective barrier is set up against what is made of proclamation according to the Roman Catholic view and of Holy Scripture according to the later form of older Protestantism, namely, a fixed sum of revealed propositions which can be systematised like sections of a corpus of law. The only system in Holy Scripture and proclamation is revelation, i.e., Jesus Christ.⁴⁰¹

He is therefore wary of some Protestant understandings of the authority of the Bible. He describes carefully an approach to Scripture which is attentive and submissive, but which does not regard the text or any interpretation of it as being, alone and in itself, the Word of God. He rejects the '17th century doctrine of inspiration' with this analysis: 'The Bible was now grounded upon itself apart from the mystery of Christ and the Holy Ghost. It became a "paper Pope".'⁴⁰²

Barth maintains instead an understanding of scripture which is based on the incarnation, giving a distinctive account of the presence of divinity in humanity:

This offence... is based on the fact that the Word of God became flesh and therefore to this very day has built and called and gathered and illumined and sanctified his Church amongst flesh... Every time we turn the Word of God into an infallible biblical word of man or the biblical word of man into an infallible Word of God we resist that which we ought never to resist, i.e., the truth of the miracle that here fallible men speak the Word of God in fallible human words.⁴⁰³

In his expressions of caution about sets of ideas which take on a life of their own separate from the action of God, Barth has much in common with Bultmann. They

⁴⁰⁰ CD I.1, p. 86

⁴⁰¹ CD I.1, p. 137

⁴⁰² CD I.2, p. 525

⁴⁰³ CD I.2, p. 529

agree, Barth says, on their 'opposition to a false orthodoxy,' their 'refusal to ground the act of faith in the acceptance of the texts of the Bible or the propositions of the Church.'⁴⁰⁴ Both theologians believe that God challenges all our systems of ideas rather than being contained comfortably within them. However, where Bultmann sees God calling the individual away from the inauthentic world of shared human ideas, Barth sees God calling the Church to bear witness to the truth and to fight against error within the realm of human debate. Both believe that revelation is a continuing divine action rather than a fixed set of words, but Barth insists that the Word is genuinely heard publically through human words. The truth is Jesus Christ, who is constantly active in revealing God to the world.

Barth's panoramic view of the all-embracing significance of Jesus Christ is set out on the largest scale in Volume IV, where Barth presents his account of reconciliation. He describes the action of God in relation to human beings using a vast Christological framework which spans and shapes the whole landscape of Christian belief, containing 2983 pages in four heavy books,⁴⁰⁵ the result of more than a decade of unfinished work. By this stage, Barth is able to look back on many years of careful theological restructuring in Volumes I to III, and to survey the whole of theology from its Christological centre, showing the Christological shape and content of the whole of theology from a position of great confidence.

Barth begins there by declaring once again the place of the incarnation at the heart of theology, writing that "'God with us" is the centre of the Christian message,'⁴⁰⁶ and that this means that 'God has become man.'⁴⁰⁷ Although he first looks at details from Isaiah and Matthew, the proclamation of the Word made flesh provides the shape of his approach. Using Johannine imagery, he declares:

He, the Creator, does not scorn to become a creature, a man like us, in order that as such he may bear and do what must be borne and done for our salvation...

So dark is our situation that God himself must enter and occupy it in order that it may be light.⁴⁰⁸

⁴⁰⁴ CD IV.2, p. 761

⁴⁰⁵ Referring to the German edition of KD IV.1-3

⁴⁰⁶ CD IV.1, p. 5

⁴⁰⁷ CD IV.1, p. 12

⁴⁰⁸ CD IV.1, p. 13

This brings, he explains, 'a real closing of the breach, gulf and abyss between God and us for which we are responsible.'⁴⁰⁹ Using, as in most of John's Gospel, realised eschatology, he writes: 'It is nothing more nor less than the coming of salvation itself, the presence of the eschaton in all its fullness.'⁴¹⁰

In Volume IV, Barth declares that 'the Christology is the key to the whole.'⁴¹¹ His giant structure is divided into three 'chapters', which describe 'Jesus Christ, the Lord as Servant', 'Jesus Christ, the Servant as Lord' and 'Jesus Christ the True Witness'. These are an account, respectively, of Jesus as very God, as true man and as God-man. They are also an account, respectively, of Jesus as priest, king and prophet. Barth explores these Christological themes in parallel and emphasises their simultaneity. His structure affirms this unity from different angles rather than dissecting it or turning it into a chronological sequence. He explains:

Our task must be to present the atonement so that it becomes and remains obvious that it is entirely to do with Jesus Christ, that he is the subject acting in it (and not only as a means of assistance or a predicate of this event). It will therefore depend on expounding and presenting the whole doctrine of reconciliation from particular Christological insights and statements, making Jesus Christ visible as the one who is the beginning, the middle and the end. And it is clear that what is said of him particularly, precisely because the whole is enclosed in his particularity, must be brought up in its particularity in the foundation of every single train of thought.⁴¹²

Jesus Christ fills the whole of Volume IV and it is within this Christological framework that Barth carefully positions his descriptions of the impact of Christ's work on human beings. He explores justification, sanctification and vocation in these three giant chapters. And he completes each chapter by considering the work of the Holy Spirit in gathering, building up and sending the Christian community, and in developing Christian faith, hope and love. People do not take their places here as fellow characters within the same story, but exist as those whose true nature is determined by the one central character, whose significance has expanded to fill all things. Any hint of a subjective experience of God in the life of the individual

⁴⁰⁹ CD IV.1, p. 12

⁴¹⁰ CD IV.1, p. 13

⁴¹¹ CD IV.1, p. 138

⁴¹² KD IV.1, p. 137, my translation (CD IV.1, p. 125)

believer is put carefully in a pneumatological perspective, held inside a framework which speaks primarily of the objective reality of divine action.

This Christological emphasis continues to depend on John. Even when Barth uses the parable of the prodigal son from Luke's Gospel to show the 'way of the Son of God into the far country' in Volume IV.1 and the 'homecoming of the Son of Man' in Volume IV.2, he makes it clear that he is exploring the 'two elements in the event of the incarnation as it is attested in John 1.14.'⁴¹³ Volume IV.3 is then full of Johannine imagery concerning light, revelation and victory.⁴¹⁴ The colossal theological enterprise of Volume IV, which proclaims and celebrates the work of Christ in a way that encompasses all life and all truth, expresses a theology which is centred on the Word made flesh, and whose structure reflects a Christology inspired primarily by John's Gospel.

5.10 Conclusion

Chapter 5 has shown how the central character of John's Gospel expands to fill the whole picture in the *Church Dogmatics*. Jesus Christ is presented at the very beginning of all things, with no mysterious divine being or choice hidden behind or before him. The decision to be incarnate is the defining event in the life of God and of his creation. In him, God is revealed to human beings and yet also remains free. He is the electing God, and the elected and rejected human being. Knowledge of God and of human nature is found only through him. He is not just one person in a story but is the origin and the focus of all truth. This expansion of the central character is associated with Barth's retreat away from systems of thought, such as views of science and history, which might otherwise provide a background framework into which Jesus Christ was forced to fit.

⁴¹³ CD IV.2, p. 20

⁴¹⁴ See, for example, CD IV.3.i, p. 231

6 The background to the story

6.1 Introduction

The central character in a story is usually set against a background which precedes him and is greater than him. When the character appears, there is already a history which has gone before. There are already assumptions about the nature of reality. Situations already exist which will provide the challenges which the protagonist must face. Even in a story which is told from the point of view of the central character, there is an assumption that he is exploring a framework which is not of his making.

When considering the accounts of Jesus Christ given in the Bible, there does indeed appear to be a long history which precedes his arrival on the stage. The Old Testament presents a narrative of creation, sin, providence, covenant and promise which sets the scene. However, when Barth uses the story, he is determined to establish that the central character is greater than any background, that he is prior to any history, and that he is the maker of all the other characters and of the framework in which they all appear. The protagonist precedes and surpasses all other elements of the story, and they are all to be understood in terms of his identity. Barth makes much use of John's Gospel in establishing this priority, as will be seen in the following explorations of the elements in the story which provide the background to the central character.

6.2 The position of the doctrine of creation

The place of the doctrine of creation in Barth's theology is surprising. In most people's theologies, this comes at or near the beginning, as in the Bible and the creeds, before any mention of sin and salvation. But for Barth, God's decision to be God *for us* comes first: his decision to be incarnate and to be in a covenant relationship with us through the reconciling work of Christ. Creation then follows as

the external basis of this covenant.⁴¹⁵ The decision to be incarnate precedes creation logically for Barth: creation happens because of God's decision to be incarnate for us, rather than incarnation happening because of God wanting to correct problems within his creation. Creation is therefore subordinate to Christology. As Webster describes, the doctrine of creation is 'derivative, not prolegomenal'.⁴¹⁶ Crisp writes: 'His rendering of this doctrine involves placing Christ at the centre of the theological agenda and working out from there.'⁴¹⁷

Barth's motivation again is to relate all doctrines to God's particular revelation of himself in Jesus Christ, while ruling out other alleged alternative routes to the knowledge of God. In this case, he is fighting against natural theology and the *analogia entis*, believing that considering creation before incarnation places theology in jeopardy. For example, he objects to the 'mischief' shown in the *Confessio Gallicana* of 1559,⁴¹⁸ which states: 'God manifests himself thus to men: Firstly by his works, in the creation as well as in the preservation and government of the same. Secondly, and clearly, by his Word, which at first was revealed in oracles and afterwards by his Spirit in books, which we call Holy Scripture.'⁴¹⁹

Such an approach establishes a route to the knowledge of God which appears to be entirely independent of the Word of God, and which can be seen as part of a human endeavour to gain understanding of God through observing and reflecting on the universe. Barth is worried that, if our understanding of creation is formed prior to Christological reflection, then our understanding of Jesus Christ may be forced to fit into a space determined by natural theology. He is therefore careful to contrast a Christian view, which depends on revelation, with non-theological thinking, which 'reckons only with such apprehension of the cosmos as is possible to unaided reason.' The true theological view sees 'creation as benefit because it is the work of God in Jesus Christ.' He concludes: 'The Christian doctrine of creation must pursue

⁴¹⁵ CD III.1 p. 94-228

⁴¹⁶ Webster, 2000a, p. 94

⁴¹⁷ Crisp, 2006, p. 77

⁴¹⁸ CD II.1, p. 127

⁴¹⁹ See Berkouwer, 1955, p. 267

its own path according to its special ground and object and independently of any and every established or future philosophical system.’⁴²⁰

Natural theology suggests that there is a general revelation of God in creation, which human beings have the capacity to interpret. Torrance gives a helpful analogy from science to explain Barth’s objection.⁴²¹ Before Einstein, it seemed obvious that the universe followed Euclidian geometry, which could therefore be studied as ‘an axiomatic deductive science’, as a prelude to investigating the laws of physics. But since Einstein developed his theories of relativity, describing complex distortions of the fabric of space and time, this has been known to be impossible. We have to investigate the shape of the universe itself as it really is, without preconceptions. Geometry therefore has to be part of physics, not prior to it. In the same way, Torrance reports, natural theology has often been assumed to be a valid ‘prior conceptual system’, which gives true knowledge of God and into which all other theology must then fit. But following Barth’s approach, any understanding of natural theology must be ‘a sub-structure within theological science’, in accordance with the particular revelation of Jesus Christ.

Creation and Jesus Christ therefore belong closely together in Barth’s theology, in a carefully-defined relationship. He draws attention to ‘the well-known series of New Testament texts which speak of the ontological connection between Christ and creation,’⁴²² referring especially to John 1. Barth stresses ‘the great truth of John 1.3 etc. that God created all things “in him,” in Jesus Christ.’⁴²³

To place the Word of God at the beginning, prior even to creation, is a distinctively Johannine insight, whose implications Barth explores with extraordinary determination. Barth continues to depend on John to justify the strategic structure of his theology. He declares: ‘The fact that God has regard to His Son – the Son of Man, the Word made flesh – is the true and genuine basis of creation... A genuine necessity is constituted by the fact that from all eternity he willed so to love the world, and did so love it, that he gave his only begotten Son (John 3.16).’⁴²⁴

⁴²⁰ CD III.1, p. 343

⁴²¹ Torrance, 1990, p. 148-149

⁴²² CD III.1, p. 51

⁴²³ CD III.1, p. 29

⁴²⁴ CD III.1, p. 51

Barth uses this interpretation of John to support the idea that the creation exists for the purpose of the covenant, 'which has its beginning, its centre and its culmination in Jesus Christ.'⁴²⁵ In this way, Barth protects dogmatics from the threat of natural theology. Barth's attitude to natural theology finds a parallel in Barrett's commentary on John: 'The Logos exists, but is unknown and incomprehensible apart from the historical figure of Jesus; creation is evidently so perverted (vv. 10f.) that it fails to manifest its Creator – John finds no place for natural theology (v. 18).'⁴²⁶

The main scriptural support for natural theology comes from Romans 1.20 rather than John. However, despite Barrett's observations about the content of John's Gospel, an examination of the theological implications of the prologue does cast doubt on Barth's approach. If the universe is created through the Word, and that *Logos* is the divine rationality which structures the cosmos, then it should be possible to learn at least something about that Word from the universe. Athanasius, for example, writes: 'God by his own Word gave the universe the order it has, in order that since he is by nature invisible, men might be enabled to know him at any rate by his works.'⁴²⁷

It is reasonable to subordinate natural theology to the pinnacle of revelation, the incarnate Christ. But it diminishes Jesus if it is impossible to observe anything of him through the universe he created and through the human nature which he made and assumed himself. Barth's strategy of retreat protects theology from being overwhelmed by hostile systems of ideas but also limits its scope. Roberts writes:

The triumphalist aggrandisement of his theology was made at the risk of a disjunction and alienation of his theology from natural reality... The ontological dogma of the incarnation loses its roots in the shared and public reality of the world in which we live; it hovers above us like a cathedral resting upon a cloud.⁴²⁸

At very least, Barth's work should open the door to theological reflection on the natural sciences, in the light of Jesus Christ. Chapter 10.3 of this thesis will show how this course has been followed by Thomas Torrance, who shares Barth's rejection of

⁴²⁵ CD III.1, p. 42

⁴²⁶ Barrett, 1978, p. 155

⁴²⁷ Athanasius, 1995, p. 22 (*Contra Gentes, Part III, §35*)

⁴²⁸ Roberts, 1991, p. 57

any kind of independent natural theology, but sees scope for a deeper, Christologically-inspired reading of nature.

6.3 The structure of the universe

John's Gospel, in common with the rest of the Bible, assumes an understanding of the structure of the cosmos familiar to the people of the ancient world: the earth is below and the heavens are above. We translate οὐρανός as either 'sky' or 'heaven' depending on the context, but in the ancient world there was no such distinction. In biblical cosmology, there is a domain physically present above our heads in which there are angels and the throne of God. This view of the universe is especially significant in John's Gospel, where it sets the scene for some of John's descriptions of Jesus. For example, John 3.13 says: 'No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.'

Ancient cosmology presents a problem of interpretation for the modern reader, knowing the evidence for a very different picture of the universe on a vast scale. No telescope or space probe has detected any sign of an angelic domain or a heavenly court. Nor is there anything special about any particular direction within the universe: no true 'up there' which takes us closer to God. It now appears that the realm above our heads follows the same physical laws as the ground beneath our feet; even the processes that make the stars shine can be reproduced here on earth.

It is one of the strengths of Bultmann's theology that he is able to address this problem with his programme of demythologising.⁴²⁹ For example, he writes: 'According to mythological thinking, God has his domicile in heaven. What is the meaning of this statement? The meaning is quite clear. In a crude manner it expresses the idea that God is beyond the world, that he is transcendent.'⁴³⁰

In Bultmann's view, the existential challenge of the transcendent God is inevitably expressed in the biblical texts using the cosmology of the day, but that mythology is not the content of the challenge. He writes: 'The real point of myth is not to give an objective world picture; what is expressed in it, rather, is how we human beings

⁴²⁹ See Chapter 3.2

⁴³⁰ Bultmann, 1960a, p. 20

understand ourselves in our world. Thus, myth does not want to be interpreted in cosmological terms but in anthropological terms – or, better, in existentialist terms.’⁴³¹

In taking this approach, Bultmann confidently asserts that demythologising is necessary because of the advances in human knowledge which mean we can no longer accept the ancient picture of the universe. Barth, however, could never say such a thing, because it would seem to him to endorse science as a source of truth which could compete with and challenge divine revelation. Arguing against Bultmann, Barth asks:

Is it true that modern thought is ‘shaped for good or ill by modern science’? Is there a modern world-picture which is incompatible with the mythical world-view and superior to it? Is this modern view so binding as to determine in advance and unconditionally our acceptance or rejection of the biblical message?⁴³²

Responding to Bultmann’s criticisms of aspects of the New Testament worldview, Barth complains that ‘there is a tendency to describe these elements a little crudely, a little ironically, even to caricature them.’⁴³³ He also believes that Bultmann is discarding concepts which are necessary in the proper understanding of Jesus Christ. He writes: ‘We have every reason to make use of “mythical” language in certain connections. And there is no need for us to have a guilty conscience about it, for if we went to extremes in demythologising, it would be quite impossible to bear witness to Jesus Christ at all.’⁴³⁴

Barth avoids acknowledging that our view of the universe requires any attention, insisting that the Bible’s message is independent of it. Wary of being confined by any other framework of ideas, he writes: ‘Here at the outset we part company with the exponents of all world-views.’⁴³⁵ He criticises any emphasis on the created world in itself, insisting that it must be understood in terms of its creator and his covenant with the human race. He declares: ‘Cosmology always only arises in the blind spot where the Word of God with its characteristic revelation has not found people’s

⁴³¹ Bultmann, 1984, p. 8

⁴³² CD III.2, p. 447

⁴³³ Barth, 1962, p. 105

⁴³⁴ CD III.2 p. 447

⁴³⁵ CD III.2, p. 6

hearing and obedience or has lost them again.’⁴³⁶ His form of retreat therefore disengages theology from science in order to protect its emphasis on revelation, restricting the areas of truth which it is seen to address.

Seeking to justify his approach, Barth observes that the scriptures use ‘the language of more than one oriental world-myth.’ By emphasising their diversity, he tries to assert their unimportance. The multiple pictures of the world found in the Bible are not revealed by God but come, Barth says, from ‘the cosmologies current in the Near East of the time.’⁴³⁷ Barth goes on to explain that Christians have made use of various world-myths and cosmologies through the centuries, assimilating them, reinterpreting them and using their language. However, he alleges that no one specific world-view is necessary to the Christian *kerygma*, and biblical faith is properly concerned with matters other than cosmology.⁴³⁸ Indeed, Christian faith is ‘disturbing, destructive and threatening to the very foundations of these philosophies.’⁴³⁹

Barth overstates the argument for diversity. While Jacobs similarly notes that it is preferable ‘to speak not so much of Jewish cosmology as of cosmologies that have been entertained by Jews,’ he does not find much variation in these pictures of the universe. He writes: ‘Although the Biblical writings extend over a period of several hundred years, the cosmological picture in these writings is remarkably uniform.’⁴⁴⁰ There is little variation in the structure of the cosmos assumed in the Bible from the creation of the heavens and the earth in Genesis 1 to their renewal with the descent of the new Jerusalem in Revelation 21. As Lucas shows, even though there is some variety among the ancient cosmologies which influenced Hebrew thought, the Pentateuch is ‘in accord with *the* wider Near Eastern worldview’ that shows the heavens and the earth as present in layers.⁴⁴¹ Scott also sees this framework present in the background to the New Testament, noting that ‘heavenly ascent is a widespread motif in both Greco-Roman and Jewish sources of many different

⁴³⁶KD III.2, p. 10, my translation (CD III.2, p. 11)

⁴³⁷ CD III.2, p. 7

⁴³⁸ CD III.2, p. 7-9

⁴³⁹ CD III.2, p. 10-11

⁴⁴⁰ Jacobs, 1975, p. 67

⁴⁴¹ Lucas, 2003, p. 137 (my italics)

kinds.’⁴⁴² Bultmann, in contrast to Barth, describes ‘*the* world picture of the New Testament.’⁴⁴³

Furthermore, despite insisting that there is no world-view commended as authoritative by the scriptures, Barth tends to use the ancient cosmology assumed in the Bible without offering any explanation for this approach. His discussion of Heaven in Volume III.3 is one example: Barth writes there of an ‘upper and a lower cosmos,’⁴⁴⁴ noting that ‘heaven’ in the scriptures is the place that the rain comes from,⁴⁴⁵ the place where the moon is,⁴⁴⁶ the location of the throne of God,⁴⁴⁷ and the place of the angels.⁴⁴⁸ When later discussing the ascension, he writes that ‘in biblical terminology’ Christ has ascended to a ‘hidden sphere’ which is ‘on the far side of the visible heaven’.⁴⁴⁹

Barth’s approach only works if we can prevent ourselves from asking what this all actually means in terms of the universe as we observe it today. Barth’s strategy of retreat involves the serious limitation of refusing to engage with modern scientific knowledge. However, he does make the valid point that the Bible uses widely-held assumptions about the structure of the cosmos, suggesting that its authors are not seeking to tell us anything new about it. ‘In the Old Testament itself there is no original picture of the world springing solely from the revelation of the God of Israel... The same is even more true of the New Testament in its relation to the mythical and scientific views of the period.’⁴⁵⁰

In doing so, Barth claims that the Word of God is concerned solely with God and humanity, so that the cosmos is simply part of the background. He writes: ‘The Word of God is concerned with God and man... The Word of God does not contain any ontology of heaven and earth themselves.’⁴⁵¹

⁴⁴² Scott, 2000, p. 447

⁴⁴³ Bultmann, 1960a, p. 1 (my italics)

⁴⁴⁴ CD III.3, p. 421

⁴⁴⁵ CD III.3, p. 435

⁴⁴⁶ CD III.3, p. 449

⁴⁴⁷ CD III.3, p. 438

⁴⁴⁸ CD III.3, p. 451

⁴⁴⁹ CD IV.2, p. 153

⁴⁵⁰ CD III.2, p. 7

⁴⁵¹ CD III.2, p. 6

It is fascinating to notice how similar his approach is to Bultmann's as a result. Bultmann seems to praise modern science and Barth to ignore it, but the result is that they both move theology away from it. Bultmann focuses theology on an existential realm which is beyond the reach of science, while Barth continues to use an ancient cosmology which he claims has no real significance in itself. Both approaches involve moving the cosmological aspects of the Bible to the background, while labelling the interaction between God and people as being central.

The main difference between their approaches is the amount of content which they thereby consign to the background. Barth regards the universe as a mere piece of scenery, however it is pictured, but sees the scriptural narrative of God's dealings with the whole human race as the real action at the front of the stage. However, for Bultmann, the Bible's descriptions of God, such as the incarnation, resurrection and ascension of Christ, also come from the general mythological assumptions of the day about divinity. They are like the various trapdoors, pulleys and lights which are normal parts of the theatre and have no importance in themselves. It is the experience of the play and the effect of the drama on the individual which is of real significance, since this is where the divine challenge takes place. Bultmann's demythologising goes further than Barth's marginalisation of cosmology, pushing aside the Bible's account of God's action in the world and shifting the focus to the individual, but it is a similar process undertaken for similar reasons.

However, Bultmann's approach appears much more consistent and successful than Barth's. It is much easier to identify a boundary between the theatre-goer and the performance than it is to make a separation between the drama and the scenery: the action only makes sense in the context of the background. Barth's epic account of divine initiative stretches across space and time and is woven into an ancient understanding of the universe. The actions of the Word made flesh cannot be understood on a blank stage, precisely because he is the one who created and sustains this specific universe, and his true identity is shown by his particular actions in travelling between heaven and earth. If we were to change the scenery and replace the levels of the ancient cosmos with images from the Hubble space telescope, then the movement taking place in front would mean something which is very different and possibly quite absurd. Bultmann's existentialism gives him a good reason for

regarding odd bits of ancient cosmology as unimportant, but Barth has no such excuse. His approach is, at best, a fudge: an attempt to continue without engaging with issues which have a significant impact on the interpretation of the actions of Jesus Christ described in John's Gospel.

Barth's emphasis on God's revelation of himself within our universe requires a reengagement with science and a clarification of how science and theology can relate. It is inconsistent both to use ancient cosmology and to pretend that it has no real significance: it should be justified or replaced. Either we need to assert that ancient cosmology gives a *divinely-approved* framework in which we can best understand *symbolically* the true meaning of the universe, or we need to work towards an understanding of how God's actions can be understood within the framework of the cosmos as we perceive it now, or possibly both.

Despite acknowledging that previous theologians and the writers of scripture all needed to make much use of the cosmologies of their time, and despite devoting four weighty part-volumes to the Doctrine of Creation, Barth fails to work towards a Christian view of the universe as it is known to 20th century science. When Barth refers to the presence of two creation 'sagas' in Genesis 1-2,⁴⁵² it is clear that he is not an advocate of six-day young earth creationism, but it is not clear what he really thinks about the history of life on earth. He fails to show us how his view of creation might take a concrete shape within an awareness of a story of evolution that stretches over billions of years, situated within a cosmos of many billions of worlds. These serious gaps in Barth's theology are further consequences of his strategy of retreat which, as discussed in Chapter 6.2, brings a disengagement from science in order to avoid being overwhelmed by it.

6.4 The Old Testament

The story told in John's Gospel follows on from a well-known series of events. There is a long history which precedes it, narrated in the writings of the Old Testament. Barrett notes that, although John uses comparatively few direct quotations from the Old Testament, its ideas and images have 'thoroughly

⁴⁵² CD III.2, p. 8

permeated John's thought.' He comments: 'John is a Christian user of the Old Testament. The Old Testament themes, never formally buttressed by the quotation of texts, are Christologically worked out.'⁴⁵³ Schnackenburg declares that 'this Gospel would be unthinkable without the Old Testament basis which supports it.'⁴⁵⁴ Rae gives the example of the echoes of the language of Genesis 1-2 which can be found in many points in John, especially the prologue. He writes: 'It is a recurring theme, for instance, that light and life are given through the agency of God's Word. That is the work of the Logos in creation, but, as the Evangelist goes on to narrate, it is also the work that is accomplished by the Son.'⁴⁵⁵

The *Church Dogmatics* refers in detail to the Old Testament, but it is not something which Barth considers first, prior to or separate from Jesus Christ. For Barth, it is the Word made flesh which is central to his understanding of the whole content of scripture. He declares that 'God's becoming man is the goal of the Old Testament,' and that 'every statement in the New Testament originates in the fact that the Word was made flesh.'⁴⁵⁶ Furthermore, the incarnation is the basis for Barth's understanding of the nature of revelation in the whole of Scripture. He writes:

It is because God's eternal Word became flesh that there are prophets and apostles and Holy Scripture, and it comes to us in the form of a human word... Its condescension, self-surrender and self-humiliation begin in the fusion with the human nature in Jesus Christ, continue in the calling of his first witnesses, and are completed in the fact that by the Word of the first witnesses it comes also to us, arousing us to believe and to witness.⁴⁵⁷

There is a unity between the Old and the New Testaments which is focused on a Johannine view of Jesus Christ. Barth comments: 'We can see plainly how the Old Testament witness to the prophecy of the history of Israel coincides with the New Testament witness to Jesus Christ as the "light of the world" "which lighteth every man."'⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁵³ Barrett, 1978, p. 27-30

⁴⁵⁴ Schnackenburg, 1982, volume 1, p. 124

⁴⁵⁵ Rae, 2008, p. 301

⁴⁵⁶ CD I.2, p. 104

⁴⁵⁷ CD I.2, p. 699

⁴⁵⁸ CD IV.3.i, p. 60

He therefore understands the Old Testament in a Christological framework. He declares that 'the history of Israel says earlier what that of Jesus Christ says later,' and that 'the history of Israel is the "pre-history" of Jesus Christ and its word his "fore-word."' ⁴⁵⁹ Barth's interpretation of John's Gospel connects it with the whole scriptural narrative of revelation. So, for example, he traces the use of the description 'the living God' through the Bible, including three references in John. ⁴⁶⁰ Barth also links the 'I am' sayings of Jesus in John's Gospel to the whole of the Bible, echoing the name of Yahweh in the Old Testament, and highlighting declarations of lordship from the Pentateuch to Revelation. He writes: 'It is, of course, obvious that in this biblical "I am" the subject posits itself and in that way posits itself as the living and loving Lord. In doing so, this subject is God. He who does this is the God of the Bible.' ⁴⁶¹

When Barth stresses the real particularity of the incarnation, he describes the Word becoming 'Jewish flesh', ⁴⁶² writing:

The particularity of the man Jesus in proceeding from the one elect people Israel, as the confirmation of its election, means decisively that the reconciliation of sinful and lost man has, above all, the character of a divine condescension, that it takes place as God goes into the far country. The Father who is one with the man Jesus his Son (John 10.30) is the God who years before was not too good, and did not count it too small a thing, to bind and engage himself to Abraham and his seed, and to be God in this particularity and limitation – 'I will be your God.' ⁴⁶³

Barth's mention of the 'Jewish flesh' of John 1.14 is referred to repeatedly by Denker, ⁴⁶⁴ who explores various connections between Barth, the prologue of John's Gospel and the Old Testament. However, his call for Christian theology to fall into line with a Jewish interpretation of the prologue ⁴⁶⁵ reverses the strategic relationships established by Barth, who wishes to understand everything in the light of the divine and human Jesus Christ.

⁴⁵⁹ CD IV.3.i, p. 66

⁴⁶⁰ CD II.1, p. 263

⁴⁶¹ CD II.1, p. 302

⁴⁶² CD IV.1, p. 166

⁴⁶³ CD IV.1, p. 168

⁴⁶⁴ Denker, 2002, p. 114 and elsewhere

⁴⁶⁵ Denker, 2002, p. 167-168; see also the Introduction above

Barth's Johannine Christology gives him a framework within which to position a detailed engagement with Old Testament texts, as will be seen in Chapter 6.5 in Barth's use of Old Testament narratives within his examination of sin in the light of Christ.⁴⁶⁶ His detailed discussion of Job in Volume IV.3 is another example. Barth also writes that 'the Old Testament testifies pitilessly what is meant by "flesh"'⁴⁶⁷ and uses it to fill in the details of his picture of the meaning of the incarnation, writing: 'To be flesh means to exist with the 'children' of Israel under the wrath and judgement of the electing and loving God. To be flesh is to be in a state of perishing before this God.'⁴⁶⁸

Barth's understanding and application of John's Gospel is strongly rooted in its position within scripture and its relationship to the background of the Old Testament, connected to a detailed understanding of the history of salvation. This contrasts greatly with the approach taken by Bultmann, for whom textual theories about a Gnostic background are more significant, and whose existentialist and demythologising approach tends to diminish the importance of the Old Testament.

Bultmann is especially keen to reject a liberal protestant view of history, and therefore is careful to distance himself from any sense that God can be found through the investigation of the past. For him, the main significance of the Old Testament is its demonstration of the failure of the law. Bultmann takes the usual Lutheran view of the contrast between faith and the law and gives it an existentialist significance. He writes:

It is, just as much or as little as what Paul says of the law; what faith means as the way of salvation is wholly understood only by those who know the false way of salvation which we find in the law... Faith requires the backward glance into the Old Testament history as a history of failure, and so of promise, in order to know that the situation of the justified man arises only on the basis of this miscarriage.⁴⁶⁹

As a record of failure, its specific form is of no significance: the Old Testament law is just one example of religion which is rooted in the world, in contrast to the authentic individual decision of faith. Elsewhere, Bultmann writes:

⁴⁶⁶ See Chapter 6.5

⁴⁶⁷ CD IV.1, p. 171

⁴⁶⁸ CD IV.1, p. 174

⁴⁶⁹ Bultmann, 1963, p. 74-75

The pre-understanding of the Gospel which emerges under the Old Testament can emerge just as well within other historical embodiments of the divine Law. Indeed, it is found wherever a man knows himself to be bound and limited by the concrete or general moral demands arising out of the relation to his fellow man which he must acknowledge in his conscience.⁴⁷⁰

Because of this approach, Watson observes in Bultmann a 'neo-Marcionite rejection of the canonical status of the Old Testament'.⁴⁷¹ Bultmann sees the impact of the Gospel as something which makes the individual stand back from the world and its history, including the Old Testament; whereas Barth, like John, sees Jesus bringing a divine revelation which is in continuity with and fulfilment of the Old Testament.

6.5 Sin

Part of the Old Testament background to John's Gospel is an extensive set of accounts of human sinfulness which show the need for God's intervention and mercy. It has been common for theologians to consider the problem of sin before introducing Jesus Christ as the solution.⁴⁷² Barth, however, continues to restructure his theology in a way which alters the order of the story. He begins with Christ and then describes sin in the light of Christ, placing his understanding of sin within the capacious Christological framework of Volume IV of the *Church Dogmatics*. When Barth has told us about the 'Obedience of the Son of God' in Volume IV.1, he can then see 'The Man of Sin in the Light of the Obedience of the Son of God', and describe the 'Pride and Fall of Man'. In the light of his account of 'The Exaltation of the Son of Man' in Volume IV.2, he describes 'The Sloth and Misery of Man'. And in the light of his account of 'The Glory of the Mediator' in Volume IV.3, he describes 'The Falsehood and Condemnation of Man'.

Barth criticises the Reformers for continuing to explore the problem of sin prior to Christology:

The programme of Reformation theology did not allow for any radical consideration of the meaning, importance and function of Christology in relation to all Christian

⁴⁷⁰ Bultmann, 1964b, p. 17

⁴⁷¹ Watson, 1997, p. 154

⁴⁷² E.g. Calvin, 1960, p. 239-308

knowledge. For that reason this theology was in many spheres – with illuminating exceptions – able to think and argue from Christology only very indirectly and implicitly, or not at all.⁴⁷³

Barth insists that there can be no normative standard obtained from elsewhere with which good and evil can be understood. He criticises the Protestant approach which emphasises the verbal inspiration of scripture and ends up with ‘a product of typical rationalistic thinking... divorced from the living Word of the living God as attested in Scripture.’ He warns strongly of ‘the irremediable danger of consulting Holy Scripture apart from the centre, and in such a way that the question of Jesus Christ ceases to be the controlling and comprehensive question and simply becomes one amongst others.’⁴⁷⁴

Barth turns again to John’s Gospel to set his doctrine of sin in a Christological context. He writes: ‘That unbelief, and particularly unbelief in Jesus Christ is the sin, is in the New Testament a specific feature of the Johannine witness.’⁴⁷⁵ For example, John 3.36 states that ‘whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God’s wrath.’ Barth uses this verse to establish how sin and the sinful world relate to the decisive figure of Jesus Christ.⁴⁷⁶ This is in contrast to the interpretation given by Bultmann, who writes: ‘In v. 36 the hearer is confronted with the possibility of faith and unbelief, together with their consequences, and so made to face the radical alternative.’⁴⁷⁷

Bultmann, like Barth, understands sin in relation to Jesus Christ, since he is the Revealer who challenges people to choose to live the authentic life of faith. But, for Bultmann, this is a way of focusing on the possibilities open to the individual hearer. Confronted with Jesus, people divide into those who accept and those who reject his message. However, Barth’s emphasis remains on Jesus Christ himself, as he continues to stress that the significance of the incarnation far exceeds that of human

⁴⁷³ CD IV.1, p. 366

⁴⁷⁴ CD IV.1, p. 368

⁴⁷⁵ CD IV.1, p. 415

⁴⁷⁶ CD IV.1, p. 415

⁴⁷⁷ Bultmann, 1971, p. 166

sin. He writes: 'Man has not fallen lower than the depth to which God humbled himself for him in Jesus Christ.'⁴⁷⁸

In Volume IV.2, Barth writes of 'The Man of Sin in the Light of the Lordship of the Son of Man'), using John 1.5 to assert that the foolishness and stupidity of slothful human beings should be understood in contrast to the light of Christ which shines in the darkness.⁴⁷⁹ Following that claim, it is interesting that it is the Old Testament to which he turns in order to examine sinful behaviour in detail, looking at examples from Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Psalms, 1 Samuel (a long discussion of Nabal), Amos, 2 Samuel (David and Bathsheba) and Numbers (the spies).⁴⁸⁰ Krötke therefore comments: 'The Old Testament is the necessary and indispensable concrete *commentary* on the knowledge of sin gained in Jesus Christ.'⁴⁸¹

Barth's illustrations from the Old Testament can be made to fit within his Christological framework and do indeed provide a detailed commentary, but do not themselves seem to require such a framework. They make perfect sense without it or prior to it, despite Barth's complaints about those who develop a doctrine of sin before a Christology.

For example, Barth explains that 'in the existence of the man Jesus we have to do with the true and normal form of human nature, and therefore with authentically human life,'⁴⁸² to which he contrasts the disorder and dissipation commonly found among human beings. As an example of this, he presents the 'strange story of David and Bathsheba', writing: 'It is primitive and undignified and brutal, especially in the stratagem by which David tries to maintain his honour. How else can we describe it except as an act of dissipation?'⁴⁸³

The sinfulness of David, portrayed so vividly in 2 Samuel, has always been perceived clearly by Jews and Christians, with or without a Christological framework. Indeed, it gives a far clearer understanding of sin than what might be obtained by reading only about Jesus and then trying to imagine the opposite.

⁴⁷⁸ CD IV.1, p. 480

⁴⁷⁹ CD IV.2, p. 424

⁴⁸⁰ CD IV.2, p. 424-483

⁴⁸¹ Krötke, 1983, p. 63

⁴⁸² CD IV.2, p. 452

⁴⁸³ CD IV.2, p. 464-467

Barth's Christological framework here again primarily serves a strategic purpose, relating to the threats he perceives from outside, rather than arising from the details of the biblical narrative. His tactical objection to thinking of Jesus Christ in terms of the pre-existing problem of sin is clear, but it is not obvious that thinking of sin in terms of the pre-existing solution of Jesus Christ adds much, if anything, to the details of the picture. The examples which Barth chooses tend to undermine his assumptions, suggesting that sin can be clearly understood prior to and independent of Jesus Christ.

6.6 **Providence**

Providence is another doctrine which could be seen as part of the background to Jesus Christ but which Barth repositions in order to bring it into line with his central emphasis on God's decision to be incarnate for us. Barth emphasises this specific revelation of God, resisting any generalised view of providence which might claim to have an independent objective status. He writes: 'The belief in providence is not a kind of forecourt, or common foundation, on which the belief of the Christian Church may meet with other conceptions of the relationship of what is called 'God' with what is called "world"'.⁴⁸⁴ Instead, he declares:

The doctrine of providence deals with the history of created being as such, in the sense that in every respect and in its whole span this proceeds under the fatherly care of God the Creator, whose will is done and is to be seen in his election of grace, and therefore in the history of the covenant between himself and man, and therefore in Jesus Christ.⁴⁸⁵

Christian faith in providence, for Barth, has to be *Christian* faith. Theology for him cannot begin with a survey of human history and an attempt to deduce the work of a supreme being from it. Relying once again on the prologue of John's Gospel, Barth declares that it is the Word which became flesh who allows us to see the lordship of God in history.⁴⁸⁶ He understands providence in the context of the covenant, of election and of Christ's completed work of redemption. As Tanner describes: 'The

⁴⁸⁴ CD III.3, p. 26

⁴⁸⁵ CD III.3, p. 3

⁴⁸⁶ CD III.3, p. 26

special history of God's acts that culminates in Christ is not a particular case of the general way God works in the world. Instead, the whole meaning of providence generally is to be found in the covenant of grace.'⁴⁸⁷

In describing providence as 'the divine accompanying', Barth looks to John's Gospel and uses its portrayal of Jesus Christ as the source of our understanding of how divine and creaturely action relate.

Always and everywhere when the creature works, God is there as the one who has already loved it, who has already worked even before the creature began to work... 'My Father worketh hitherto, and I work' (John 5.17). God created the conditions and pre-conditions and pre-pre-conditions of all creaturely working.⁴⁸⁸

In this way, Barth avoids any understanding of providence which could operate independently from the revelation of the Word made flesh, or which could focus on human action and experience instead of divine initiative.

6.7 The other characters in the light of the protagonist

After 3707 pages of the *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, after talking in great depth about a view of theology centred on divine initiative and incarnation, Barth finally arrives at a detailed consideration of the subject he is most wary of: human beings. This contrasts with Schleiermacher, who had commenced the first part of his 'system of doctrine' in *The Christian Faith* by talking about 'religious self-consciousness'.⁴⁸⁹ It contrasts also with Bultmann, for whom the decision of faith of the individual human being is central. It is only in Volume III.2, published 16 years after Volume I.1, that Barth is ready to turn his attention to the human race and to set it in its proper context.

Above all, Barth is absolutely determined that sinful human beings will not take the central place in his theology. The major affirmations of the creed, he says, 'cannot be reduced to statements about the inner life of man.'⁴⁹⁰ Barth will not in any way allow people to judge God or to displace the Word of God from the heart of theology,

⁴⁸⁷ Tanner, 2000, p. 122

⁴⁸⁸ CD III.3, p. 119

⁴⁸⁹ Schleiermacher, 1928, p. 131

⁴⁹⁰ CD III.2, p. 446

so that God cannot be forced into a framework based on secular views about human nature.⁴⁹¹ He will not allow the potential of human beings, the decisions of human beings, or even the sin of human beings to have a place of any strategic significance in his theology. He will not allow any sense that human beings, in and of themselves, can achieve the freedom, the objectivity and the insight to determine the truth about God. Nor will he allow human beings, in and of themselves, to be the main point of interest in theology. Theology is about God, and is not primarily a way of talking about human beings or their choices, possibilities, values or experiences. Barth allows a place for human beings and their choices within his account of God and God's actions, but he is careful to show that this is not a place which has significance in itself.

Barth relocates his understanding of humanity to make it a branch of his Christology. This is another change of order in the normal sequence of theological ideas, similar to his repositioning of his doctrine of sin.⁴⁹² In Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, for example, the state of fallen humanity is described in detail long before Christology is explored in depth.⁴⁹³ In most theology, the incarnation and work of Christ are described as a response to the needs of the human race, which are understood first. Barth reverses this order, claiming that humanity can only be understood rightly through Jesus Christ. In order to defend theology from being influenced by secular anthropology or becoming a branch of anthropology, he will not allow any understanding of human nature which is prior to Christology. Jenson writes:

The basic move by which Barth found his way, and which is made in every locus of his theology, is simple and radical. Nineteenth century theology began by telling the story of man, and then asked what role Christ had in that story... Barth simply *reversed the order*. A story of man prior to Christ's story does not occur, he said, and never has occurred.⁴⁹⁴

This transforms our approach to anthropology:

⁴⁹¹ See Chapter 1.2

⁴⁹² See Chapter 6.5

⁴⁹³ Calvin, 1960, p. 239-308

⁴⁹⁴ Jenson, 1969, p. 68-69

Barth turns anthropology on what we have previously supposed to be its head by saying that the incarnation is not the Son of God assuming a 'human nature' already defined by *our* lives, but that rather the Son defines human nature by assuming it. Christ freely decides what his life shall be – and *this* decision determines what is human.⁴⁹⁵

Once again, Barth's Christological enthusiasm takes him into the realms of speculation beyond the text of John, or any other part of scripture. Barth projects the incarnation back onto eternity, so that God's decision to be incarnate for us precedes all else. But in John, incarnation is located after the creation of the human race, suggesting that there is an unassumed human nature. A more obvious reading of 'became flesh' indicates that there was a time when flesh had a separate identity, as indicated by Barrett's comment on the force of the language in John 1.14: 'σὰρξ... represents human nature as distinct from God, but expresses this in the harshest available terms.'⁴⁹⁶

Nevertheless, as before, it is the prologue of John's Gospel which Barth uses to reshape theology by emphasising the all-encompassing significance of the Word made flesh. He writes: 'If the eternal Logos is the Word in which God speaks with himself, thinks himself and is conscious of himself, then in its identity with the man Jesus it is the Word in which God thinks the cosmos, speaks with the cosmos and imparts to the cosmos the consciousness of its God.'⁴⁹⁷

Barth sees Jesus Christ as the source of all existence, truth and divine revelation, and he is quick to apply that principle to his understanding of human nature. He describes Jesus as 'the one Archimedean point given us beyond humanity... the one possibility of discovering the ontological determination of man.'⁴⁹⁸ He writes: 'As the man Jesus is himself the revealing Word of God, he is the source of our knowledge of the nature of man as created by God.'⁴⁹⁹ Here he relies extensively on verses from John's Gospel which concern the identity of Jesus Christ. Quoting Pilate in John 19.5, he declares: '*Ecce homo*.'⁵⁰⁰

⁴⁹⁵ Jenson, 1969, p. 73

⁴⁹⁶ Barrett, 1978, p. 164-165

⁴⁹⁷ CD III.2, p. 147

⁴⁹⁸ CD III.2, p. 132

⁴⁹⁹ CD III.2, p. 41

⁵⁰⁰ CD III.2, p. 44

Barth considers the 'I am' sayings from John and comments that they refer to Jesus in terms of action, process and history, rather than describing something static. For example, he writes: 'In John 14.7 Jesus speaks of himself primarily and predominantly as the Way: not as the beginning or end of the Way; but as the Way itself...He is what he is in these actions, in this history.'⁵⁰¹

Barth is careful to describe Jesus in terms of particular actions, rather than any generalised understanding of human nature or human potential: 'Jesus does not have a neutral humanity, in which he could choose to stop doing what he does or to do something else in its place. He exists by working in a particular direction which is always the same.'⁵⁰²

Further references to various parts of John follow, as Barth describes the work of Christ and his actions as judge, saviour and the bringer of light and life.⁵⁰³ However, the main collection of references to John in this context comes when Barth examines the relationship between the Son and the Father, showing how the Son does the will of the Father, rather than pursuing an independent human existence. He writes:

It is because he is the one whom this Father of his has sent, because he has not come of himself, that he can do nothing of himself, that he cannot speak of himself, and that he never in any event seeks or does his own will. There is no 'own,' no 'or himself,' no neutral sphere, from which things might be sought or said or done as from the seat of a will distinct from that of his Father.⁵⁰⁴

When Barth describes the doctrine of the Trinity as giving the best explanation of Johannine Christology, he stresses that 'it is not merely the eternal but the incarnate Logos and therefore the man Jesus who is included in this circle.'⁵⁰⁵ Jesus' humanity is not to be considered separately from his divinity. Barth writes: 'The Johannine Jesus is man in and by the very fact that he is the Son of God and that he is included in the circle of the inner life of the Godhead.'⁵⁰⁶

⁵⁰¹ CD III.2, p. 56

⁵⁰² KD III.2, p. 66, my translation (CD III.2, p. 56-57)

⁵⁰³ CD III.2, p. 57-61

⁵⁰⁴ CD III.2, p. 63

⁵⁰⁵ CD III.2, p. 65

⁵⁰⁶ CD III.2, p. 66

He therefore affirms again the 'doctrine of the Early Church concerning the *anhypostasia* or *enhypostasia* of the human nature of Christ by which John 1.14 ('the Word became flesh') was rightly interpreted.'⁵⁰⁷ This implies that the human nature of Christ has no existence or significance in and of itself, but does exist in union with Christ's divine nature.

It is from this Christology that Barth gains his understanding of human action. According to Webster,⁵⁰⁸ human reality and human agency are 'enhypostatically real' in Barth's thought: God is the ground, not the abolition, of human agency. Similarly, Hunsinger finds a 'Chalcedonian pattern'⁵⁰⁹ in Barth's understanding of divine and human agency, which is the same as the pattern shown in Barth's understanding of the incarnation. Both cases show three formal aspects: asymmetry, intimacy and integrity. The asymmetry is the absolute precedence of divinity, with humanity only following. The intimacy is that divine actions coincide with human actions (without separation or division). And the integrity is that divine and human actions coexist and coinhere (without any confusion or mixture, or the transformation of one into another). Hunsinger observes that nearly all discussion of divine and human agency in the *Church Dogmatics* conforms to this scheme.

Barth's account of humanity in Volume III.2 is carefully structured in a way which allows no place at all for a human nature which is independent from God, even in Jesus Christ. There is therefore no possibility of a genuine account of human nature coming from any source other than God. Barth's logic here can be summarised as follows: Jesus is the one who shows us what human beings really are; Jesus must be described entirely according to his actions; but Jesus' actions are purely those of obedience to his Father, doing his Father's work, rather than arising from any will of his own. Barth concludes: 'This is the human being: the creature which is for God.'⁵¹⁰

Barth also refers extensively to John to describe the relationship between the Father and the Son.⁵¹¹ He finds in John an *analogia relationis*: the relationship of the disciples to Jesus is an 'exact copy' of the relationship between Jesus and his

⁵⁰⁷ CD III.2, p. 70

⁵⁰⁸ Webster, 1998, p. 89, following Matheny

⁵⁰⁹ Hunsinger, 1991, p. 185-188

⁵¹⁰ KD III.2, p. 82, my translation (CD III.2, p. 71)

⁵¹¹ CD III.2, p. 209

Father.⁵¹² He also uses a series of references to John to explore the 'unique relation' between Jesus and the Spirit.⁵¹³ He sees Jesus as a meaningful, ordered unity of body and soul, and resists any attempt to separate them. Jesus is the Word made flesh who is filled with the Spirit: the totality of his human existence is involved. It is interesting to note that Barth still relies heavily on John when looking at Jesus' humanity, mentioning various details of Jesus' emotions and friendships, his experience of grief and the troubling of his spirit, his hunger and thirst and his wounds.⁵¹⁴ John's exploration of both the humanity and divinity of Christ allows Barth to explore an understanding of humanity in the light of Christology.

While maintaining this Christological approach, Barth emphasises that the unity of divinity and humanity in the person of Christ do not imply a combined divine and human enterprise in salvation. He declares: 'There can be no thought of any reciprocity or mutual efficacy even with the most careful precautions. Faith in particular is not an act of reciprocity, but the act of renouncing all reciprocity, the act of acknowledging the one Mediator, beside whom there is no other.'⁵¹⁵

In contrast with Barth's theology, examples of synergy and cooperation between people and God can be found in John's Gospel. John 15.4 ('Abide in me as I abide in you.') is described by Moloney as having the 'fundamental meaning' of 'mutuality and reciprocity.'⁵¹⁶ This is an aspect of John's Gospel which Barth avoids.

Continuing his opposition to synergy, Barth also opposes the Roman Catholic understanding of Mary, describing it as the 'heresy which explains all the rest', the archetypal image of 'the human creature co-operating servantlike in its own redemption on the basis of prevenient grace.'⁵¹⁷ He acknowledges that it can be a 'legitimate expression of christological truth' to describe Mary as the 'mother of God',⁵¹⁸ but he is wary of excessive interest in her and insists: 'Mariology is an

⁵¹² CD III.2, p. 222-221

⁵¹³ CD III.2, p. 332-340

⁵¹⁴ CD III.2, p. 328-331

⁵¹⁵ CD I.2, p. 146

⁵¹⁶ Moloney, 1998, p. 423

⁵¹⁷ CD I.2, p. 142

⁵¹⁸ CD I.2, p. 138

excrement, i.e., a diseased construct of theological thought. Excrements must be excised.’⁵¹⁹

In Barth’s theology, his understanding of human nature is contained within his understanding of the incarnate God, and so humanity is allowed to have no prior meaning or separate identity of its own. This manoeuvre, in itself, appears to leave us with an account of human nature which has collapsed into a tiny space within Christology and has little room to tell us about the way people actually are. Balthasar comments: ‘Barth ends up talking about Christ so much as *the* true human being that it makes it seem as if all other human beings are mere epiphenomena.’⁵²⁰ However, Barth’s writings on ethics and his theology of baptism, as will be seen later,⁵²¹ do show more of a commitment to understanding the details of human nature and history set within a Christological context.

6.8 Freedom redefined

Barth’s strategic restructuring of theology involves, as shown above, the relocation of anthropology to become a branch of Christology. Another part of this strategy is a distinctive understanding of freedom, which is defined as something found in obedience to God rather than in potential opposition to him. Barth uses freedom in an Augustinian sense, in opposition to the approach taken by Bultmann, Brunner and many others. He writes: ‘The freedom of man does not really consist – except in the imagination of the invincibly ignorant – in the fact that, like Hercules at the crossroads, he can will and decide.’⁵²²

Writing about Jesus statement in John 8.34 that ‘everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin,’ Barth comments: ‘As a sinner man has decided against his freedom to be genuinely man... In this briefest of biblical formulations we have the whole doctrine of the bondage of the will.’⁵²³

⁵¹⁹ CD I.2, p. 139

⁵²⁰ Balthasar, 1992, p. 243

⁵²¹ See Chapters 8.6 and 8.7

⁵²² CD IV.2, p. 494

⁵²³ CD IV.2, p. 495

Salvation does not involve a free human decision to respond to God, but is an act of grace in which God gives human beings the freedom to live in obedience to him. Barth therefore says 'sin' when many other people would say 'freedom', and says 'freedom' when many other people would say 'obedience'. Barth gives this definition:

This freedom constitutes the being of man and therefore real humanity – the freedom which, in accordance with its origin and responsibility towards it, can be actualised and exercised only in the knowledge of God, in obedience to him and in asking after him, whereas in any other freedom man would in some sense be stepping out into the void and could only forfeit and lose himself.⁵²⁴

Barth's approach is not without its problems. Biggar comments: 'This yields a notion of human freedom that is more apparent than real, and it raises questions about the graciousness of a grace that does not concede to the beloved the freedom to turn away permanently.'⁵²⁵

However, this strategy allows Barth to insist not only that the truth about humanity comes from God, but also that real humanity only exists in relationship to God. Sin, evil and the human beings who live in denial of the salvation brought by Christ have an uncertain place in his theology, as Barth regards them as a denial of reality. Sinful humanity cannot therefore occupy a place of any independent strategic significance in Barth's theology, because it is simply a deception. Barth has made doubly sure that there can be no way of understanding human beings except in relation to Jesus Christ. He writes: 'Sin is undoubtedly committed and exists. Yet sin itself is not a possibility but an ontological impossibility for man. We are actually with Jesus, i.e., with God. This means that our being does not include but excludes sin. To be in sin, in godlessness, is a mode of being contrary to our humanity.'⁵²⁶

Barth's approach to anthropology acts against the tendency for theologians to set up a doctrine of humanity which rivals or even overwhelms their doctrine of God. He has taken bold and effective measures to prevent theology from turning into anthropology. He has succeeded in gathering up and positioning ideas about human

⁵²⁴ CD III.2, p. 194

⁵²⁵ Biggar, 1993, p. 5

⁵²⁶ CD III.2, p. 136

nature, freedom and sin in his theology without allowing them to have any power of significance in themselves. All attention is still focused on the Christological centre of his theology, and the threat of theology being overwhelmed by secular anthropology is averted.

Barth's work here involves a dramatic reshaping of the theological landscape, in which some areas are stretched and become much more prominent, while other areas become vanishingly small, trivial or impossible. In Barth's rearrangement of theology, the place of the sinful, separate person shrinks away to insignificance. It is reminiscent of the way that Hell in C. S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce* is a grey, microscopic, insubstantial place occupying a tiny crack in Heaven.⁵²⁷ It does, in some sense, still exist, but in a way which is insignificant and lacking in concrete reality.

6.9 Conclusion

As seen in Chapter 5, Barth portrays the central character of John's Gospel in a way that makes him expand to encompass all that exists, so that other characters are seen bearing witness to him. Other human beings and their freedom are understood entirely through their relationship to him. Throughout Chapter 6, it has been clear that every aspect of the background to the story of Jesus Christ is preceded and controlled by him and understood through him. Barth does not permit any person, event, idea or situation to determine a framework into which Jesus Christ must fit. Instead, he is the one who establishes true humanity; sin is understood in relation to him; he is prior to the Old Testament narrative of creation and providence; and he is greater than all space and time. Barth's retreat from areas such as science is associated with the expansion of the significance of the central character, to whom all attention is now directed.

⁵²⁷ Lewis, 2002, p. 138

7 Time and narrative

7.1 *The Word which became time*

As is normal for stories, John's Gospel narrates a progression of events through time, within which people encounter each other, face challenges, make decisions and show developments in their character. However, Barth emphasises that the central figure portrayed by John, though present within time, is also greater than time. In fact, it is Barth's interpretation of John's account of the incarnation of Jesus Christ which provides the model for his view of time and its relationship to eternity. Barth does not present Jesus Christ as someone travelling through a temporal framework obtained from elsewhere, but insists that the truth about time is determined by the central character himself.

Barth distances himself from the view expressed in his commentary on Romans of revelation as 'permanently transcending time', which he describes as a reaction against the 'prevailing historicism and psychologism'. He declares 'The Word became flesh' also means 'the Word became time', and explains that his former view did not do justice to John 1.14.⁵²⁸ Based on the bringing together of divinity and humanity, Barth sees eternity and time joining together without either dissolving into the other. Barth's Christological view allows him to see God acting within history without being formed by it or dependent on it, remaining free and transcendent. He writes:

A correct understanding of the concept of eternity is reached only if we start from the other side, from the real fellowship between God and the creature, and therefore between eternity and time. This means starting from the incarnation of the divine Word in Jesus Christ. The fact that the Word became flesh undoubtedly means that, without ceasing to be eternity, in its very power as eternity, eternity became time.⁵²⁹

Chalcedonian Christology remains important here, as Roberts comments:

The supreme theological *locus* of the union of God and man in the Word become flesh subordinates all other categories. This union is propounded through the distinction of *an-*

⁵²⁸ CD I.2, p. 50

⁵²⁹ CD II.1, p. 16

and *enhypostasis*, a Christological conception which presents its own difficulties, but which is, in this context, extremely important as an explanation of the basis upon which eternity and time are reconciled.⁵³⁰

In contrast with Bultmann's retreat from history into the present moment of decision, Barth emphasises God's presence within the history shown in the biblical narrative of salvation. He declares:

If the Word of God had not become temporal it would not have become flesh. Becoming flesh, it clothed itself with time, the time of a man's life... In this present, past and future, God creates from our lost time his time of grace – the time of his covenant with man... The incarnate Word of God *is*. But this means that it was and will be.⁵³¹

Barth, while not seeing God as constrained by history or the deductions of historians, affirms that God's identity is shown through his actions within the past, present and future. Therefore, although Barth describes Jesus as the Word and as the truth, he is not trying to present Jesus simply as an idea, or the bringer of an idea for us to learn. He describes Jesus Christ in personal, historical, dynamic terms, insisting:

In the language of the Bible knowledge (*yada*, γινώσκειν) does not mean the acquisition of neutral information, which can be expressed in statements, principles and systems... What it really means is the process or history in which man... becomes aware of another history which in the first instance encounters him as an alien history from without, and becomes aware of it in such a compelling way that he cannot be neutral towards it, but finds himself summoned to disclose and give himself to it in return.⁵³²

Barth writes that the reconciliation of the world with God has a 'historical, dramatic and warring character.'⁵³³ He does not see the 'I am' sayings of John's Gospel as declarations of a static form of being, but as 'materially identical' with the proclamation in the Synoptic Gospel that 'the kingdom of God is at hand.' He writes: 'History is the life of all men actualised in Jesus Christ. It is the history of the covenant fulfilled in him.'⁵³⁴

⁵³⁰ Roberts, 1991, p. 40

⁵³¹ CD III.1, p. 73

⁵³² CD IV.3.i, p. 183-184

⁵³³ CD IV.3.i, p. 180

⁵³⁴ CD IV.3.i, p. 181

Reconciliation is, above all, an event, a divine action. It has also the character of revelation because this event has an impact on us and involves us. Barth comments: 'In this character it proves itself to be a history which encroaches and impinges upon us men no matter who we are or what we may think of ourselves... history in which our own history takes place.'⁵³⁵

Barth's understanding of the Word which became time allows him to emphasise strategically the initiative and revelation of God shown in the biblical narrative. Here he opposes those who, like Bultmann, do not find God's action in history. His use of *an-* and *enhypostatic* Christology allows him at the same time to guard against those who, like Hegel, merge God entirely into the processes of history.

However, Barth does risk emphasising the completed action of God in a way which diminishes the significance of history. For example, he can seem to compress the whole drama of salvation into the declaration of the incarnation. Here Barth makes use of the distinctive Johannine theme that the glory of the victorious Christ is displayed powerfully from the very beginning and shown through the crucifixion, rather than being glimpsed during the story and then shown triumphantly at the resurrection. Barth refers to the 'I am' sayings and writes that 'in the story of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel we have one long story of the transfiguration.'⁵³⁶ He notes that 'as the Gospel of John has it, his exaltation on the cross was also his exaltation to the Father.'⁵³⁷ Barth describes the crucifixion as 'the fulfilment of the incarnation of the Word,' revealing what 'was indeed virtual and potential from the very beginning his history and existence.'⁵³⁸ He also ties the resurrection and ascension to the incarnation, declaring that they are the 'event of John 1.14', in which the glory of the Word made flesh was seen. Barth insists that Jesus 'did not become different' in the resurrection and ascension, but that he 'was actually seen as the one he was and is.'⁵³⁹

Barth refers repeatedly to John when describing Jesus as Lord of time.⁵⁴⁰ He also embraces the realised eschatology shown in much of the Fourth Gospel. Quoting

⁵³⁵ CD IV.3.i, p. 183

⁵³⁶ CD IV.2, p. 139

⁵³⁷ CD IV.2, p. 154

⁵³⁸ CD IV.2, p. 140

⁵³⁹ CD IV.2, p. 133

⁵⁴⁰ CD III.2, p. 437-11

John 14:18 ('I will not leave you comfortless; I will come to you'), he says: 'Easter, Ascension, Pentecost and *parousia* are here seen as a single event, with much the same foreshortening of perspective as when we view the whole range of the Alps from the Jura.'⁵⁴¹

As I have already noted,⁵⁴² this compression of time is part of the way in which Barth avoids looking closely at the Spirit, sandwiching Pentecost tightly between the resurrection and second coming of Jesus Christ, labelling them all as three forms of the *parousia*. As will be seen in more detail in the following pages, this is a highly unusual approach to history and narrative. It uses themes from John's Gospel in a way which makes that text appear much less like a story.

7.2 Christology and simultaneity

Barth takes the innovative course of considering the person and the work of Christ together, rather than seeking to give an account of the being of Christ in isolation first. He asks: 'In the Fourth Gospel does the Son of God exist in any other way than in the doing of the work given him by the Father?'⁵⁴³

This approach is an example of the form of scriptural interpretation identified by Kelsey as rendering an agent by narrating his actions.⁵⁴⁴ Although Barth focuses on Christology, he does so through primarily considering divine action rather than the categories of person and substance used by the Church Fathers. He writes:

The other Johannine passages in which Jesus describes himself as the light, the door, the bread, the shepherd, the vine and the resurrection, point to pure process, to a being which is caught up in its products, so that it is impossible to distinguish between this being as such and its products, or to seek and find this being in itself or apart from these products, but only in them.⁵⁴⁵

It is also significant that Barth dwells so much on the 'Word made flesh' as his image of Christ: this is itself a statement of an event, a divine action, rather than a

⁵⁴¹ CD III.2, p. 497

⁵⁴² See Chapter 5.7

⁵⁴³ CD IV.1, p. 127

⁵⁴⁴ Kelsey, 1999, p. 39-50

⁵⁴⁵ CD III.2, p. 60

static eternal state of being. Furthermore, although Barth affirms the Chalcedonian definition,⁵⁴⁶ he seeks to steer us away from a static view of the two natures of Christ as entities in themselves to a dynamic view. He writes:

The doctrine of the two natures cannot try to stand on its own feet or to be true of itself. Its whole secret is the secret of John 1.14 – the central saying by which it is described. Whatever we may have to say about the union of the two natures can only be a commentary on this central saying. Neither of the two natures counts as such, because neither exists and is actual as such. Only the Son of God counts, he who adds human essence to his divine essence, thus giving it existence and uniting both in himself.⁵⁴⁷

Barth therefore gives an account of the simultaneous humiliation and exaltation of Christ, a creative interpretation of a strongly Johannine theme. He believes that his account of the ‘humiliation of the Son of God and the exaltation of the Son of Man’ expresses what ‘the older Christology was trying to state in its doctrine of the “states” of Jesus Christ.’⁵⁴⁸ Barth believes that he has affirmed all that was true in the more philosophical approach of traditional Christology, while moving from a static understanding of Christology to a dynamic one. He states: ‘We have left no place for anything static at the broad centre of the traditional doctrine of the person of Christ... we have re-translated that whole phenomenology into the sphere of a history.’⁵⁴⁹

Barth describes this as dynamic because it involves two interconnected ‘movements’. When the Word becomes flesh, the Son of God humbles himself and the Son of Man is exalted. Barth insists that there is a ‘unity of descending and ascending so plainly indicated in John 3.13’,⁵⁵⁰ even though most people would read that text as describing two separate events. History usually involves a progression of events, but Barth turns separate key events into simultaneous ones. This transformation of time means that his account of Jesus Christ is in danger of becoming something very unlike the telling of a story, as will now be seen.

⁵⁴⁶ CD IV.1, p. 133

⁵⁴⁷ CD IV.2, p. 66

⁵⁴⁸ CD IV.2, p. 110

⁵⁴⁹ CD IV.2, p. 106

⁵⁵⁰ CD IV.2, p. 110

7.3 *The distortion of the narrative*

It is significant that Barth makes comparatively little use of the details of the narrative of John's Gospel. He displays a great interest in the theory of describing the character and identity of Jesus Christ through the ways he acts. But his actual exegesis is focused mainly on the overall shape of Jesus' life, especially in terms of humiliation and exaltation, and its principal events, such as the incarnation, his obedience to his Father, and his glorification on the cross. He is far less interested in smaller-scale details, even in the full account of the crucifixion and resurrection, and he pays little attention to the other characters. He rarely engages with the narrative of John's Gospel in a sustained way.

This can perhaps be summarised best by pointing out that Barth makes much use of the seven 'I am' sayings in John's Gospel, but little use of the seven miraculous signs. Barth is using the main features of John's descriptions of Jesus and titles for Jesus to support his theology, but not the full details of Jesus' actions. His interest in the particularities of history is shown more often in the Old Testament stories which he looks at in depth within the Christocentric framework which he has built using John's Gospel.

Barth's handling of the narrative of John's Gospel is dominated by strategic concerns, rather than a careful attention to all the details, in order to form its picture of the Word made flesh into a framework that can bear the weight of the rest of his theology. Ford notes Barth's 'tendency to load the story of Jesus Christ with significance in such a way that it twists under the strain on its main character.'⁵⁵¹ And he observes that Barth tends to interpret the Gospels 'as more Christocentric than they are and so upset the realistic "ecology" of responsible and free agents in interaction.'⁵⁵²

Other factors involving Barth's distinctive interpretation of John's Gospel combine to give a highly unusual approach to history. The way that Barth prioritises the history of Jesus Christ over everything else in space, time and eternity means that it is left looking very little like a narrative and very much like a set of supreme

⁵⁵¹ Ford, 1979, p. 85

⁵⁵² Ford, 1979, p. 86

philosophical concepts. Firstly, as shown in Chapter 7.1, there is Barth's tendency to compress Biblical events together, merging the resurrection, Pentecost and second coming, and linking everything to the incarnation. Secondly, as shown in Chapter 7.2, there is the simultaneity of the humiliation and exaltation of Jesus Christ, which again has lost any sense of a progression of events. And thirdly, as seen in Chapter 5.3, there is the rejection of the *λογος ἄσαρκος*, with the projection of the incarnation back onto eternity.

The result of all these factors is that there is no narrative sequence in the incarnation, no before and after, in that God can never be truly understood prior to or separate from the incarnation, and real humanity has no existence or meaning separate from the incarnate Word. God's eternal decision to be incarnate for us outweighs all other decisions and events and has paramount importance. Instead of a drama which is centred on a decisive and transforming event, there is no real progression or change within time. One great moment in time reveals God's eternal decision and enacts it in a way which overpowers all else. The incarnation becomes a proclamation of the predetermined state of being of both divinity and true humanity. Balthasar comments:

Too much in Barth gives the impression that nothing much really *happens* in his theology of event and history, because everything has already happened in eternity... Barth rejects all discussion of anything in the realm of the relative and temporal that would make for a real and vibrant history of man with his redeeming Lord and God.⁵⁵³

Therefore, the scriptural narrative of salvation is no longer presented as a series of real changes within time, but as the public proclamation and demonstration of eternal Christological truths. This is not the replacement of a static system with a dynamic one; it is the replacement of a system which invites non-Christological speculation with one in which Christology is proclaimed within time but reigns supreme. In this process, Barth changes John's method for highlighting the significance of Jesus into a theological manoeuvre which threatens to overwhelm and collapse the whole story.

⁵⁵³ Balthasar, 1992, p. 371

Berkouwer observes Barth's failure to honour fully the decisiveness of history. He writes:

His rejection of creation by the Logos *asarkos*... his thinking in terms of the *centre* of the whole process *must* consistently lead to the protest against the 'step-wise' conception of God's dealings with men. Over against the historicising of God's work... Barth posits the omnipotent and radical initiative of grace. In doing so, however, the historical perspective is threatened with obscuration.⁵⁵⁴

Once again, some reasons for Barth's complex approach derive from his strategic need to protect dogmatics on more than one front. He is firstly asserting that God's identity is shown in and through his specific acts, rather than in some abstract static essence about which philosophers can speculate: this causes the emphasis on a narrative of events occurring within time. However, he is also prioritising God's decision to be incarnate over everything else, in order to avoid giving any significant place to human decisions, or allowing speculation about a form of divinity prior to or independent of the incarnate Word. The result is something which is still narrative, but not as we usually know it. It has been stretched, edited and rearranged to fit round a new shape. The middle happens at the beginning, the beginning is so decisive that we do not actually need an end, and most of the details are missed out.

In the process of using John's Gospel to centre theology on the Word made flesh and to defend it from all other alleged routes to the knowledge of God, Barth has introduced significant distortions into his account of that text. The narrative of salvation turns into the proclamation of a revelation with a very different dramatic form, as will be discussed in Chapter 9.⁵⁵⁵

7.4 *Justification and sanctification*

The narrative of the effect of Jesus Christ on others is also strongly affected by the distinctive way in which Barth presents the central character and his incarnation. Human beings are drawn into the simultaneity which Barth uses to describe Jesus Christ, which changes the way in which the narration of other lives can function.

⁵⁵⁴ Berkouwer, 1956, p. 254-255

⁵⁵⁵ See Chapter 9

Barth describes the incarnation as, simultaneously, the humiliation of the Son of God and the exaltation of the Son of Man, seeing in this the exaltation of all human beings. He writes:

Man – this one Son of Man – returned home to where he belonged, to his place as true man, to fellowship with God, to relationship with his fellows, to the ordering of his inward and outward existence, to the fullness of his time for which he was made, to the presence and enjoyment of the salvation for which he was destined.⁵⁵⁶

Others might see the Word becoming flesh entirely as a drama of divine humility, looking instead to the ascension to see the exaltation of humanity in Jesus Christ, and looking ahead to our future resurrection to see the exaltation of individual human beings. Barth, however, looks to the incarnation to find the central focus of this ‘movement from below to above, the movement of reconciled man to God.’ He writes: ‘As God condescends and humbles himself to man and becomes man, man himself is exalted, not as God or like God, but to God, being placed at his side... and becoming a new man in this exaltation and fellowship.’⁵⁵⁷

Barth’s aim here is, again, strategic. He is developing another aspect of his Christological framework, setting the transformation of human beings in the context of the work of Jesus Christ. He is aware that he is describing an aspect of theology which he has taught others to approach with caution. He asks: ‘Is not this the way of theological humanism, moralism, psychologism, synergism, and ultimately an anthropocentric monism – a way which in the last thirty years Evangelical theology has scarcely begun to learn again to see and avoid in all its aridity?’⁵⁵⁸

But Barth’s Christological defences against those enemies are now established and he is able to access this territory safely. He writes:

The problem of reconciled man, like that of the reconciling God, has to be based in Christology... It has its roots in the identity of the Son of God with the Son of Man, Jesus of Nazareth, in what this man was and did as such, in what happened to him as such. In and with his humiliation (as the Son of God) there took place also his exaltation (as the Son of Man). This exaltation is the type and dynamic basis for what will take place and is to be known as the exaltation of man in his reconciliation with God.

⁵⁵⁶ CD IV.2, p. 20-21

⁵⁵⁷ CD IV.2, p. 6

⁵⁵⁸ CD IV.2, p. 8

This work of theological reconstruction means that all human experiences of God and of sanctification, and all ideas about them, are placed within Barth's understanding of Jesus Christ, rather than having any power to become points of significance in their own right. Instead of pointing to any human decisions, everything points to the one divine decision. Barth reminds us: 'The true humanity of Jesus Christ, as the humanity of the Son, was and is and will be the primary content of God's eternal election of grace.'⁵⁵⁹

Barth is unusual in viewing both justification and sanctification as taking place simultaneously, objectively in Christ. For him, sanctification is not primarily about a process which takes place in individuals: it is about the way that all are sanctified in Christ. Hunsinger writes:

Simultaneity of justification and sanctification takes place first at the level of our objective participation in Christ. He thereby forcibly shifts the whole axis of salvation (justification and sanctification) away from what takes place in us existentially (*in nobis*) to what has taken place apart from us preveniently in Christ (*extra nos*).⁵⁶⁰

For us, sanctification is therefore a matter of acknowledging and receiving something that has already happened, in Christ. It is not the individual process of our own slow, gradual spiritual growth.

Barth observes in the preface to Volume IV.2 that his account of sanctification depends on his account of Christology. He writes:

I had to give particularly careful expression to the Christological section which stands at the head and contains the whole *in nuce*, speaking as it does of the humanity of Jesus Christ. I cannot advise any to skip it either as a whole or in part in order to rush on as quickly as possible to what is said about sanctification, etc. For it is there – and this is true of every aspect – that the decisions are made.⁵⁶¹

Barth's Christology is shown in his remarkable use of the Chalcedonian Definition to describe a relationship between justification and sanctification which mirrors the relationship between the divine and human natures of Christ. He declares that 'we

⁵⁵⁹ CD IV.2, p 31

⁵⁶⁰ Hunsinger, 2004, p. 78

⁵⁶¹ CD IV.2, p. x

have to do with two different aspects of the one event of salvation'.⁵⁶² He uses 'the christological *ἀσυγχυτως* and *ἀτρεπτως* of Chalcedon' to show that these belong together without confusion or change. They 'belong indissolubly together' but cannot merge into each other. Neither one can be explained by the other. Barth writes: 'It is one thing that God turns in free grace to sinful man, and quite another that in the same free grace he converts man to himself.'

He then quotes 'the *ἀχωριστως* and *ἀδιαρεπτως* of Chalcedonian Christology' to explain that 'justification and sanctification must be distinguished, but they cannot be divided or separated.'⁵⁶³ Forgiveness of sins and freedom from sins belong together, just as do faith and obedience.

In this restructuring, Barth maintains the reality of our sanctification, but prevents it from taking on its own separate significance or acting as an alternative centre for theology. He insists that Jesus Christ brings a real change to sinful human beings, but keeps that real change firmly anchored to him rather than to us. He warns of the dangers of allowing justification to merge into sanctification, and declares that 'the most serious objection to the theology of R. Bultmann' is that it allows 'faith in Jesus Christ as the judge judged in our place... to merge into the obedience in which the Christian in his discipleship has to die to the world and himself.'⁵⁶⁴

Hunsinger notes that it is important for Barth that salvation in Christ is not a means to an end, nor an end with another means.⁵⁶⁵ So Christ is not to be seen as a way of bringing about personal growth, or removing social ills, or establishing a system of morality. Nor are sacraments, spiritual exercises or social activism to be seen as a means of salvation. Salvation is all about what has already happened, in Christ, for everybody. Once again, Barth is keeping Christian doctrines safely focused on Christ and away from any independent means of assessing them or deriving them.

Nevertheless, although the large-scale structure of Barth's theology gives absolute priority and centrality to the work of Christ, he is still able to look in detail at biblical references to real changes in people. Having established the structure, Barth writes

⁵⁶² CD IV.2, p. 503

⁵⁶³ CD IV.2, p. 505

⁵⁶⁴ CD IV.2, p. 504

⁵⁶⁵ Hunsinger, 1991, p 145

about 'The Awakening to Conversion'. He uses John 3 and John 1 in considering conversion, along with the imagery of light and darkness, allowing him to emphasise divine action in the 'birth from above'.⁵⁶⁶ However, he still resists using those verses which Bultmann sees as functioning as demands for human decision. He also writes about 'The Praise of Works',⁵⁶⁷ even acknowledging that the Old and New Testaments give an eschatological promise of a reward for good works.⁵⁶⁸

Barth shows caution here, not wanting to allow his Christocentric theology to shift its focus and its origin to human actions. But, once he has set up boundaries, he is able to give a place to some of the scriptural references to human conversion and action and the consequences of human action.

However, Barth's understanding of the simultaneity of justification and sanctification distorts his view of the Christian life. Barth maintains that justification, sanctification and continuing sin all coexist simultaneously, which is a tactical move to avoid Christianity being centred on people. But this squeezes out the possibility of an account of the Christian life as a real story of growth in holiness and love within a human lifetime. Barth has engineered his theology to allow no space for a description of the progression of an individual Christian journey, and this is both a strategic advantage and a serious limitation. His approach avoids any risk of rewriting theology around people, but makes it much harder to see the connections between the narrative of the Gospels and the narratives of individual lives.

7.5 Conclusion

Chapter 7 has described how Barth's telling of the story of Jesus Christ transforms even the framework of time itself, presenting us with something very different from the history of a sequence of events. The humiliation and exaltation of Jesus Christ are presented as simultaneous. Time is compressed and is overshadowed by an eternal decision. The narrative of the story is pulled out of shape by the weight of the significance of the central character. His significance also overwhelms any account of

⁵⁶⁶ CD IV.2 p. 562-563

⁵⁶⁷ CD IV.2 p. 584-598

⁵⁶⁸ CD IV.2 p. 586

the history of an individual Christian, for whom the simultaneous works of justification and sanctification point entirely towards Jesus Christ. Barth describes a revelation which is present as a person within history, but his retreat from the methods and assumptions of historians is associated with a complete reshaping of time and narrative around that person. A genuinely Johannine emphasis on the eternal significance of Jesus Christ could still allow far more space for narrative, history and real interactions between characters than is found in Barth's use of John.

8 The response of the readers

8.1 *Hearing the truth*

For Bultmann, as shown in Chapter 3, the most significant aspect of John's story about Jesus Christ is the response of the reader to that text. What matters most for Bultmann is not the central character, or the background, or the flow of the narrative, but the individual's experience of the story. Bultmann emphasises the effect which the proclamation of the Gospel can have on those who through it hear the divine challenge to respond in faith.

Barth similarly believes that John's message can have a powerful effect on people's lives, leading to repentance, faith and obedience, but his theology does not focus on the possibilities open to the readers. Where Bultmann's interest is in the decision of the individual, Barth's interest is in the revelation itself. The *Church Dogmatics* is therefore written with the assumption that the main purpose of Christian proclamation is to communicate the truth about God. In Barth's view, the primary intended response of the reader to the story of Jesus Christ is simply that of understanding the truth, since God's revelation is the matter of most significance. Barth does give a careful place in his theology to the actions of human beings in response to the message of Jesus Christ, as will be seen later in this chapter; however, while Bultmann's theology emphasises the possibilities of authentic life opened up by the challenge of Christian proclamation, Barth insists above all that dogmatics is concerned with the '*content*' of the Christian Church's '*distinctive talk about God*.'⁵⁶⁹

As Barth explores the nature and content of the truth which is revealed to the reader, he relies on John's understanding of the identity of Jesus Christ. He writes: 'Revelation 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."⁵⁷⁰

The Word made flesh is the key idea underlying Barth's understanding of the nature of divine revelation, the defining expression of the form of our knowledge of God. For Barth, revelation is real, personal, dynamic and accessible to us, at the same

⁵⁶⁹ CD I.1, p. 3, my italics

⁵⁷⁰ CD I.1, p. 119

time as remaining greater than us and impossible to master or systematise. John 1.14, interpreted with a Chalcedonian understanding of the two natures of Christ, is at the heart of his approach. The incarnation is the bringing together of humanity and divinity in a way which preserves the natures of both. A connection is made, but the limitations of the human race in itself and the freedom of God both remain. Just as the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, taking human nature but remaining divine, so the Word of God can be proclaimed to us and by us, while still remaining free and transcendent.

While Bultmann focuses on the individual, Barth emphasises the role of an understanding shared and discussed within the faithful Christian community, insisting that there is 'no possibility of dogmatics at all outside the Church.'⁵⁷¹ He regards this shared endeavour as a discipline which is *wissenschaftliche*.⁵⁷² The English version's translation of this word as 'scientific' is potentially misleading, since Barth is not thinking specifically of the natural sciences. 'Scholarly' might be a better term. Frei labels the word *Wissenschaft* as 'untranslatable', but describes it as 'the inquiry into the universal, rational principles that allow us to organise any and all specific fields of enquiry into internally and mutually coherent, intelligible totalities.'⁵⁷³ Barth is presenting theology as a weighty, serious, significant endeavour which has integrity and is worthy of meticulous and lengthy study. It is a distinctive field of scholarship which has a 'definite object of knowledge', which 'treads a definite and self-consistent path of knowledge' and can give an account of that path.⁵⁷⁴

This is an approach to faith which emphasises revelation and shared knowledge, while neglecting areas such as individual decision. Further analysis of the nature of Barth's theology can be found in Ford's exploration of theology in terms of five grammatical 'moods of faith'. He notes the strong presence of the indicative mood shown in Barth's emphasis on knowledge, and also the imperative mood shown in Barth's ethics. However, there is a lack of emphasis on the interrogative mood

⁵⁷¹ CD I.1, p. 17

⁵⁷² KD I.1, p. 1 (CD I.1, p. 1)

⁵⁷³ Frei, 1992, p. 97-98

⁵⁷⁴ CD I.1, p. 7-8

(‘questioning and questioned’), the subjunctive mood (‘possibilities and surprises’) and the optative mood (‘desiring and desired’).⁵⁷⁵

In contrast to Barth’s narrow focus, John’s Gospel contains much to stimulate all five moods of faith, as is clear from the wide range of theological and devotional writing which it has inspired. Vanier, for example, comments: ‘The Gospel of John gives some facts about the life of Jesus, although every fact leads further into a mystery revealed in a symbolic way that tells us something about who *we* are called to be.’⁵⁷⁶

Vanier, like Bultmann, focuses on the possibilities which John’s Gospel opens up for the reader confronted with its message. He also refers to an experience of being drawn into mystery, of being led into the love of God. Others note that John is a text which invites and provokes questions and debates, rather than delivering an immediate system of answers. Beasley-Murray writes about the ‘Enigma of the Fourth Gospel’, noting: ‘Everything we want to know about this book is uncertain, and everything about it that is apparently knowable is a matter of dispute.’⁵⁷⁷

Pollard refers to the need for Church in its first five centuries ‘to explicate the double problem posed by the Johannine Christology’,⁵⁷⁸ namely the relationship between the Son and the godhead, and the relationship of humanity and divinity in Jesus Christ. Hanson comments: ‘The Gospel According to St. John was the major battlefield in the New Testament during the Arian controversy. It was the chief resource of the pro-Nicenes but was by no means free of difficulties and pitfalls even for them. It is generally true that the Arians scored heavily in using the Synoptic gospels.’⁵⁷⁹ Similarly, Moloney observes: ‘The Fourth Gospel also generates questions about God that it does not resolve.’⁵⁸⁰ Anderson notes: ‘John is also the primary source of the historic *Filioque* debates. Does the Holy Spirit proceed from the Father only or from the Son only?’⁵⁸¹

⁵⁷⁵ Ford, 2007, p. 45-51, 248

⁵⁷⁶ Vanier, 2004, p. 12

⁵⁷⁷ Beasley-Murray, 1991, p. xxxii

⁵⁷⁸ Pollard, 1970, p. 5-6

⁵⁷⁹ Hanson, 1988, p. 834

⁵⁸⁰ Moloney, 1998, p. 21

⁵⁸¹ Anderson, 2008, p. 314

John's Gospel involves us in a process of questioning, not just of God but also of ourselves (as Bultmann saw) in response to its challenge. Lincoln writes: 'Readers, then, have to be prepared not only to bring their own probing questions to the Gospel but to find themselves and their values radically questioned by the one to whom it bears witness as the criterion of truth and judgement.'⁵⁸²

The interrogative, subjunctive and optative moods, being more open-ended and centred on the human subject, do not fit well with Barth's strategic, defensive, Christocentric restructuring of theology. He is especially thorough in avoiding questioning which appears to him to challenge the central strategic position of the Word made flesh. Barth issues an explicit denial of the validity of questioning which would appear to set up another position from which God can be judged, insisting: 'The possibility of the knowledge of God and therefore the knowability of God cannot be questioned *in vacuo*, or by means of a general criterion of knowledge delimiting the knowledge of God from without, but only from within this real knowledge itself.'⁵⁸³

Barth sometimes also simply deflects attention away from obvious questions. I have already mentioned Rogers' description of Barth's 'rhetorical manoeuvre of announcing one topic and pursuing another' in reference to the 'eclipse of the Spirit', which Rogers suggests Barth performs with 'a certain mischievous delight.'⁵⁸⁴ Rogers also looks in more detail at the reader's experience of studying Barth's work on election, writing: 'The reader expects to hear about the predestination of the individual. But Barth thinks that the question "Am I saved?" or, worse, "Is that one saved?" is a terrifically bad question. It's narcissistic, and it distracts the Christian from Christ.'⁵⁸⁵

These are clearly important questions which would be in the minds of most readers. Barth's response, however, is to divert attention away from these questions with hundreds of pages about God, culminating in what Rogers describes as 'delightful obscurities' of biblical typology. The result is:

⁵⁸² Lincoln, 2005, p. 91

⁵⁸³ CD II.1, p. 5

⁵⁸⁴ Rogers, 2004, p. 175, and see Chapter 5.7 above

⁵⁸⁵ Rogers, 2004, p. 176

The reader who makes it to the end has not only forgotten the original question, she has undergone Barth's *therapy* against it. It will not arise again. She has not only been advised – as Augustine, Luther and Calvin all suggest – to look for her election not in herself but in Christ, she has been *caused* to do so by Barth's exposition, and his refusal to expound.

McCormack explains Barth's approach, writing: 'The question, "To whom does election apply?" is from Barth's point of view a secondary question. What is primary is the question, "Who is the God who elects and what does a knowledge of this God tell us about the nature of election?"'⁵⁸⁶

Training us to stop asking what Barth regards as the wrong questions is a key feature of his theology, in which large areas of enquiry are placed off-limits for strategic reasons. Barth's doctrine of election, with its emphasis on the gracious decision of God, seeks to train us to stop asking about the significance of individual decisions. Although it has a strategic value, this deflection of unauthorised questions is not an approach which fits John's Gospel well. As seen above, John appears to others to provoke many questions and to invite readers on a journey of exploration. Barth's focus on the central importance of the Word made flesh comes from John, but the barriers he erects are his own.

8.2 Believing with no other proof

Barth endorses Anselm's '*Credo ut intelligam*', presenting divine revelation as something which demands our faithful acceptance on its own terms. It establishes its own validity without needing to be proven or justified in terms of some other standard. Barth presents a strategic view of the Word of God as the one source of truth which can never be overcome or assimilated, the one unconquerable vantage point. 'In the Word of God it is decided that the knowledge of God cannot let itself be called in question, or call itself in question, from any other position outside itself.'⁵⁸⁷

The incarnation is 'the prime mystery', something which cannot be regarded as analogous to any other event and does not fit in any human philosophy. 'It comes to us as a datum with no point of connexion with any other previous datum. It becomes

⁵⁸⁶ McCormack, 2000, p. 93

⁵⁸⁷ CD II.1, p. 4

the object of our knowledge by its own power and not by ours. We are not the masters, but the mastered.’⁵⁸⁸

Although God allows himself to be known within a human frame of reference, this does not imply that he submits to the authority of that frame as if he were just another part of the universe. Barth writes: ‘Knowledge of God is thus not the relationship of an already existing subject to an object that enters into his sphere and is therefore obedient to the laws of this sphere.’⁵⁸⁹ Barth therefore portrays Jesus as the truth who judges all systems of human thought and cannot be contained by them. He is adamant that there is no vantage point or other truth from which Jesus can himself be judged. He asks: ‘Is there any place from which we are really able to ask whether Jesus Christ is the light, the revelation, the Word, the Prophet?’⁵⁹⁰ He answers: ‘To ascribe to ourselves a competence to put such questions is *ipso facto* to deny that his life is light, his work truth, his history revelation, his act the Word of God.’

In this response, he explains that he has in mind Feuerbach’s observation that theology is anthropology, and is wary of any approach which establishes a divine figure on the basis of its agreement with our own values and ideas. He asks: ‘Is his Logos no more than what we regard as the *ratio* of our own life-action? And therefore at bottom is his prophecy no more than the power and authority of our own self-declaration?’⁵⁹¹

Barth criticises those who accept that ‘Jesus Christ is light, truth, revelation, Word and glory’ and then seek to prove this with ‘a historical, philosophical, anthropological or psychological investigation and exposition.’ Attempting to justify Jesus Christ in terms of any other standard simply shows that it is the other standard which we hold supreme, rather than Jesus Christ. He writes: ‘On this procedure and the more basically the more skilfully we pursue it, do we not declare the very opposite of what we intend, namely, that we do not really regard as a prophet the

⁵⁸⁸ CD I.2, p. 172

⁵⁸⁹ CD II.1, p. 21

⁵⁹⁰ CD IV.3.i, p. 73

⁵⁹¹ CD IV.3.i, p 72

one whom we think we must help in this way, and least of all do we regard him as the prophet of God?⁵⁹²

Barth simply accepts the truth of Jesus Christ as something which justifies itself and has its own power to convince us. He focuses on the way that Jesus bears witness to himself, writing: 'His self-attestation is in fact the absolutely dominating theme of the Gospel of John. Jesus not only is the light of the world, but as he is and shines as such, he also says that he is.'⁵⁹³ He insists: 'The life of Jesus Christ is light and prophecy. We do not venture it arbitrarily or at random, but on the basis of the fact that this life is grace, and grace is radiant as such. Hence there is no need to establish or justify its radiance from some other point. Indeed, all attempts to do this are forbidden.'⁵⁹⁴

Kreck comments on Barth's use of John, including the themes of light and darkness, the need for new birth and the coming of Christ from above, writing: 'Barth's fundamental thesis, that God can only be known through God, that this happens only in Christ as the revealer, and that apart from him the Word lives in falsehood and darkness, indeed in death, finds here a surprising confirmation.'⁵⁹⁵

Barth quotes John 18.37 ('Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.') and declares that Jesus Christ is the truth which sets us free for the truth, so that we no longer have 'the false freedom to ask for special confirmations of the truth from without.'⁵⁹⁶ To seek any other proof is a 'betrayal',⁵⁹⁷ as is described robustly in the Barmen Declaration, which Barth quotes from in this context: 'We reject the false doctrine that the Church can and must, as the source of its proclamation, recognise other events and powers, forms and truths, as the revelation of God outside and alongside this one Word of God.'⁵⁹⁸

Faith, for Barth, means an obedient attentiveness to the revelation of God shown in the scriptures, not the assent to any human system of ideas. While asserting the reality of revelation in human words among those who have faith, Barth denies that

⁵⁹² CD IV.3.i, p. 74-75

⁵⁹³ CD IV.3.ii, p. 612

⁵⁹⁴ CD IV.3.i, p. 82

⁵⁹⁵ Kreck, 1978, p. 160, my translation

⁵⁹⁶ CD IV.3.i, p. 77-78

⁵⁹⁷ CD IV.3.i, p. 79

⁵⁹⁸ CD IV.3.i, p. 86

the Word of God could form a set of data able to be mastered and manipulated by philosophers. He opposes any sense that God's particular acts of self-revelation can be treated as the raw material for any scholarship other than the reverent, obedient and faithful approach to dogmatics which he has in mind. He insists: 'If a man, the Church, Church proclamation and dogmatics think they can handle the Word and faith like capital at their disposal, they simply prove thereby that they have neither the Word nor faith.'⁵⁹⁹

Furthermore, Barth will not allow dogmatics to become one academic subject among many, fitting into a framework of methods and assumptions established elsewhere. It is not possible for theology to function authentically in this way, he believes. He writes: 'Since the days of Schleiermacher, many encyclopaedic attempts have been made to include theology in the sciences... The actual result of all such attempts has always been the disturbing or destructive surrender of theology to a general concept of science.'⁶⁰⁰ He also warns: 'That he is the one Word of God means further that his truth and prophecy cannot be combined with any other, nor can he be enclosed with other words in a system superior to both him and them.'⁶⁰¹

Barth's strategy involves close attention to the particularities of divine revelation, alongside opposition to any surrender to generalities imposed from elsewhere. Dogmatics is worthy of serious study in the modern world, but is not something that can fit neatly into the assumptions of contemporary academia. There can be no true marriage between theology and the rest of human thought, for one party will inevitably overwhelm the other. Barth declares: 'There never has actually been a *philosophia christiana*, for if it was *philosophia* it was not *christiana*, and if it was *christiana*, it was not *philosophia*.'⁶⁰²

Theology cannot allow itself to be shaped or channelled or evaluated using any measures taken from outside. Instead, dogmatics has its own 'criterion', which is 'Jesus Christ, God in his gracious revealing and reconciling address to man.'⁶⁰³ The correct human response to the message of Jesus Christ is one of humble faith and

⁵⁹⁹ CD I.1 p. 225

⁶⁰⁰ CD I.1, p. 10

⁶⁰¹ CD IV.3.i, p. 101

⁶⁰² CD I.1, p. 6

⁶⁰³ CD I.1, p. 4

thankful obedience, without seeking to test that message using criteria taken from elsewhere, or to tame the Word by absorbing him into a human system of ideas.

8.3 Answering the one who calls

As described in Chapter 5.1, Barth's theology centres on the divine decision to be incarnate, in a clear and deliberate contrast to Bultmann's existentialism. Individual human decision has, at most, a peripheral place in the *Church Dogmatics*. In the preface to Volume I.1, he declares:

I have excluded to the very best of my ability anything that might appear to find for theology a foundation, support, or justification in philosophical existentialism... In the former undertaking I can see only a resumption of the line which leads from Schleiermacher by way of Ritschl to Herrmann. And in any conceivable continuation along this line I can see only the plain destruction of Protestant theology and the Protestant Church.⁶⁰⁴

Barth structures the whole of his theology in a way which never gives individual decision a place which could in any way threaten the strategic centrality of the divine decision to be incarnate. In this approach, Barth relies on John's Gospel. For example, he writes:

Theology has to be determined to think and teach about the relation between God and the creature only in the way prescribed by the fact of the assumption of the flesh by the divine Word in the person of Jesus Christ and the consequent assumption of sinful man to be the child of God...It will necessarily be seen that the decision about the existence and nature of the relation between God and the creatures lies exclusively with God.⁶⁰⁵

Barth's strategy is usually to focus so carefully on the actions of God shown in the scriptures that our attention is distracted from the significance of individual decisions. However, when Barth nears the end of Volume IV.1 he gives more space to the discussion of the faith of the individual. This follows 21 years of careful strategic work on the structure of theology in the *Church Dogmatics*, and takes a small place within the Christological framework of Volume IV. Barth sets his discussion of the

⁶⁰⁴ CD I.1, p. xiii

⁶⁰⁵ CD II.1, p. 582

individual in the context of the work of the Holy Spirit as 'the awakening power in which Jesus Christ summons sinful man to his community and therefore as a Christian to believe in him.'⁶⁰⁶ But he declares in a section of small print that he has now reached the 'high-water mark' of his agreement with a way of thinking found in Luther, Pietism, Kierkegaard, Herrmann and contemporary theological existentialism (he does not mention Bultmann's name here). He acknowledges that they are right to put the 'question of the individual Christian subject', and to answer with the '*pro me*' of faith.⁶⁰⁷ But he warns of 'the usurping invasion of theology by a subjectivist theology', and writes:

In respect of what can be *pro me*, of what can be 'existentially' relevant, we have to refrain from interpreting it in the light of any kind of anthropology or ontology or pre-understanding, into the framework of which the God who is *pro me* in Jesus Christ can be fitted and to the measure of which he can be cut as in a bed of Procrustes.⁶⁰⁸

Barth's fleeting recognition of a place for existentialism is surrounded by careful warnings which transform its meaning:

It will be acknowledged that Christian faith is an 'existential' happening, that it is from first to last I-faith, which can and should be sung in I-hymns. But there will take place the necessary 'de-mythologisation' of the 'I' which Paul carried through in Galatians 2.20: 'I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.'

This is a remarkable inversion of Bultmann's programme of demythologising. For Bultmann, demythologising marginalises our shared understanding of the world and its history, and focuses attention on the decisions of the individual. However in Barth's version, the action of Christ in the world is emphasised in a way which marginalises, and even replaces, the role of the individual. This involves, as will be seen in the following pages, a selective use of the scriptures. Barth's approach would be less well supported by Galatians 6.7-9 ('you reap whatever you sow') than by his use of Galatians 2.20 above, for example. And a different image of the relationship between Christ and the individual Christian could have been found from John's

⁶⁰⁶ CD IV.1, p. 740

⁶⁰⁷ CD IV.1, p. 755

⁶⁰⁸ CD IV.1, p. 757

emphasis on abiding in Christ.⁶⁰⁹ However, Barth concludes that real 'Christian individualism' requires us to 'jerk ourselves free from the abstractions which have been so kindly received in modern Protestantism.'⁶¹⁰

In this discussion of faith, Barth makes use of four related German words to illuminate different aspects of the human reception of divine revelation: *Kennen* (knowledge), *Anerkennen* (acceptance), *Erkennen* (recognition) and *Bekennen* (declaration).⁶¹¹ As *Kennen*, Barth describes faith as a 'cognitive event' involving new understanding. As *Anerkennen*, it is an obedient and active acceptance of the 'living Jesus Christ himself', and not of 'any creed or dogma'.⁶¹² However, as *Erkennen*, it is the recognition that he 'is the Jesus Christ attested in Holy Scripture and proclaimed by the community.'⁶¹³ This leads, as *Bekennen*, to the outward response of professing faith before others, bearing witness to Jesus Christ and being baptised.⁶¹⁴

Throughout this discussion, Barth ensures that all talk of faith points towards Jesus Christ himself, describing it as 'the obedience to the call of Christ', which (referring to John 16.13) 'grasps the promise that we shall be led into all truth.'⁶¹⁵ He is careful to avoid giving any significant place to the individual's faith or decisions or spiritual biography. Faith, for him, must never primarily be seen as an event in the life of the individual: it points to the completed reconciling work of Jesus Christ. He resists all attempts to focus on the history of the individual's faith itself, constantly emphasising the history of Jesus, the object and source of faith. Criticising both the younger Luther and, explicitly for once, Bultmann, he writes:

The real presentation (*repraesentatio*) of the history of Jesus Christ is that which he himself accomplishes in the work of his Holy Spirit when he makes himself the object and origin of faith. Christian faith takes note of this, and clings to it and responds to it, without itself being the things which accomplishes it, without any identity between the redemptive act of God and faith as the free act of man.⁶¹⁶

⁶⁰⁹ e.g. John 15.4

⁶¹⁰ CD IV.1, p. 757

⁶¹¹ KD IV.1, p. 847, my translation (CD IV.1, p. 758).

⁶¹² CD IV.1, p. 758-760

⁶¹³ CD IV.1, p. 762

⁶¹⁴ CD IV.1, p. 776-778, and see Chapters 8.6 and 8.8 below

⁶¹⁵ CD I.1, p. 17

⁶¹⁶ CD IV.1, p. 767

He insists: 'What takes place in the recognition of the *pro me* of Christian faith is not the redemptive act of God itself... What is Bultmann's conception but an existentialist translation of the sacramentalist teaching of the Roman Church?' Barth is referring to the Catholic understanding of the Mass as a bloodless repetition of the sacrifice of Christ on Golgotha. This approach risks making the crucifixion itself seem merely to be an event which enables the miracle of the Mass, so that the Mass itself is the point of real significance. Bultmann's focus on God's action in the individual's decision of faith makes, in Barth's view, human choice the point of real significance, with the crucifixion itself becoming an enabling event or a myth. Bultmann's approach, in Barth's eyes, is a strategic disaster.

For Barth, faith is a recognition of what God has already done, 'not the redemptive act of God itself.' He believes, as described in section §59 of the *Church Dogmatics* and elsewhere, that Jesus' death causes the real destruction of our sinful humanity, but that this is an event which happens at the crucifixion, rather than at the point at which we acknowledge it. Indeed, the nature of that destruction implies that the only point of interest is the one who destroys and replaces our fallen nature.

In Barth's view, those who receive God's revelation do so as those who have no other possible means of knowing anything about God. In contrast to Bultmann's existentialism, Barth's theology gives no great significance to the individual who hears the Word of God, since the very act of hearing involves an acceptance of the individual's own inability to know God. For Barth, God's challenge to the individual is one which draws attention away from the individual's experience and response to God. Therefore, even when considering 'The Readiness of Man', Barth still focuses determinedly on Jesus Christ.

Man never at all exists in himself... Man exists in Jesus Christ and in him alone; as he also finds God in Jesus Christ and in him alone. The being and nature of man in and for themselves as independent bearers of an independent predicate, have, by the revelation of Jesus Christ, become an abstraction which can be destined only to disappear.⁶¹⁷

⁶¹⁷ CD II.1, p. 149

For Barth, Jesus Christ *is* the readiness of human beings for God, and the human knowledge of God. Referring once again to John 1.14, Barth declares: 'In our flesh God knows himself.'⁶¹⁸

Barth resists also any attempt to turn theology into an exploration of human possibilities, which brings him into conflict with Bultmann over the meaning of ζῶν and φῶς in John 1.4. Bultmann writes that 'the vitality of the whole creation has its origin in the Logos.'⁶¹⁹ He later declares:

It is – because the ζῶν is the φῶς – that life that carries within itself the necessity and the possibility of illumined existence. The ζῶν bestowed by Jesus is not *another* ζῶν different from that bestowed by the pre-existent Logos; Jesus gives man the possibility, realised through faith in him, of understanding himself in the ζῶν.⁶²⁰

Barth objects, arguing: 'In this passage darkness and light, and therefore revelation, are not described as "possibilities," and certainly not as possibilities of human "self-understanding."' "⁶²¹ He insists that ζῶν and φῶς in John's Gospel are linked directly with Jesus Christ, rather than being found within the created world. Barth refuses to allow a decisive place in his theology for individual human beings who can choose for or against the light of Christ. Talk of human possibilities, or of some kind of potential inherent in creation, pulls theology out of shape in his opinion, losing its central focus on Jesus Christ.

However, Bultmann's interpretation means that he is happy to affirm that John 1.12 implies that 'a division takes place when men are confronted with the revelation.'⁶²² He is able to follow John 3.19-21 in considering some people to be in the light and some in the darkness. Barth, meanwhile, in order to keep the focus of theology on the action of Jesus Christ rather than on the choices of individual, makes the light and the darkness simultaneous in the lives of all people. This approach is shown in his use of John 1.5: 'As the light of light *shines* in the darkness, the world

⁶¹⁸ CD II.1, p. 151

⁶¹⁹ Bultmann, 1971, p. 39

⁶²⁰ Bultmann, 1971, p. 45

⁶²¹ CD IV.3.i, p. 9

⁶²² CD IV.3.i, p 56

and all men come within the reach of its beams, but as it shines in the *darkness*, the world and all men are still in the sphere of darkness.’⁶²³

From Bultmann’s perspective, the ζῶη is the φῶς of all people because it is present in creation, and the possibility of coming to the light is open to all. For Barth, Jesus is the light of all people because of his divinity and the universal significance of what he has done to save the world. The light is a reality for all (at the same time as the darkness) rather than a possibility for all (as an alternative to the darkness). This approach inevitably points strongly towards universal salvation, as will be discussed in Chapter 8.5.

Later in Volume IV.3, Barth discusses vocation, emphasising divine initiative, rather than the experience of the individual. He opposes those who would make the calling of the individual ‘the true object and theme of theology.’⁶²⁴ He has Schleiermacher, among others, in mind here, and a theology which he dismisses as ‘Christianocentric’ rather than Christocentric.

Barth affirms, nevertheless, that ‘the living Jesus Christ encounters definite men at definite time in their lives as their contemporary.’⁶²⁵ They may say, with the Samaritans of John 4.42, that they have heard Jesus themselves, not just the witness of another. The light of the world is not detached from us, but does become real for individuals in particular concrete ways. However, he rejects all attempts to place such experiences at the heart of theology, or to develop systems which describe the events and progressions of the Christian life. He notes the range of such attempts, including Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, and the ‘mystical ladder of the Middle Ages’, and asks: ‘Is not this awkward diversity of a piece with the fact that the Bible does not offer any such scheme, that the biblical witnesses were not interested in the process as a psychological and biographical evolution?’⁶²⁶

Therefore, although Barth affirms that vocation must mean particular concrete events in the lives of particular individuals, his focus remains on the one who calls rather than those who are called, saying: ‘To say vocation is to speak of the one, total

⁶²³ CD IV.3.i, p. 191

⁶²⁴ CD IV.3.ii, p. 498

⁶²⁵ CD IV.3.ii, p. 502

⁶²⁶ CD IV.3.ii, p. 506

address to man of the living Jesus Christ.⁶²⁷ Barth avoids any discussion of specific experiences and decisions, returning to the safe strategic ground of divine action and the universal significance of Jesus Christ.

Using John 1.12-13, he notes that it is Jesus who gives people the freedom to become the children of God.⁶²⁸ From John 15.16, he quotes Jesus telling the disciples that they did not choose him, but he chose them.⁶²⁹ Further references along the same lines follow. For example, Barth declares: 'In the terminology of John's Gospel (esp. 17.6f), Christians are those whom the Father has given to the Son, unreservedly entrusting and committing them to him.'⁶³⁰

The goal of this calling is, Barth describes, union with Christ.⁶³¹ Drawing heavily on John, he writes:

'I in you' (John 14.20, 15.4). 'I in them' (John 17.23, 26). 'I in him' (John 6.56, 15.5).

According to John 15.1f he is the vine which produces, bears and nourishes the branches, or according to the even stronger expression in John 6.33 he is the 'bread of God which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world.'⁶³²

Barth looks closely at the account of the calling of the disciples in John 1.35-51. He notes that, whereas the Synoptic accounts often show Jesus telling people to follow him, in John they usually follow without being asked. Barth observes that this shows 'a kind of predestinarian, and as such highly efficacious, bond' between the disciples and Jesus, in which the 'decisive acting subject both in his own sight and theirs is Jesus himself.'⁶³³ He comments:

What the Johannine account obviously intends to say is that the encounter of these men with the man Jesus is in itself and as such strong enough to bring into effect their relationship of discipleship to him as something already resolved concerning them. He calls them as they become aware of his existence and of the determination of their own existence for discipleship.

⁶²⁷ CD IV.3.ii, p. 506

⁶²⁸ CD IV.3.ii, p. 521

⁶²⁹ CD IV.3.ii, p. 528

⁶³⁰ CD IV.3.ii, p. 536

⁶³¹ CD IV.3.ii, p. 540

⁶³² CD IV.3.ii, p. 543

⁶³³ CD IV.3.ii, p. 585

Barth neglects to mention here John's account of those disciples who choose to reject Jesus' teaching and to abandon him (John 6.60-71). Barth uses John in a way which emphasises divine action, even when he is talking about human beings. His approach to John 1.35-51 is in contrast to Bultmann, who sees the same passage as concerning the revealing of the possibility of human authenticity, writing: 'Jesus shows himself to be the Revealer because he knows the people who meet him... in the encounter with him the believer's own existence is uncovered.'⁶³⁴ Bultmann's image suggests a human authenticity which is already present within the individual, needing only to be unveiled, while Barth's account stresses divine initiative in a way which brings a drastic change to people from the outside.

In Barth's understanding of vocation, the 'first and original minister, servant or slave' is 'Jesus Christ himself.' Barth highlights the account of Jesus washing his disciples' feet in John 13.2f as an example of the kind of service which others are called to follow. Barth also quotes from John to show that the opposition encountered by Christians has its 'true basis' in the world's hatred for Jesus Christ.⁶³⁵

Barth's understanding of vocation, although it assumes the existence of specific individual callings, is focused from beginning to end on Jesus Christ, the one who calls and who himself embodies the obedient response to God's call. Everything is still understood through the central character.

8.4 *John and the decision of the reader*

Despite their contrasting approaches, Barth and Bultmann each find much support for their view of theology within John's Gospel. Their different assumptions lead to them interpreting verses in very different ways, or focusing on different parts of the text. A close examination of their use (or avoidance) of various texts from John will now show that there is an existentialist theme within John's Gospel and will criticise Barth's avoidance of it. As Bultmann finds, John's story does show the consequences of individual responses to Jesus Christ and does identify the possibilities open to the individual reader based on those decisions.

⁶³⁴ Bultmann, 1971, p. 107

⁶³⁵ CD IV.3.ii, p. 638

John 3.16

The differences between Barth and Bultmann are shown clearly in their approach to John 3.16, where their contrasting assumptions lead to them emphasise different parts of the same sentence. When Barth discusses this verse in Volume IV.1, he presents it as a text about God's action towards the world ('For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,'); whereas for Bultmann this is a divine challenge to the individual. Both note the love of God, the humility of God and the darkness of the world, but Bultmann shows much more interest in the second half of John 3.16 ('so that that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life,') than Barth does.

Bultmann is much more comfortable than Barth with the implication that salvation depends on a human response which is made by some people ('everyone who believes in him'), so that its scope is limited by the decisions of individual human beings. For Bultmann, John 3:16-21 shows 'a radical understanding of Jesus' appearance as the eschatological event,'⁶³⁶ an event which clearly divides the human race into two groups, as people decide between faith and unbelief. In this decision, 'it becomes apparent what man really is and what he always was.' Therefore God 'makes the encounter with the Revealer the moment of true decision for men.'⁶³⁷ Bultmann stresses the mention of judgement in John 3:19, so that 'from now on there are only believers and unbelievers... those who have life and those who are in death.'⁶³⁸

Barth, making a rare reference to his rival, resists this focus on division between people, emphasising instead the love of God towards the whole world. He writes: 'The object of God's love was the *κοσμος*, which means (compare the following with R Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, 1971) the human world as a unified subject which confronts God in a hostile manner.'⁶³⁹

⁶³⁶ Bultmann, 1971, p. 155

⁶³⁷ Bultmann, 1971, p. 159

⁶³⁸ Bultmann, 1971, p. 155

⁶³⁹ KD IV.1, p. 75, my translation (CD IV.1, p. 70)

The only distinction which Barth makes here between believers and unbelievers is that of portraying the Christians as witnesses to an event which affects the whole world,⁶⁴⁰ rather than as a group whose decisions have opened to them a different destiny from the rest of humanity. He insists that the first part of John 3.16 ('For God so loved the world') is the 'controlling part of the sentence'. He also endorses Hoskyn's view that God's purpose here is 'redemption and not judgement.'⁶⁴¹

His selective reading continues through the following verses. After focusing on the first part of John 3.16, he quotes verse 17 ('God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him'), which fits with his emphasis on God's action towards the whole world. However, he does not continue to verse 18 ('those who do not believe are condemned already'), which points again towards a distinction between different kinds of people based on their chosen responses to Jesus.

John 9

Barth looks closely at the healing of the man born blind in John 9, as part of a discussion of the 'connection which emerges in the New Testament passages between the actions of Jesus and the faith of the men to whom and among whom they occur.'⁶⁴² Barth refers to a number of passages from the Synoptic Gospels, including Matthew 9.27-31, in which Jesus' miraculous healings seem to depend on and follow from the faith of the sick person. Barth's theology avoids giving such a decisive place to an individual person, so he emphasises that only a tiny amount of faith is involved, and that this faith is *in* Jesus Christ. But his main strategy is to give priority to John 9, in which the miraculous healing occurs first, while the question of faith ('Do you believe in the Son of Man?') occurs at the end. Barth draws particular attention to this structure, commenting: 'We are given an active demonstration of the free grace of God in the specific form of the removal of the blindness of this man.... He is simply given his sight, almost, as it were, over his head, and quite irrespective

⁶⁴⁰ CD IV.1, p. 73; Barth also interprets the second half of John 3.16 in this way in CD II.2, p. 422-423

⁶⁴¹ CD IV.1, p. 72

⁶⁴² CD IV.2, p. 233-242

of what he was or was not in relation to Jesus.⁶⁴³ The emphasis is therefore entirely on divine action, prior to and independent of human response. Subsequently, as Barth comments: 'With irresistible power, it took place that he was awakened and called to faith.'⁶⁴⁴

Barth uses John 9 to assert that the relationship between faith and miracles is the opposite of the one which might appear to be the case in many examples from the Synoptic Gospels. He concludes by defining faith as 'man's turning to Jesus and his power upon the basis of the fact that Jesus has turned to man in his power.'⁶⁴⁵

Bultmann's interpretation of this passage is, once again, very different. Like Barth, he compares it with miracle stories in the Synoptic Gospels, and notes the lack of mention of the man's faith and the initiative seized by Jesus. However, his conclusion is that this is 'a sign of the advanced stage of the development of the story.'⁶⁴⁶ Where Barth finds divine action and objective revelation, Bultmann sees the human history of the text.

Bultmann notes that Jesus calls himself 'the light of the world' in verse 5, and declares that 'the following story must be seen in the light of this symbolism.'⁶⁴⁷ The true purpose of the text is therefore our own encounter with the light which it symbolises, rather than the content of its account of Jesus' actions. Bultmann pays much more attention than Barth to the response of the Pharisees and the man himself to the healing, which forms the greater part of John 9. Commenting on Jesus asking the man whether he believes in him, Bultmann writes: 'The decisive step only comes when the question is put explicitly, when a man is confronted by the self-revelation in the word.... the word itself is only intelligible because it reveals to man the meaning of his own experience.'⁶⁴⁸

He also highlights the significance of Jesus' words at the end of the chapter: 'I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.' He writes:

⁶⁴³ CD IV.2, p. 236

⁶⁴⁴ CD IV.2, p. 237

⁶⁴⁵ CD IV.2, p. 238

⁶⁴⁶ Bultmann, 1971, p. 330

⁶⁴⁷ Bultmann, 1971, p. 331

⁶⁴⁸ Bultmann, 1971, p. 338-339

Everyone must face the question to which of the two groups he wants to belong... This is what the judgement means; the 'blind' receive 'sight'. These are the men who 'believe' in the 'light', and whose seeing is no longer an attempt to find their way in the world, in the delusion that they are able to see, but the condition of illumination through the revelation.⁶⁴⁹

The passage, for Bultmann, leaves us with a sense that our own decision of whether or not to respond to the light of Christ in faith is of central importance. That is precisely the point which Barth uses the passage to oppose.

John 11.1-44

Barth looks in detail at the raising of Lazarus in John 11.1-44. He highlights Jesus' description of himself as the 'resurrection and the life', and his command to Lazarus to 'come forth'. He comments

It is his Word as his act... This is the battle of Jesus for the cause of man as God's creature ordained by God for life and not for death. And when Lazarus hears it, and does as he is commanded, it is the victory of Jesus in this battle. And we have to remember, of course, that what is unfolded in this dramatic and almost breathtaking way in John 11 is the secret which the New Testament tradition thought it saw in all his acts and primarily in the Word which found concrete form in his acts.⁶⁵⁰

For Barth, this is one of a number of events which show Jesus' identity and message through his actions. The emphasis is on Jesus' initiative and authority in revealing himself and in conquering death. Bultmann, however, observes a different significance in the words which follow Jesus' description of himself as the 'resurrection and the life'. In the second half of John 11.25, Jesus declares: 'Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.'

Bultmann, as with John 3.16, highlights in these words a division between two kind of people. Jesus' words cause a 'sunderance between faith and unfaith'.⁶⁵¹ Barth, of course, ignores this implication of the passage. However Bultmann, unlike Barth,

⁶⁴⁹ Bultmann, 1971, p. 341

⁶⁵⁰ CD IV.2, p. 228

⁶⁵¹ Bultmann, 1955a, p. 38

is not comfortable with a literal understanding of the physical resurrection of Lazarus. He approves of the way that this present encounter with Jesus takes our attention from any thought of a future resurrection, but he does not regard the bodily resurrection itself as the real matter of significance. He writes: 'The idea of the eschatological ἀνάστασις is so transformed that the future resurrection of Martha's belief becomes irrelevant in face of the present resurrection that faith grasps. The raising of Lazarus is only a symbol of this.'⁶⁵²

For Bultmann, resurrection concerns the transformation of the life and experience of the individual through faith in Christ, rather than the objective action of God in causing the resurrection of the body. He writes: 'What then is the meaning of the death and life which are spoken of here...? It is that authenticity of existence, granted in the illumination which proceeds from man's ultimate understanding of himself.'⁶⁵³ Therefore the 'I am' saying itself also needs to be reinterpreted: "'I am the life" is not a description of the metaphysical nature of Jesus; it speaks of his gift for the man who comes to faith and thereby "rises."⁶⁵⁴

The two different strategies of retreat employed by Barth and Bultmann cause them to interpret this passage in ways which barely overlap. They each highlight some themes in the text, while taking care to avoid or dismiss the aspects noted by the other.

John 12.48 and other references to judgement

This contrast with Bultmann is evident again when Barth describes Jesus as 'The Judge Judged in our Place' in Volume IV.1, where he draws on several texts from John's Gospel to affirm Jesus' role as judge. For example, he refers to John 12.48, which says that those who do not receive Jesus' word are judged by our present response to that word. Barth's interpretation here is that Jesus is the 'judge who pronounces against us', applying this assumption to the whole human race.⁶⁵⁵ Meanwhile, Bultmann finds in these same verses in John 'a dualism of decision',

⁶⁵² Bultmann, 1971, p. 402

⁶⁵³ Bultmann, 1971, p. 258, referenced from note 5 on p. 403

⁶⁵⁴ Bultmann, 1971, p. 403

⁶⁵⁵ CD IV.1, p. 218-219

emphasising that this judgement involves the 'division of mankind into two groups.' For Barth, the realised eschatology highlights the present importance of Jesus Christ as judge, whereas for Bultmann it adds urgency to the need for the individual to make a choice. Bultmann writes that 'Jesus' words are not didactic propositions but an invitation and a call to decision.'⁶⁵⁶

For Barth, judgement comes within a framework determined by the incarnation and by the journey of the Son of God into the far country. Jesus is judged in our place, which brings a real transformation to us. He writes:

The Word became flesh that there might be the judgement of sin in the flesh and the resurrection of the flesh.⁶⁵⁷

In the suffering and death of Jesus Christ it has come to pass that in his own person he has made an end of us as sinners and therefore of sin itself by going to death as the one who took our place as sinners.⁶⁵⁸

This suggests an objective change which affects the entire human race. There is no hint at all of the judgement bringing division to us, since that judgement has been borne for us by Jesus himself. Nor is there the sense of the urgent significance of our own response. Barth goes on to write of the resurrection as the 'Verdict of the Father' as the revelation of the 'glory of the Word made flesh', and the proclamation of the salvation of the human race, that we have died and risen with Christ.⁶⁵⁹ Barth sees 'the comprehensive form of the divine verdict pronounced in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead' in the words of Jesus in John 14.19: 'Because I live, you also will live.'⁶⁶⁰

Barth notes that John, despite often placing eternal life and judgement in the present, is 'rather strangely the only book in the whole of the New Testament to speak of the last day.' Rejecting Bultmann's theory of an ecclesiastical redactor, although not mentioning him by name, Barth insists that 'it is advisable not to solve the implied difficulty of interpretation by critical amputation.'⁶⁶¹ Barth does not

⁶⁵⁶ Bultmann, 1955a, p. 21-22

⁶⁵⁷ CD IV.1, p. 237

⁶⁵⁸ CD IV.1, p. 253

⁶⁵⁹ CD IV.1, p. 341, 316

⁶⁶⁰ CD IV.1, p. 354

⁶⁶¹ CD IV.3.i, p. 294

follow Bultmann's approach of seeking to demythologise any focus on a future eschatological event. Yet, neither does he give any attention to the details of a coming judgement. Nowhere in the whole of the *Church Dogmatics* does he mention John 5.29, which states that when the dead hear the voice of the Son of Man, some will rise to the 'resurrection of life' and some to the 'resurrection of condemnation.'

Elsewhere he concedes, in a recognition of John's emphasis on judgement, that 'nowhere else in the New Testament are such sharp and stern sentences passed on unbelievers who despise and reject the gift of faith.'⁶⁶² However, he quickly turns our attention back to God's initiative again, writing:

And yet according to the same Gospel those who may believe can never doubt for a moment that they owe to the divine freedom both the objective presupposition and the subjective fulfilment of this action and therefore their whole existence in this circle, so that they can receive and honour not only the Son but also their faith in him only as a free and quite unmerited gift made over to the world and to them.

Surrounding quotes from John emphasise divine action, and Barth continues to show little interest in the impact of the warnings about judgement found in John.

John 14.26

Barth makes frequent references to parts of John's Gospel which concern the interactions within the Trinity, such as John 14.26: 'The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you.'

Barth observes that the Gospel of John is 'particularly explicit and impressive' in the way it describes the relationship between the Spirit and the Son. Barth uses John to emphasise that the role of the Spirit is to declare Jesus, rather than acting independently.⁶⁶³ In his theology, the understanding of the Spirit and of our present experience of the Spirit points back towards the completed work of Jesus Christ. Bultmann also comments on the link between the Son and the Spirit in John 14.26, but uses that link to point in the opposite direction. He describes the Spirit as 'the

⁶⁶² CD IV.3.i, p. 235

⁶⁶³ CD IV.2, p. 326

power given to the community, the power in which the eschatological event continues to be carried through', so that it is 'realised in the present.' The witness of the Spirit 'places the hearer again and again in front of the *now* of the eschatological decision.'⁶⁶⁴ For Bultmann, talk of the Son becomes, via the Spirit, a call to grasp the possibilities of the present moment, and therefore a way of focusing on the decisions of the individual. For both Barth and Bultmann, the Spirit connects the individual with Jesus Christ, but they use the same chain of theological ideas to move our attention in opposite directions along it.

John 15.1-11 and other references to the Church and the world

Barth refers briefly to Jesus' description of himself as the 'true vine' in John 15.1-11 when talking about the Christian community as the body of Christ. He emphasises the authority of Jesus Christ as the head of the body and, quoting John 15.5, he writes: "'Without me ye can do nothing" – you cannot be my body, you cannot be a body at all.'⁶⁶⁵

This and other passages enable Barth to develop a doctrine of the Church which is centred on Jesus Christ. Christians exist as members of the body of Christ because of the action of Jesus Christ. Elsewhere, he writes:

It is born of the omnipotent Word of God's grace in Jesus Christ. It cannot, then, hear the voice of a stranger (John 10.5). For all its dependence on the world and world-occurrence, it cannot be ruled and determined by these.⁶⁶⁶

The community only exists as he exists. 'Because I live, ye shall live also' (John 14.19), is the right order.⁶⁶⁷

Bultmann, by contrast, sees 'promises and threats' in John 15.1-11 which are intended to provoke a response. He declares that 'the Revealer is not the mediator of a doctrine that can be received once for all,' but that his words 'speak of the promise that he will always remain the ground and origin of the possibility of life.'⁶⁶⁸ For Bultmann, this is an ongoing reciprocal relationship which requires individuals to

⁶⁶⁴ Bultmann, 1971, p. 626-627

⁶⁶⁵ CD IV.1, p. 664

⁶⁶⁶ CD IV.3.ii, p. 741

⁶⁶⁷ CD IV.3.ii, p. 754

⁶⁶⁸ Bultmann, 1971, p. 536

make continuing decisions to abide in Christ, allowing themselves to be held by Christ. Bultmann does see divine action and initiative here, but in a way which opens up human possibilities rather than replacing them, and which is dependent on a human response. Barth, however, ignores the implications of this passage for the significance of the human decision to abide in Christ.

Elsewhere, Barth uses John's account of the incarnation in order to give a warning against a kind of 'ecclesiological Docetism'⁶⁶⁹ which would overemphasise the distinction between the Church and the world. He thereby carefully avoids Bultmann's emphasis on a division reflecting different responses to God. Barth stresses that the Church 'is a people like so many others,' which can be discussed using ordinary human categories. Like the incarnate Word, it exists in a 'visible and worldly manner.'⁶⁷⁰ It is interesting to note that Barth can even use the humanity of Christ to distract attention away from the responses of human beings and towards Jesus.

Barth uses John 20.21 and 17.18 to relate Jesus' sending of the disciples to the Father's sending of the Son. He writes that 'the two sendings are comparable because they have the same origin.'⁶⁷¹ Both sendings are related to the declaration of God's love for the world in John 3.16, so that Barth describes the Church as the 'Community for the World'. The Church therefore becomes a witness to God's actions towards the whole world, rather than being a group set apart from the world whose membership is of theological significance. In taking this approach, Barth does not explore the Johannine emphasis on the disciples as those who do not belong to the world shown, for example, in John 17.14-16.

8.5 Barth's silencing of existentialist themes in John

There are, as shown above, a number of ways in which Barth and Bultmann use the same passages in John to point in very different directions, highlighting different aspects of their message. Even more significant, however, is the way that Barth keeps

⁶⁶⁹ CD IV.3.ii, p. 723

⁶⁷⁰ CD IV.3.ii, p. 724

⁶⁷¹ CD IV.3.ii, p. 768

away from those verses in John's Gospel which can be used to support Bultmann's existentialism. I have identified 38 places in John's Gospel which can be seen as stressing the importance of the individual's response to Jesus Christ. These are listed below. In many cases, they define clearly a division between believers and unbelievers and describe it as having great consequences, in a way which is at odds with Barth's tendency towards universalism.

1.12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.

3.3 'No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.'⁶⁷²

3.5 'No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.'

3.14-15 'So must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.'

3.16 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.'

3.18 'Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.'

3.19-21 'This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.'

3.36 'Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath.'

4.14 Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty.

5.24 'Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life.'

5.25 'The dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.'

5.28-29 'The hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.'

6.27 'Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.'

⁶⁷² See the discussion of Baptism with the Spirit in Chapter 8.6 for the distinction between Barth and Bultmann's approaches to John 3.1-8.

- 6.35 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'
- 6.40 'This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.'
- 6.47 'Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life.'
- 6.51 'I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever.'
- 6.53 'Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.'
- 6.54 'Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day.'
- 6.57 'Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.'
- 6.58 'The one who eats this bread will live forever.'
- 7.37 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water."'
- 8.12 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.'
- 8.31-32 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.'
- 8.51 'Whoever keeps my word will never see death.'
- 10.9 'I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.'
- 11.25 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.'
- 12.25 'Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.'
- 12.26 'Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.'
- 12.36 'While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.'
- 12.46 'I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness.'
- 12.48 'The one who rejects me and does not receive my word has a judge; on the last day the word that I have spoken will serve as judge.'
- 13.8 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.'
- 13.20 'Whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.'

14.12 'The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.'

14.21 'They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.'

14.23 'Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.'

15.5-6 'I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.'

20.29 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

In Bultmann's existentialist approach, these are extremely significant texts.⁶⁷³ The challenge to the reader implied by such verses has also been widely noted by other commentators. Lincoln comments that 'the Fourth Gospel interprets Jesus' life as evoking a crisis for humanity, demanding radical decision-making.'⁶⁷⁴

Schnackenburg finds in John 3.18 'an immediate summons, challenging men to decision here and now.'⁶⁷⁵ Writing about John 3.16, O'Day notes: 'God's gift of Jesus... decisively alters the options available to the world. If one believes, one's present is altered by the gift of eternal life; if one does not believe, one perishes.'⁶⁷⁶

Despite the large number of these verses and their obvious common theme, Barth rarely focuses on their challenge to the individual in any depth, usually ignoring or occasionally explaining away this implication. In some cases, such as John 3.16, as discussed earlier, Barth highlights a statement about God but ignores the immediately adjacent description of a division that results between people based on their response.

Barth's careful avoidance of the theme of human decision fits with the central importance in his theology of God's decision to be gracious to the human race by being incarnate for us. The shape of his theology seems to make a belief in universal salvation inevitable, because it is structured so that no human or divine event could

⁶⁷³ Many are mentioned in Bultmann, 1955a, p. 22, which discusses the division of the human race into two groups, and sees Jesus' words as 'an invitation and a call to decision.'

⁶⁷⁴ Lincoln, 2005, p. 90

⁶⁷⁵ Schnackenburg, 1982, vol. 1, p. 403

⁶⁷⁶ O'Day, 1995, p. 553

act against God's gracious decision. Nevertheless, Barth remains cautious on a point which the logic of his theology seems to demand, as Berkouwer, Balthasar, Rodin and others observe.⁶⁷⁷

Barth holds out the possibility of universal salvation but says that we are 'forbidden to count on it'.⁶⁷⁸ And he declares that we cannot venture either the statement that all are to be saved or the statement that some are not.⁶⁷⁹ Nevertheless, he highlights verses from John which emphasise that Jesus is the light of the world, that he came because of God's love for the world that the world might be saved through him, that he gives life to the world, and that he will not reject anyone who comes to him.⁶⁸⁰

Meanwhile, he gives little attention to the fact that there are verses in John, as in other parts of the New Testament, which are deliberately and shockingly clear about the idea that some will not be saved. The distinction between those who come out of their graves to 'the resurrection of life' and those who come to 'the resurrection of condemnation' in John 5.29, ignored by Barth, does not appear ambiguous. Lindars describes that verse as a 'completely conventional apocalyptic picture... naïve in its literalism.'⁶⁸¹ Brown sees there a declaration of future damnation which is found in Paul and the Synoptics as well as John.⁶⁸²

Yet Barth does not have a clear space in his theology for a divine decision not to save a particular human being, or a human decision which could result in that person not being saved. Human beings may choose to live in ignorance of God's gracious actions on their behalf, or may fail to live up to their calling, but they cannot undo the salvation which has already been gained for them. Balthasar summarises Barth's position as follows:

Barth basically could not explain how it was possible for a human being not to have faith. If one takes seriously Barth's presuppositions, unbelief can only be the refusal to admit the truth of the faith that is already present. Man of course has the power to say No to God, but his No can never be strong enough to annul God's Yes to man or even to call it

⁶⁷⁷ Berkouwer, 1956, p. 111-122; Balthasar, 1992, p. 186, Rodin, 1997, p. 129

⁶⁷⁸ CD IV.3.i p. 478

⁶⁷⁹ CD II.2, p. 417-418

⁶⁸⁰ CD II.2, p. 422

⁶⁸¹ Lindars, 1981, p. 226

⁶⁸² Brown, 1966, p. 215

into question. In Christ, God has triumphed for all and over all, and all human beings are what they are through Christ.⁶⁸³

Barth's theology connects well with those aspects of John's Gospel which emphasise the universal significance and triumph of Jesus Christ. But as is clear from the verses which Barth ignores, and from the existentialist theme which Bultmann highlights, John's Gospel has an urgent and insistent concern with the genuine eternal consequences of present human decisions.

As shown above, Barth and Bultmann use John's Gospel in very different ways as a result of their contrasting theological assumptions. The role of these assumptions, however, is something which Barth observes readily in Bultmann but not in himself. He grumbles: 'Bultmann is an exegete. But it is impossible to engage him in exegetical discussion. For he is also a systematic theologian of the type which handles texts in such a way that their exegesis is always controlled by a set of dogmatic presuppositions and is thus wholly dependent upon their validity.'⁶⁸⁴ He explains that Bultmann's 'rule' and 'hermeneutical suggestions' would prevent him from saying those things which he believes ought to be said.⁶⁸⁵

However, in their contrasting interpretations of the passages explored above, it seems that each theologian has a distinctive exegesis which is controlled by a set of dogmatic presuppositions. Bultmann assumes that the real message of the Bible is an existentialist one, whereas Barth assumes that its real meaning is an account of God shown through his actions. Each approach enables one to say things that he thinks are important, while marginalising the things which the other emphasises, so that both miss part of the meaning of the text. For example, John 3.16-21 contains *both* a declaration of God's objective action in and for the world *and* a challenge to individuals which shows the consequences of their response to that action.

Barth, like Bultmann, deploys a set of dogmatic presuppositions in a way which silences part of John's Gospel, preventing him from hearing important aspects of its message. Each theologian is being deliberately selective, in a way which he believes is fully justified because of his assumptions about the nature and place of divine

⁶⁸³ Balthasar, 1992, p. 245

⁶⁸⁴ CD III.2, p. 445

⁶⁸⁵ CD IV.1, p. ix-x

action and revelation. However, seen from any other vantage point, it appears that each has an approach to the text which is deficient.

Bultmann's existentialism gives him a reason for demythologising and reinterpreting texts which describe the actions of God. His method is clearly stated and explained. His theories about the history of the text, even if highly speculative, give him a declared reason for rejecting some verses as the work of an 'ecclesiastical redactor'. Barth, however, never announces a principle which would give him a justification for glossing over significant aspects of a Gospel. He never attempts to reconstruct an original text which differs from its canonical form, nor suggests that parts of the Bible need to be updated in the light of modern knowledge. He has no excuse for ignoring a significant aspect of its message. Instead of giving a justification for pushing aside particular verses, his approach is simply to focus attention in other directions. He summarises his own method simply in these words: 'At each point I listen as unreservedly as possible to the witness of Scripture and as impartially as possible to that of the Church, and then consider and formulate whatever may be the result.'⁶⁸⁶

Clearly Barth's approach is far more complex than he states here, but he does not outline a method in detail, preferring to write about God rather than hermeneutics. However, Hunsinger finds in Barth's use of scripture 'a hermeneutic of close textual readings richly informed by doctrinal considerations not immediately suggested by the text itself but rather by a deepened appreciation for the larger dogmatic or hermeneutical context.'⁶⁸⁷ The larger dogmatic context is the distinctive action of the Trinitarian God in revealing himself and redeeming the world in Jesus Christ, understood in a way which leaves no significant place for human decisions.

Barth criticises Bultmann's hermeneutics but, despite his commitment to being attentive to the whole of scripture, he has a set of unspoken dogmatic presuppositions which prevent him from hearing part of its message. In comparison with Bultmann's acknowledged dogmatic presuppositions, Barth's approach is less open and less consistent.

⁶⁸⁶ CD IV.2, p. xi

⁶⁸⁷ Hunsinger, 1991, p. 57

8.6 Baptism with the Holy Spirit and with water

More insights into Barth's understanding of the relationship between divine initiative and human response can be found in his discussion of baptism in the unfinished Volume IV.4, which makes much use of John's Gospel. Having spent many years clearly establishing the absolute priority of divine initiative, the elderly Barth now turns to the event which marks the beginning of the Christian life. Here he is careful to distinguish between baptism with the Holy Spirit and baptism with water. He regards baptism with the Holy Spirit as the divine action which causes a person to become a Christian, while baptism with water is the obedient human response to what God has already done and the beginning of the life of discipleship.

In considering baptism with the Holy Spirit, Barth depends on several passages from John's Gospel. John 1.12-13 describes Jesus giving people the power to become children of God; in John 1.33, John the Baptist describes Jesus as the one who baptises with the Holy Spirit; and in John 3.3-8, Jesus tells Nicodemus about the need to be born of water and the Spirit. For Barth, this Johannine account of divine action described and initiated by Jesus Christ is of central importance.

Barth describes the connection between the history of Jesus Christ and the history of the individual believer. He writes: 'A Christian... is a man from whom it is not hidden that his own history took place along with the history of Jesus Christ.'⁶⁸⁸ Thus, although baptism in the Spirit is a real event in the life of the Christian, it is not one which draws attention to the life of the individual, but one which shows the true meaning of that life as a part of the history of Jesus Christ. Barth comments: 'In the history of Jesus Christ, then, is the origin and beginning of the Christian life.'⁶⁸⁹ He insists that the New Testament permits 'no demythologising or reinterpretation' of this statement and writes: 'The fact that the change in which a man becomes a Christian has its ground and commencement in the history of Jesus Christ characterises it as a divine happening.'

Barth is guarding against baptism with the Holy Spirit being understood primarily as an event within a human life, an experience which is wholly or partly determined

⁶⁸⁸ CD IV.4, p. 13

⁶⁸⁹ CD IV.4, p. 17

by human choices, so that talk about the Holy Spirit becomes talk about human histories and decisions. It is in reference to Jesus' distinction in John 3.6 between those who are born of the Spirit and those who are born of the flesh, that Bultmann writes: 'πνεῦμα refers to the miracle of a mode of being in which man enjoys authentic existence, in which he understands himself and knows that he is no longer threatened by nothingness.'⁶⁹⁰

For Bultmann, the references to being born from above in John 3.1-8 function as invitations, seeking a response from individuals, rather than declarations of the priority of divine action. He writes: 'In the Revealer's call there opens up to him the possibility of *being* otherwise than he was. He can exchange his Whence, his origin, his essence for another; he can "be born again" (3.1ff) and thus attain to his true being. In his decision between faith and un-faith a man's being definitely constitutes itself.'⁶⁹¹

Barth, by contrast, is vigilant in ensuring that all talk about Christian lives is made to point towards the history of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, he is also careful to seek an appropriate balance between discussion of divinity and discussion of humanity when considering how the history of Jesus Christ '*extra nos*' can 'become an event *in nobis*.'⁶⁹² Although he affirms Christocentricity, he warns against a 'Christomonist solution' in which 'all anthropology and soteriology are thus swallowed up in Christology.' And he opposes an 'anthropomonist view' in which 'Christology is now swallowed up by a self-sufficient anthropology and soteriology.'⁶⁹³

Barth complains about those who impose 'obvious but distorted solutions... with the aid of an alien concept of unity.' There is no simple model which will provide the answer. But the New Testament itself speaks of both God and human beings without allowing one side to swallow up the other, and that is the witness which must be followed, even if it contains elements of paradox. Barth writes:

The history of Jesus Christ, then, does not destroy a man's own history. In virtue of it this history becomes a new history, but it is still his own new history. The faithfulness to God to which he is summoned is not, then an emanation of God's faithfulness. It is truly his

⁶⁹⁰ Bultmann, 1971, p, 141

⁶⁹¹ Bultmann, 1955a, p. 25

⁶⁹² CD IV.4, p. 18

⁶⁹³ CD IV.4, p. 19-20

own faithfulness, decision and act. He could achieve it if he were not liberated thereto. But being thus liberated, he does it as his own act, as his answer to the Word of God spoken to him in the history of Jesus Christ.⁶⁹⁴

Barth's writing can give the impression that human history has indeed been swallowed up by the history of Jesus Christ. In some earlier parts of the *Church Dogmatics*, it did seem that all history had been emptied of real significance by the absolute priority of the eternal decision of God to be incarnate for us. However, Barth's writings on baptism, along with other passages on ethics, make it clear that this is not his intention. He affirms the reality of human history, and affirms that baptism with the Holy Spirit is a real event in the life of human beings, while showing that human history has its real meaning and origin only in relation to the history of Jesus Christ.

When Barth proceeds to talk about the human action of baptism with water, he is careful to relate it to the divine action of baptism with the Holy Spirit in a way which preserves the existence and significance of both, while giving priority and emphasis to the work of God. In an allusion to Chalcedonian Christology, he writes:

Each of the elements both individually and also in correlation, and therefore the totality of the event, will be misunderstood if it is either separated from or, instead of being distinguished, mixed together or confused with the other. Baptism with the Holy Spirit does not exclude baptism with water. It does not render it superfluous. Indeed, it makes it possible and demands it. Again, baptism with water is what it is only in relation to baptism with the Holy Spirit. Whether it looks back to this or forward to it, it presupposes it.⁶⁹⁵

Barth turns to the example of John the Baptist in John's Gospel, the witness to Jesus Christ who points towards him.⁶⁹⁶ Water baptism points towards baptism with the Spirit. Barth comments: 'Almost unmistakably implied in John is a polemic against overestimation of the person and mission of the Baptist, or of water baptism as such.'

Barth opposes the identification of baptism as a sacrament, and the finding of sacramentalism in John's Gospel. This leads him into a detailed discussion of John 3.5

⁶⁹⁴ CD IV.4, p. 23

⁶⁹⁵ CD IV.4, p. 41

⁶⁹⁶ CD IV.4, p. 61-62

(birth of water and Spirit) and John 19.34 (blood and water flowing from the side of the crucified Christ). In both cases, he notes that Bultmann attributes mention of water and blood to the ecclesiastical redactor,⁶⁹⁷ but this convenient excuse does not fit with his approach to the Bible.

Barth alleges that 'water and the Spirit' in John 3.5 form 'one of many pairs-in-tension which are characteristic of the thought and utterance of the Fourth Gospel', such as 'hear and learn' in John 6.45.⁶⁹⁸ The accent, Barth declares, is always on the second thing. From this highly conjectural reasoning, Barth concludes: 'What the "water" is by which a man is born from above is explained wholly and exclusively by "Spirit" ... Water is to be defined in this function solely by Spirit... He, the Spirit alone, is the "living water" (4.10f, 7.38).' This conflicts with the widely-held interpretation described by Brown: 'There can be little doubt that the Christian readers of John would have interpreted vs. 5, "being begotten of water and Spirit," as a reference to Christian Baptism.'⁶⁹⁹

In the case of the water and blood in John 19.34, Barth similarly concludes that the reference is to the Spirit and the life which Jesus brings, rather than to baptism and the eucharist, a view which Moloney, for example, affirms.⁷⁰⁰ Barth rejects an emphasis on sacraments because it can seem to make human action cause divine action. Baptism in water, in his view, does not make people Christians; it merely responds to and points to the divine initiative of Jesus Christ, who has acted to save the world and who sends the Holy Spirit to bring about the conversion of human beings.

8.7 Living obediently

Barth's caution in describing water baptism in relation to baptism with the Spirit is similar to his strategic approach to ethics. In discussing the life of obedience to God, Barth is careful to maintain an emphasis on divine initiative. He is determined not to acknowledge the validity of any general form of ethics which might claim an

⁶⁹⁷ CD IV.4, p. 120, 125

⁶⁹⁸ CD IV.4, p. 121

⁶⁹⁹ Brown, 1966, p. 141-142

⁷⁰⁰ Moloney, 1998, p. 509

existence which is separate from or prior to Jesus Christ. The goodness of particular human actions should not in themselves form the focus of theological enquiry. Barth insists that ethics is part of the doctrine of God and is to be understood Christologically: 'Because Jesus Christ is the holy God and sanctified man in one, it has its basis in the knowledge of Jesus Christ.'⁷⁰¹

Barth will therefore not allow there to be a prior, general ethical framework deduced by observation from nature and human behaviour, into which Jesus Christ can subsequently be fitted. He opposes an exploration of natural law.⁷⁰² Jesus Christ comes first, and it is only in relation to him that the true nature and meaning of ethics can become clear.

We cannot understand the ethical question as the question of human existence as if it were posed in a vacuum, as if there were an ethical question in itself and for itself, as if it were not first posed by the grace of God – and not only posed but already answered by the grace of God. We cannot act as if the command of God, issued by God's grace to the elect man Jesus Christ, and again by God's grace already fulfilled by this man, were not already known to us as the sum total of the good.⁷⁰³

Again, Barth connects everything to Jesus Christ, so that Christ can be seen to reign supreme. He is both the God who commands and the man who obeys; the sanctifying God and the sanctified man; the God who restores us to his image and the reconstituted man; the image both of the Law which commands us and the Gospel which reconciles us with God.⁷⁰⁴ Barth declares that ethics is part of dogmatics, and that its 'central concept', 'starting-point and destination' is the 'claiming of man by the command of God, his sanctification as it is accomplished in Jesus Christ, and therefore the action of God for man and in man.'⁷⁰⁵

Goodness is therefore understood in relation to the action of God in Jesus Christ:

Man does good in so far as his action is Christian. A Christian is one who knows that God has accepted him in Jesus Christ, that a decision has been made concerning him in Jesus

⁷⁰¹ CD II.2, p. 509

⁷⁰² CD II.2, p. 514

⁷⁰³ CD II.2, p. 518

⁷⁰⁴ CD II.2, p. 539

⁷⁰⁵ CD II.2, p. 546

Christ as the eternal Word of God, and that he has been called into covenant with him by Jesus Christ as the Word of God spoken in time.⁷⁰⁶

Barth continues to have John 1 in mind as he ensures that ethics is brought into line with his central emphasis on God's decision to be incarnate for us. He writes of:

The sovereign divine decision as the norm of our conduct... the concrete reality of the covenant between God and man, as the person and the work and lordship of Jesus Christ: his person, in whom the eternal Word has taken our flesh and assumed and accepted human existence in its totality into union with himself in order that he may be the head, and also our head, in his community, but also secretly in the whole cosmos.⁷⁰⁷

When writing about ethics, Barth uses other passages from John to assert the universal significance of Jesus Christ, who is the light which enlightens everyone (John 1.9)⁷⁰⁸ and the good shepherd (John 10.14f)⁷⁰⁹. Goodness is related to abiding in Jesus Christ (John 6.56 and 15.4).⁷¹⁰ Even in the subject of ethics, the examination of human actions, Barth continues to emphasise divine decision and action.

Ethics, for Barth, is a matter of the command of God. He insists that the revelation of the Word made flesh shows us that God makes himself known in words, but cannot be replaced by them or mastered by a theological system. He writes: 'In Jesus Christ the fact of the encounter of God and man is not merely a fact which can be recognised as such, but also a Word – a Word in flesh and for flesh – which can be known as such.'⁷¹¹ Barth insists that ethics is dynamic, related to the living God, and should not become casuistry, because that would place the moralist 'on God's throne, to distinguish good and evil.'⁷¹² Instead of a system of rules, Barth describes the command of the living God in this way: 'It is always an individual command for the conduct of this man, at this moment and in this situation; a prescription for this case of his; a prescription for the choice of a definite possibility of human intention, decision and action.'⁷¹³

⁷⁰⁶ CD II.2, p. 547

⁷⁰⁷ CD II.2, p. 660

⁷⁰⁸ CD II.2, p. 539

⁷⁰⁹ CD II.2, p. 777

⁷¹⁰ CD II.2, p. 600

⁷¹¹ CD III.4, p. 24

⁷¹² CD III.4, p. 10

⁷¹³ CD III.4, p. 11

Here Barth appears to come close to Bultmann's existentialism. Like Bultmann, he is keen to show that God transcends all human systems of ideas. But Barth does not dwell on the individual's experience of being confronted by the divine command: his focus is, as usual, on the giver of the command. Bultmann's existentialism is related to ethics, in that it deals with decisions and holds out the possibility of authentic choices which are a faithful response to God; however it relates to individuals and tends to seek a retreat from human culture rather than demanding a shared engagement with the problems and dilemmas of the world.⁷¹⁴

Barth writes about the urgency of the present moment in a way which briefly seems to resemble Bultmann. But whereas Bultmann seeks to present the moment of decision as the crossroads which could lead us in very different directions, Barth's contrasting view of freedom places careful limits around our choices and seeks to connect everything to Jesus Christ:

The urgency of the divine command carries with it a warning to seize our limited time as a unique opportunity, and a summons to freedom within this limitation, only when we are aware that the cosmos and history, and with them our own existence in this sphere, have their meaning in the calling and covenant and salvation of God, and their centre and significance in Jesus Christ.⁷¹⁵

When Barth writes of a freedom to respond to God's command and to act ethically, he makes it clear that this choice operates within limits set by God, so that the action and will of God is always the most significant fact.

The truth is that for all its independence and responsibility human choice takes place within the area and framework of the divine choice, counsel and decision, so that man's decisions as such are comprehended within the decree and fulfilment of the will of God.... It is quite impossible, however, that he and his decision should somehow step out of the reach of the will and plan of God.⁷¹⁶

Barth sets the ethical life of human beings always in the context of the action of Jesus Christ, the man who embodies both divine command and human response, and has already acted decisively on our behalf. He writes:

⁷¹⁴ See Chapter 3.4

⁷¹⁵ CD III.4, p. 580

⁷¹⁶ CD III.4, p. 633

Jesus Christ, whether known or not, is in fact the fellow of each man who exists and passes in his time. Jesus Christ is the centre and meaning of the cosmos and history... The Word became flesh... The repentance, faith and obedience of man were enacted... at the heart of cosmos and history... Now the event which filled and controlled his time, as the event of the existence and action of God in unity with this man, has objectively occurred for them.⁷¹⁷

While Barth relies heavily on John in order to establish the nature of ethics and the position of ethics within his restructured theology, he tends to look elsewhere in the scriptures for the details of ethical issues. This can be explained by John's 'lack of interest in ethics', which is noted by Hart.⁷¹⁸ In a rare exception, it is John's description of Jesus washing the disciples' feet which gives Barth the culminating image for active love, and the image for the Christian life as the call to love our neighbour.⁷¹⁹

Barth's deep concern for ethics, shown clearly in his response to the German military aggression of the two World Wars, is reflected in the structure of his theology. Barth's theology does not serve ethics, in that its first concern is not with human choices and actions; but it justifies a belief in the distinctive revelation of the central character of John's Gospel, whose commands are more authoritative than all human ideologies and philosophies.

8.8 *Bearing witness to the Word in words*

As already seen, Barth's account of the Christian life describes a response to God in faith and obedience. He expects that Christian faith will lead to changes in people's lives, even though he avoids giving a decisive position in his theology to the choices and experiences of Christians. Barth's emphasis is on the work of Jesus Christ, to whom, as discussed in Chapter 5.8, he believes that all human beings bear witness in different ways.

Barth gives particular attention to the Church's calling to speak words which point towards the Word made flesh, human words through which the Word of God

⁷¹⁷ CD III.4, p. 577

⁷¹⁸ Hart, 1998, p. 23

⁷¹⁹ CD IV.2, p. 824

(revealed, written and proclaimed) may be heard. Christians are called to bear witness to God in preaching and in the theological work of reflection on the content of the Church's message. Barth believes that the event of the incarnation shows that genuine divine revelation can then be found in the content of shared human statements and ideas, even though the Word remains greater than them. He writes: 'God's Son is God's Word. Thus God does reveal himself in statements, through the medium of speech, and indeed of human speech.'⁷²⁰

Despite Barth's caution about systems of ideas, his Christocentric view of revelation gives him a deep commitment to the exploration of the actual doctrinal content of Christian proclamation. Barth also sees the incarnation as the basis for Christian preaching: 'It is because the Word of God is Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ is for all time attested in Holy Scripture, that the promise that God himself will speak in the proclamation of the Church is recognisable and meaningful.'⁷²¹

Barth believes in being deeply attentive to scripture but insists that the text of scripture itself is not enough to form the proclamation of the Church. Commenting on preaching, Barth writes: 'It cannot consist in the mere reading of scripture or in repeating and paraphrasing the actual wording of the biblical witness.'⁷²²

A church service of music and readings with no sermon would be unthinkable for Barth, as would a theology which simply listed the conclusions of previous theologians.

The concrete encounter of God and man today, whose actuality, of course, can be created only by the Word of God himself, must find a counterpart in the human event of proclamation, i.e., the person called must be ready to make the promise given to the Church intelligible in his own words to the men of his own time.⁷²³

Barth and Bultmann share a similar emphasis on preaching as a present event which is more than just the recitation of ancient texts.⁷²⁴ Barth, while expecting preachers to work at putting the Word into their own words, nevertheless includes extensive advice on sermon content in the index volume of the *Church Dogmatics*. Barth's work

⁷²⁰ CD I.1, p. 137-8

⁷²¹ CD I.2, p. 801-2

⁷²² CD I.1, p. 59

⁷²³ CD I.1, p. 59

⁷²⁴ See Chapter 3.4

is intended to be a resource for preachers, and Genest comments that 'the monumental *Church Dogmatics* can be seen as homiletics of a higher order.'⁷²⁵

Bultmann's understanding of preaching involves locating the event of revelation within the experience of the individual, who is challenged by hearing the Word. But Barth locates the event of revelation within the person of the Word himself, Jesus Christ. In his discussion of the proclamation of the Word, Barth declares his reliance on an understanding of the Word made flesh which is heavily dependent on Chalcedonian Christology. He writes:

Proclamation is human speech in and by which God himself speaks like a king through the mouth of his herald... As this human utterance serves it, it is itself God's own Word. For a proper explanation of this 'is' we should have to refer even at this early stage to the Christological doctrine of the two natures.⁷²⁶

At the heart of Barth's understanding of the theology and proclamation of the Church is this Chalcedonian understanding of the Word made flesh, in which humanity and divinity coexist together in Jesus Christ but maintain their distinctive natures, including the freedom of God.

As Christ became true man and remains true man to all eternity, real proclamation becomes an event on the level of all other human events... But as Christ is not just true man, so it is not just the willing and doing of proclaiming man. It is also and indeed it is primarily and decisively the divine willing and doing.⁷²⁷

This understanding of revelation and divine initiative, derived from John's account of the incarnation, is why Barth considers it possible for human beings to preach the Word of God. Barth's emphasis on the continuing action of God supports his belief that the continuing work of theologians is necessary in equipping the Church to proclaim the Word in human words.

Other than Jesus Christ, the character in John's Gospel whom Barth emphasises most is John the Baptist. Barth describes him as the 'prototype of the New Testament witness'⁷²⁸, and draws attention to the way he is depicted pointing (with his

⁷²⁵ Genest, 1988, p. 142, my translation

⁷²⁶ CD I.1, p. 52

⁷²⁷ CD I.1, p. 94

⁷²⁸ CD IV.3.ii, p. 611

‘prodigious index finger’⁷²⁹) towards Christ in Grünewald’s painting of the crucifixion. For Barth, John the Baptist indicates that preaching and dogmatics have a real subject and a real content, pointing towards God but remaining one step removed from him. Theological statements and Christian sermons remain human words unless God freely chooses to speak through them. The Baptist, as the one who testifies to the light but is not himself the light (John 1.8), represents for Barth the role which we are invited to take.

8.9 Conclusion

Chapter 8 has described how Barth’s understanding of the human response to the story of Jesus Christ centres on the truth of the content of that story rather than the response. The Christian life is founded on faith in what God has already done and serves to bear witness to that truth. Christian experience and action are not themselves the matters of central importance, but they derive from and point towards Jesus Christ, who is himself the truth. The central character not only fills the story itself, reshaping the background and the structure of the narrative around him, but provides the true understanding of the lives of the readers, whose calling is to have faith in him and to bear witness to him.

⁷²⁹ CD I.1, p. 112

9 The dualism and drama of John's Gospel

9.1 *Good and evil*

Chapters 4 to 8 have looked at John's Gospel as a story, discussing how Barth's theology relates to different aspects of it. To bring together these different themes and to reach a conclusion, it is useful now to consider the drama of John's Gospel as a whole, and to compare that drama with Barth's theology.

John's Gospel is a text full of contrasts and conflicts showing, as Ashton notes, a 'distinctive dualism'.⁷³⁰ According to the prologue, Jesus is the light which shines in the darkness, the one rejected by his own people. John goes on to tell us of the people who choose to love the darkness rather than the light of Christ, of the world's hatred for Jesus, of the Devil working through Judas to cause Jesus' death, and of Jesus' declaration that he has come to judge the world and drive out its ruler.⁷³¹ The passion, as Barrett notes, is presented as 'a conflict between Jesus and Satan.'⁷³² This is a clear but unbalanced dualism, in which there are real powers of evil which put up a fierce fight, but which are ultimately less powerful than the light of Christ.

John's account of a battle between Jesus and the Devil presents problems for both Barth and Bultmann, neither of whom can adopt this theology without significant reinterpretation. Bultmann sees an urgent need for demythologising, so that we will not be misled by the imagery of the ancient world but can still understand the existential meaning of the text. For Barth, whose theology is structured to avoid giving any decisive place to any agent other than God, or to any other standard against which to judge the truth, there is a serious difficulty in finding a place for the real existence of evil.

Evil is a difficult topic for all Christian theologians because, as Inwagen notes, 'there is a fundamental opposition between the existence of a loving and all-powerful

⁷³⁰ Ashton, 1991, p. 206

⁷³¹ John 3.18, 15.18, 13.27, 12.31

⁷³² Barrett, 1978, p. 469

God and the existence of evil in the world this God has made.⁷³³ But the most common approach to the problem is an answer which conflicts with Barth's theology, summarised here by Flint: 'The dominant theme among Christian apologists has long been that God allows evil for the sake of some greater good. And the good most often cited is human freedom. The importance and value of free will, they suggest, provide us with the best defence against the deductive argument [from evil].'⁷³⁴

This emphasis on the significance of free will is incompatible with Barth's theology. Furthermore, human freedom, in the sense used by Flint, is not something which Barth sees as a greater good. For him, any claim to a value for human autonomy is a denial of the truth that real humanity is found in the life of obedience to God lived for us by Jesus Christ. Since Barth's theology is structured in a way which rules out the most fruitful approach to the understanding of evil, the problem for Barth is especially acute. Evil simply does not fit. In this context, Barth pleads:

We have here an extraordinarily clear demonstration of the necessary brokenness of all theological thought and utterance. There is no theological sphere where this is not noticeable. All theology is *theologia viatorum*. It can never satisfy the natural aspiration of human thought and utterance for completeness and compactness. It does not exhibit its object but can only indicate it... It can never form a system, comprehending and as it were 'seizing' the object. That is true of all theological assertions.⁷³⁵

Barth is stuck with the fact that evil exists when the rest of his theology suggests that it should not. His main answer is really just a way of restating the problem: evil exists, and yet it exists as something which God has rejected. Barth presents evil as 'nothingness' (*das Nichtige* – that which is not),⁷³⁶ linking it carefully with his central focus on divine decision: 'The ontic context in which nothingness is real is that of God's activity as grounded in his election... Nothingness is that from which God separates himself and in face of which he asserts himself and exerts his positive will... God elects and therefore rejects what he does not elect.'⁷³⁷

⁷³³ Inwagen, 2004, p. viii

⁷³⁴ Flint, 2000, p. 222

⁷³⁵ CD III.3, p. 293

⁷³⁶ CD III.3, p. 289-368

⁷³⁷ CD III.3, p. 351

This is a development of a tradition within Christian theology, linked notably with Augustine⁷³⁸ and influenced by Neoplatonism,⁷³⁹ which sees evil as the privation of good. However, Hick observes that Barth's view of evil has no basis in the scriptures. He writes:

It does not represent revealed truth at all. It is a product of Barth's own fertile and fascinating mind. The notion that evil has been brought into 'existence' as that which God rejected when he elected his good creation is not among the data of Christian faith. It is not a part of, nor is it an unproblematic deduction from, the biblical revelation⁷⁴⁰.

Barth fails, especially, to convey the drama of the power of darkness in John's Gospel, as described at the beginning of this chapter. In writing about sin, he has to resort to paradoxical language: 'It has no basis either in God or in man himself by which it can be explained... It is the grasping of the possibility which is no possibility, but can be characterised only as an impossibility.'⁷⁴¹

Similarly, he declares that 'we can never acknowledge the genuinely godless man to be real man.'⁷⁴² Barth's view of evil as nothingness and sin as an impossible possibility is especially distant here from John's Gospel, with its robust and dramatic account of a great conflict between Jesus Christ and the powers of darkness. Such a continuing conflict between opposing cosmic powers, even when one is clearly prevailing, is alien to Barth's way of thinking. McGrath gives this description of Barth's problem: 'It is simply impossible to accommodate the existence of sin and evil in a convincing manner within the context of a theology which presupposes that the historical process is absolutely determined by what is already perfected at the beginning of time.'⁷⁴³

Alongside his account of nothingness, Barth also seeks to bring certain forms of evil under the heading of 'a negative aspect of creation and creaturely occurrence.'⁷⁴⁴ Here, he uses symbolism of light and shadow in a very different way from John. Where John sees Jesus bringing the victory of light over the opposing forces of

⁷³⁸ Augustine, 1984, p. 440 (Book IX, Chapter 9)

⁷³⁹ Clark, 1994, p. 54

⁷⁴⁰ Hick, 1985, p. 143

⁷⁴¹ CD IV.2, p. 495

⁷⁴² CD III.2, p. 72

⁷⁴³ McGrath, 2005, p. 400

⁷⁴⁴ CD III.3, p. 295

darkness, driving out the evil ruler of the world, Barth writes: 'When Jesus Christ shall finally return as the Lord and head of all that God has created, it will also be revealed that both in light and shadow, on the right hand and on the left, everything created was very good and supremely glorious.'⁷⁴⁵

Barth has compressed the biblical narrative of salvation here: that all that remains for the eschaton is a fuller understanding of the prior perfection of God's work, rather than the closing stages of the process whereby good triumphs over evil. His argument here depends primarily on the music of Mozart, in which 'the light shines all the more brightly because it breaks forth from the shadow.'⁷⁴⁶ But he also refers again to the prologue of John, in a way which has been cleansed from all dualism:

Since God's Word became flesh, he himself has acknowledged that the distinct reality of the world created by him is in both its forms, with its Yes and its No, that of the world which he willed. He has thus revealed its right to this twofold form, and therefore the goodness of creation. We cannot believe in Jesus Christ and repudiate the right of the Creator and creature proclaimed in him.⁷⁴⁷

Barth here expounds John's Gospel in a way which emphasises the unity and priority of divine action in all things, but which removes its dramatic sense of a cosmic conflict and a victory which occurs within time. This contrasts with Bultmann's approach, who is clear and open about seeing an existential reality at the heart of a mythological account. He writes: 'The cosmological dualism of Gnosticism has become in John a *dualism of decision*.'⁷⁴⁸

Bultmann's dualism of decision has already been seen in the close attention he pays to those passages in John which show the consequences of the individual response to Jesus Christ.⁷⁴⁹ For him, the battle between good and evil is not primarily out there in the world and its history, but in the existential struggle of each person as they are confronted by the message of the Gospel. Dualism is, for him, an account of the two sets of possibilities open to each person, as they choose whether or not to live the authentic life of faith.

⁷⁴⁵ CD III.3, p. 296

⁷⁴⁶ CD III.3, p. 298

⁷⁴⁷ CD III.3, p. 301

⁷⁴⁸ Bultmann, 1955a, p. 21

⁷⁴⁹ See Chapter 8.4

9.2 Knowledge and falsehood

Barth finds his own distinctive kind of dualism, which becomes evident when he moves on from talking about the nature of evil and reaches the subject of the *knowledge* of evil. He becomes much more insistent in using Johannine themes when discussing knowledge, writing in that context of the Word becoming a 'lost creature', exposing himself to assault and then routing the 'invading alien.'⁷⁵⁰ Barth's theology is carefully structured to establish Jesus Christ as the source and centre of all truth, so that it is a straightforward matter for Barth to declare that evil can only be correctly understood in the light of Christ. This approach prevents evil from becoming a point of significance in its own right, maintaining the strategic structure of Barth's theology. Barth insists that 'the objective ground of our knowledge of nothingness is really Jesus Christ himself.'⁷⁵¹ Evil is recognised and understood in its contrast with good, and its emptiness and defeat are revealed through Jesus Christ.

Therefore, while Bultmann turns John's account of a battle between cosmic forces of good and evil into a dualism of decision between different possibilities, Barth turns it into a dualism of knowledge and falsehood. There is no sense at all of a real power struggle with evil, but there are varying degrees to which the knowledge of Christ's triumph and of evil's defeat are known, accepted, lived out and proclaimed. Salvation and the defeat of evil are an accomplished fact, one which was certain from the beginning, but Barth's *Church Dogmatics* itself forms part of a struggle to proclaim this truth in a world which tries to conceal it. When Barth expounds the theme that 'Jesus is Victor', he does so in the context of a discussion of truth and revelation with a strongly Johannine theme. He gives this analysis of the situation of human beings:

The Word of grace does not say that man will be this new man, but that he already is....
It is the Word of God spoken in Jesus Christ – a Word which speaks of the end of the old man in the power of his cross and the coming of the new in the power of his resurrection:
'Because I live, ye shall live also' (John 14.19).⁷⁵²

⁷⁵⁰ CD III.3, p. 304

⁷⁵¹ CD III.3, p. 306

⁷⁵² CD IV.3.i, p. 249

In Barth's view, our sinful nature and the evil of the world have already been put to death by the cross, and we have already been made new by the resurrection: salvation is not an invitation to be accepted, or a possibility to be explored, but a fact to be understood. Barth writes that the sinful person 'exists in a subjective reality alien to and contradicting his objective reality.'⁷⁵³ Barth describes the human tendency to resist and silence the Word: 'It sets one fact against another: against the fact of accomplished reconciliation, of the fulfilled covenant, the fact of indifference to what this Word proclaims.'⁷⁵⁴

The real ongoing battle therefore is a cognitive one, a conflict between revelation and falsehood. Barth refers to John 8.43-44, which describes the Devil as 'a liar and the Father of lies', presenting it as the only passage 'which gives any exact information concerning his nature.'⁷⁵⁵ The real enemy, for Barth, is untruth. He draws on the description in John 1.5 of the light shining in darkness, which is not overcome by the darkness, and uses that to give a Johannine description of a continuing conflict between truth and falsehood: 'The power of light is not so overwhelming in relation to that of darkness that darkness has lost its power altogether, as though its antithesis were already removed...[it] is active in great superiority yet has not so far attained its goal but is still wrestling toward it.'⁷⁵⁶

Throughout the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth seeks to exalt the Word made flesh and to show the absolute supremacy of God's revelation. It is in Volume IV.3 that Barth proclaims most joyfully the triumph of the truth of Jesus Christ, writing of the prophetic work of Jesus Christ, the 'true witness'. This is the great victory that Barth has been working towards throughout the previous decades of writing, and it is full of triumphant Johannine imagery. Describing the glory of Jesus Christ, Barth writes: 'It is thus the glory of the fulfilled covenant faithfully kept by both God and man. In this unity and totality it is the light, the name and revelation, the truth, the Word of life. In this unity and totality it is seen by those of whom it is written in John 1.14: "We beheld his glory."⁷⁵⁷

⁷⁵³ CD IV.3.i, p. 469

⁷⁵⁴ CD IV.3.i, p. 253

⁷⁵⁵ CD IV.3.i, p. 260

⁷⁵⁶ CD IV.3.i, p. 168

⁷⁵⁷ CD IV.3.i, p. 48

Barth here draws powerfully on a series of Johannine images relating to the knowledge of God brought by Jesus Christ: light, name, revelation, truth, Word and the beholding of glory. He explains: 'We have now laid down our main christological thesis that the life of Jesus Christ is as such light and his reconciling work a prophetic Word.'⁷⁵⁸ He refers back to the opening of the Barmen Declaration, which begins by asserting that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life (John 14.6) and continues: 'Jesus Christ, as he is attested to 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 emphasises the significance of John's Gospel, writing:

It is especially relevant that we should consider the verdict of this Gospel in the present context because the terms Word, light, revelation, speech and witness denote the specific angle from which the history of Jesus Christ is seen and recounted in this Gospel. Epigrammatically, we might almost say that the Gospel of John is the Gospel of the Gospel itself, i.e., of the prophetic work of Jesus Christ.⁷⁵⁹

This comment begins six pages of small print containing many references to John's Gospel, in which Barth presents seven conclusions about the history of the prophecy of Jesus Christ. Barth stresses the initiative of the 'entry, speech and action of Jesus himself among men,' shown especially in the 'I am' sayings. His work speaks for itself, being the 'light and witness and revealer' of God's glory, as is recognised immediately by John and Baptist and the disciples. His prophetic work is greater than all other prophecies, as is proclaimed by the Baptist, and shown by Jesus' account of his own identity. His work is a past history but is also made present for us now, as shown by the promise of the Holy Spirit, by the glory of cross and by his victory over death and over the world. It is a history inaugurated by God, in which God is made known in the world through the Son who bears witness to him and does his work. And it is a revelation of the grace and love of God.

He therefore highlights verses in John's Gospel which speak of the universal significance of Jesus Christ: the light of the world, the saviour of the world, the one sent because of his Father's love for the world and the one who draws all people to

⁷⁵⁸ CD IV.3.i, p. 86

⁷⁵⁹ CD IV.3.i, p. 231

himself when lifted up from the earth.⁷⁶⁰ He writes: 'In the light of the universalistic passages of the Bible, we can say that man in every time and place stands already in the light of life.'⁷⁶¹

It is interesting to look back on the whole shape and story of the *Church Dogmatics* and to note that it begins with a detailed enquiry into the Word of God, the revelation of God and the knowledge of God, and leads in Volume IV.3 to a joyful celebration of the triumph of the truth of Jesus Christ. Meanwhile, the work of salvation itself is presented as something which is completed and certain, so that the real story takes place in the struggle of truth against falsehood. McGrath reflects on this with disapproval:

The theological drama which constitutes the Christian faith is thus held to concern humans and their knowledge of God, rather than the salvation of sinful humans, caught up in the cosmic conflict between God and sin, the world and the devil. Such a conflict is an impossibility within the context of Barth's theology, in that Barth shares with Hegel the difficulty in accommodating sin within an essentially monistic system. Barth has simply no concept of a divine engagement with the forces of sin or evil (unless these are understood in the epistemically reduced sense of 'ignorance' or 'misunderstanding'); instead, we find only talk about God making himself *known* to humanity.⁷⁶²

However, Hart defends Barth, noting that revelation in Barth's theology means far more than just the transfer of information:

The knowledge of God which, for Barth, is the heart of the God-human relation is not to be construed as some merely intellectual phenomenon, but is a self-involving transformative event in which the power of Christ's death and resurrection are realised in the lives of particular people, bringing those lives to a point of crisis and provoking ethical response.⁷⁶³

Exploring similar themes in Volume IV.3, Ford comments that knowledge 'is the basic concept of Barth's spirituality because it enables union with Christ while at the same time preserving distinction.'⁷⁶⁴ Barth's account of the victory of the revelation of Jesus Christ signifies much more than is suggested by McGrath's comment above,

⁷⁶⁰ CD IV.3.ii, p. 487

⁷⁶¹ CD IV.3.ii, p. 491

⁷⁶² McGrath, 2005, p. 399

⁷⁶³ Hart, 2000b, p. 50

⁷⁶⁴ Ford, 1981, p. 177

but McGrath has correctly noted the location of the real drama in Barth's theology. Barth has succeeded in restructuring theology so that it is genuinely about God, and the result is a structure in which the knowledge of God shines through as being the prime concern and the greatest good. It is no surprise, therefore, that Johannine themes are heard so triumphantly in Volume IV.3, for the Fourth Gospel has a distinctive soteriological emphasis on revelation and truth. Only the Son has seen the Father and can make him known (John 1.18), while eternal life is to know the true God and Jesus Christ (John 17.3); Jesus is the truth and the life, and the truth will set us free (John 8.32). This is such a strong emphasis that Scrutton suggests that John 'sees salvation as *primarily* about revelation, consigning other themes (such as sacrifice and victory) to second place.'⁷⁶⁵

The Johannine proclamation of the light of Christ is the perfect raw material for a theology which emphasises revelation. The result, in Barth's hands, is an epic drama which tells the story of the knowledge of God becoming known in the world, and itself forms part of that story, in which much about the world itself, the details of human experiences and choices, and even the events of salvation become pieces of scenery or supporting characters.

9.3 Conclusion

Chapters 4 to 8 have described many examples of the important role played by John's Gospel in Barth's account of revelation. The *Church Dogmatics* is founded on Christology, for which, like the Church Fathers, Barth relies on John. He carries out an ambitious restructuring of dogmatics in which all areas of theology, including the doctrines of election, creation, providence, anthropology and sin, are connected to the Word made flesh and made to fit in with God's gracious decision to be incarnate for us. His concern throughout to proclaim the incarnate Word as the true revelation of God keeps him reliant on John's Gospel, sharing its emphasis on the truth, on the light which shines in the darkness, and on the divine glory which is seen in the world. From his early reflections on the Trinity, on Christology and on revelation in volume I, to his celebration of the light, name, revelation, truth and glory of Jesus

⁷⁶⁵ Scrutton, 2008, p. 363

Christ in Volume IV.3, the *Church Dogmatics* is an epic account of the truth of God brought into the world by the Word made flesh. It is a story of revelation inspired by a deep knowledge of the Fourth Gospel.

Yet the context of Barth's work also leaves a considerable mark. The whole of Barth's theology shows a keen strategic awareness of the various competing philosophies which might threaten to overwhelm the revelation of the Word. His theology is strongly influenced by his need to build defences against these enemies, often on more than one front at a time. The structure of Barth's theology is formed in response to these hostile philosophies, cutting off competing avenues of enquiry by constantly prioritising the Word made flesh.

The result is a theology which is greatly shaped by the outside forces it is seeking to oppose. It is marked by the original retreat away from those forces, with large and significant areas of truth and reality being placed off-limits for strategic purposes. These include themes which are significant in John's Gospel, such as individual decision (as Bultmann emphasises), cosmology, the unfolding narrative of the conflict between Jesus and the forces of evil, the *λογος ἁσαρκος* and even the personal distinctiveness of the Holy Spirit. In these and other ways, even though the centre of Barth's theology is strongly dependent on John, the *Church Dogmatics* does not communicate the full vision and scope of the Fourth Gospel. There is much more to John than Barth's theology is able to express.

Both Barth and Bultmann derive from John a dramatic dualism which tells the story of their greatest concern, and shows for both of them the real point of conflict at which they believe God acts. Bultmann's theology has a dualism of decision, which gives an existentialist understanding of how God reveals himself to the individual faced with the Gospel's challenge to live an authentic life of faith. Barth's *Church Dogmatics* has a dualism of knowledge and falsehood, in which a battle is fought to centre theology on God's revelation of himself in the Word made flesh. Both these themes can be found strongly in John's Gospel, but neither theologian captures the fullness of the cosmic conflict there, or of the messiness and drama of the history of the incarnate Word's entanglement in the complex realities of our sinful world.

10 Reengagement

10.1 *A wider view of John*

Barth and Bultmann both identify important themes within John's Gospel, using them to shape their theology in ways which have been very influential in academic theology and the life of the Church. John's Gospel maintains that no one can come to the Son unless drawn by the Father,⁷⁶⁶ and yet also repeatedly shows the significance of the human decision to believe and to follow Jesus.⁷⁶⁷ John shows both a divine and a human side of salvation in which a new relationship is formed: the Christian chooses to abide in Christ and the Spirit comes to abide with the Christian.⁷⁶⁸ He tells the story of Jesus Christ in a way which invites others to understand their stories in the light of his: Jesus is both the decisive figure who brings people back to God, and the light to which they are called to respond. As Bultmann finds, John provides a rich resource for an existential exploration of the human experience of the decision of faith. At the same time, as Barth finds, it provides many insights into the priority of divine action and the importance of the incarnation.

Barth and Bultmann face the challenges of the same era using this same text, yet their interpretations hardly overlap at all: they emphasise different phrases and take them in very different directions. Each draws out only some of the implications of the text of John. A comparison of Barth and Bultmann therefore exposes the limitations of the strategy of retreat which both have adopted: each has ended up with a defensive system which is too small to hear and to encompass the full scope of John's Gospel. Barth believes that he has to focus on divine decision in order to protect theology from being part of a human enquiry into religious experience, while Bultmann believes that he has to focus on individual decision in order to protect theology from being a series of objectified human ideas about God. However, neither approach includes the full message of John.

⁷⁶⁶ John 6.44

⁷⁶⁷ e.g. John 3.16,18

⁷⁶⁸ John 15.4, John 14.17

A more complete theological interpretation of John could explore the themes of both divine initiative and individual human response. Moltmann, for example, suggests that Barth's emphasis on the content of revelation and Bultmann's emphasis on its effects can be seen as complementary. He writes: 'Whereas the concept of the "Word of God" illuminates the gospel's power of expression, God's self-revelation and self-utterance, the kerygmatic interpretation explains its power of address, which makes possible that existential decision which we call faith.'⁷⁶⁹

Yet there is more to John's account of the interactions between people and God than is suggested even by combining the themes emphasised by Barth and Bultmann. The implications of the Fourth Gospel go beyond the cognitive and the existential. Much Christian reflection on John concerns spirituality and explores the experience of the events which John describes. For example, Adrienne von Speyr gives this comment on John 1.12 ('he gave power to become children of God'): 'Like a man bowled over by love, we are whirled by it into an abyss, into the abyss of childhood in God, where, altogether inconceivably, we are treated as though we were one with the Son of God.'⁷⁷⁰ Describing what it means to be born of the Spirit (John 3.8), she writes: 'The Spirit awakens the longing for God in us, and by the same token gives that longing its happiness, joy in God, delight and pleasure in being open towards God.'⁷⁷¹

Many, such as Temple, also find strongly sacramental themes in John,⁷⁷² a matter avoided by Barth⁷⁷³ and attributed to the ecclesiastical redactor by Bultmann.⁷⁷⁴ Temple notes that the passages describing being born of water and the Spirit (John 3.1-21), and receiving the body and blood of Christ (John 6.22-59) are detached from any account of the ceremonies of baptism and the Eucharist: they 'represent and focus a principle far beyond themselves'. He writes: 'Christianity, based as it is on the incarnation, regards matter as destined to be the vehicle and instrument of spirit.'⁷⁷⁵

⁷⁶⁹ Moltmann, 1992, p. 210

⁷⁷⁰ Speyr, 1953, p. 122

⁷⁷¹ Speyr, 1959, p. 59-60

⁷⁷² Temple, 1939, p. xx; see Brown, 2003, p. 220-234 for a discussion of the debate for and against sacramentalism in John

⁷⁷³ See Chapter 8.6

⁷⁷⁴ See Chapter 3.3

⁷⁷⁵ Temple, 1939, p. xxi

For Temple and others, John's Gospel suggests that God, through the incarnation and the sacraments, has made his glory knowable to the human senses. There are therefore experiential and sacramental dimensions to John's account of the relationship between people and God which are neglected by both Barth and Bultmann. However, John's implications are wider than any focus simply on the saving encounter between people and God, even with these themes included

A still broader vision can be found in the work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a writer with diverse interests who found in John's account of the *Logos* the justification for something very different from a retreat. He wrote:

My system is the only attempt that I know of ever made to reduce all knowledges into harmony; it opposes no other system, but shows what was true in each, and how that which was true in the particular in each of them became error because it was only half the truth. I have endeavoured to unite the insulated fragments of truth and frame a perfect mirror.⁷⁷⁶

Perkins explains: 'For him, philosophy, history, poetry, religion and science all bore witness to the truth of Christianity, to the unique value of the human person, and to history as a redemptive scheme through which the whole created order would be fulfilled and perfected.'⁷⁷⁷ Coleridge planned an 'Opus Maximum' to be entitled 'Logosophia'.⁷⁷⁸ He never wrote a full account of his system, scattering its wide-ranging ideas across many manuscripts, but Perkins reports that that the *Logos* of John's Gospel was its 'unifying factor'⁷⁷⁹ and that he 'constantly reaffirmed' the *Logos* as 'an essential and fundamental ground of his system.'⁷⁸⁰ She writes:

He attempted to establish the *Logos* as unifying principle (natural, moral, psychological, and aesthetic) and as the symbol which best communicated the underlying reality of the powers and forms of the physical world... Through the *Logos* idea, the whole of life and thought were both realised and recognised as a harmonious whole.⁷⁸¹

⁷⁷⁶ Coleridge, 1990, p. 248

⁷⁷⁷ Perkins, 2002, p. 188

⁷⁷⁸ See McFarland, 1981, p. 359

⁷⁷⁹ Perkins, 1994, p. 3

⁷⁸⁰ Perkins, 1994, p. 12

⁷⁸¹ Perkins, 1994, p. 20

For Coleridge, the greatness of John's Gospel was not its ability to liberate theology from hostile powers so that it could operate on its own terms, but its potential for pointing to a divine unity which would bring all areas of knowledge and experience into their true relationship with one another.

As Coleridge saw, John's Gospel does indeed have an extraordinary breadth. It describes the origin of the cosmos, good and evil, human knowledge, relationships and decisions as well as divine identity and action. John presents Jesus as the incarnate *Logos*, the truth, the embodiment and revelation of the rationality underlying the whole of existence. The *Logos* is therefore the source of all that is, and of all that can truthfully be thought. All human experience and all truth finds its proper place and context only in relation to him.

In calling Jesus the *Logos*, John takes over the Jewish concept of the divine wisdom which comes to dwell with human beings, and he retells the account of creation given at the beginning of the Old Testament. At the same time, he adopts the Greek concept of the divine rationality which gives structure to all that exists.⁷⁸² There is no hint of a retreat into a safe space here, or any kind of defensive manoeuvre. John indicates that Jesus is at the heart of all the truths known to Jewish and Greek thought.

John also describes Jesus as the agent of creation,⁷⁸³ the 'true light which enlightens everyone'⁷⁸⁴, the 'light of the world'⁷⁸⁵ and the 'truth'.⁷⁸⁶ This seems to suggest that he may be at least partly known in and through our reflections on human experience, history, culture and science, rather than in a way which marginalises those investigations as Barth and Bultmann do. John's Gospel does not permit us to stay with Bultmann's retreat into the realm of individual human decision or Barth's retreat into an account of divine decision and action, or even some combination of the two. Its scope is completely universal.

As Coleridge believed, connections can be found between John's account of the *Logos* made flesh and all areas of truth. The faithfulness and rationality of the *Logos*,

⁷⁸² Beasley-Murray, 1991, p. 6-10, and see Chapter 5.4 above

⁷⁸³ John 1.3

⁷⁸⁴ John 1.9

⁷⁸⁵ John 8.12

⁷⁸⁶ John 14.6

with his purpose to create and redeem humanity, place the regular mathematical patterns uncovered by natural science in their true context.⁷⁸⁷ The creative love of God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and who addresses his Word to us, also shows the origin and purpose of relationship and communication. We exist and relate to each other as people in communities because the Trinitarian God creates people in order that we might know and love him and each other. The Good Shepherd, the Light of the World, also shows the meaning of the drama of history, of the struggle between good and evil, of our experience of purpose and vocation, of conscience and ethics. The glory of God, described by John, is the true centre of aesthetics.⁷⁸⁸ All that exists and all that is true comes from the *Logos* and finds its meaning and context in relation to him.

John's Gospel can therefore be used not just to restructure Christian theology in its own private realm, but also then to begin to reposition and reconnect *the whole of human knowledge*. Because of the *Logos* made flesh, it should be possible to bring theology into an authentic relationship with all forms of truth, and to provide the connections which show how all areas of knowledge can relate to each other. The Prologue of John demands for theology not only a retreat from hostile philosophies and a restructuring around its authentic centre, but also a confident engagement in conversation with all forms of truth and human experience.

My conclusion is that Barth's project should be taken a stage further. Retreat and restructuring need to be followed by a process of *reengagement*, a third strategic move which is only occasionally evident in the *Church Dogmatics*. Once theology has been enabled to stand on its own feet, it can reach outwards again with authenticity and confidence. Such a development is also more relevant to the needs of our own time, since Barth's quest for the independence of theology is perhaps less unusual and less necessary now than it was in the middle of the 20th century. Pluralism, diversity and specialisation are widely accepted in human life and thought, and it is normal for different branches of human knowledge and activity to operate independently and happily in their own idiosyncratic realms, with their own rules, with no thought of a bigger picture, and with no need to mount a vigorous defence against the outside

⁷⁸⁷ Discussed further in Chapter 10.3

⁷⁸⁸ Discussed further in Chapter 10.4

world in order to exist in this way. It is not difficult for Christianity to operate in its own private corner, but a more important challenge lies in pointing towards a divine unity in all that exists.

This process of reengagement is a huge undertaking whose details are far beyond the scope of this thesis, but it is, I believe, the way to provide an authentic 21st century theological interpretation of John's Gospel which is faithful to the vision and the implications of that text. I wish, at least, to point towards some ways in which Barth and those he inspired have begun the process.

10.2 Conversations with the other words

In Volume IV.3, having fought so hard to establish the central and unassailable position of the Word made flesh, the seventy-year-old Barth writes triumphantly on Johannine themes of glory, light, victory and promise. From a settled position of great strength, Barth now writes more generously about other expressions of truth.

He cautiously admits that there are 'other words' and 'other lights' in 'the Bible, the Church and the world.'⁷⁸⁹ He sees these as not being ruled out but as being put in their correct context by Jesus Christ, the one Word of God. This Word 'delimits all other words, lights, revelations, prophecies and apostolates, whether of the Bible, the Church of the world, by what is declared in and with the existence of Jesus Christ.' Any other truths have light which is 'lent them by the shining of the one light of the one truth.'⁷⁹⁰

Barth now seeks to avoid an account of the light of Christ which has too limited a view of his supremacy, reality and freedom. To confine that light to Christ himself would diminish its radiance, so Barth asserts that its brilliance is seen clearly in the Bible, in the Church and in the world. Yet to define its presence too strictly in any sphere would also limit it, and therefore Barth has still to avoid endorsing any approach which would seek to give a place to the Word within a system. Jesus Christ can be heard in many places, but there is no other authority that can challenge his voice.

⁷⁸⁹ CD IV.3.i, p. 97

⁷⁹⁰ CD IV.3.i, p. 152

Barth continues to oppose natural theology,⁷⁹¹ and also declares that there are no 'other words' which can be 'laid alongside Scripture as a kind of second Bible.'⁷⁹²

All well-meant but capricious conjunction of Jesus Christ with something else, whether it be Mary, the Church, the fate worked out in general and individual history, a presupposed human self-understanding, etc., all these imply a control over him to which none of us has any right, which can be only the work of religious arrogance.⁷⁹³

Alleged 'true words' have firstly to be compared with the 'witness of scripture', which they can never replace. Secondly, Barth adds: 'With certain qualifications we must also consider the relationship of these other words to the dogmas and confessions of the Church as a criterion of their truth.'⁷⁹⁴ However, there is no set of perfect rules which Barth can establish here, as scriptural interpretation and the formation of Christian tradition are themselves open to error and are not themselves the true light. Barth insists that it is the Word which is real and active, judging all human ideas and placing all 'creaturely' and 'partial' truths⁷⁹⁵ in their correct perspective. He writes: 'When and where God causes his own final Word to go forth within the cosmos and its lights and words and truths, the latter are set in their place but also in the appropriate relationship, i.e., in what we have called their context.'⁷⁹⁶

Yet, having reached this point towards the end of his life, Barth does not devote much space to engaging with such lights, words and truths, or showing how particular examples could be set in their true context. The details of this work of reengagement fall to others, as is illustrated well by Torrance and Balthasar.

10.3 Torrance and the natural sciences

Thomas Torrance interprets and builds on Barth's work in a way which gives a much more positive assessment of the natural sciences and their connection with theology. He believes that Barth's objection to natural theology is only to its allegedly

⁷⁹¹ CD IV.3.i, p. 117; see Chapter 6.2 above for comments on Barth's opposition to natural theology in CD II.1 and III.1

⁷⁹² CD IV.3.i, p. 133

⁷⁹³ CD IV.3.i, p. 101

⁷⁹⁴ CD IV.3.i, p. 126

⁷⁹⁵ CD IV.3.i, p. 159

⁷⁹⁶ CD IV.3.i, p. 163

independent character, which ‘it develops on the ground of “nature alone” in abstraction from the active self-disclosure of the living God.’⁷⁹⁷ He writes that he has Barth’s verbal support, given in a conversation shortly before Barth’s death, for an approach to natural theology which is grounded in God’s self revelation, and which is located within and subordinate to that revelation.⁷⁹⁸ McGrath, describing Torrance’s views, writes:

The order that the natural sciences identify within creation is... intrinsic to the created order by virtue of its divine creation. The divine order and rationality, which is *embedded* in nature is also *embodied* in Christ as God incarnate. The *Logos* that can be discerned, however weakly, within nature is disclosed fully in Christ.⁷⁹⁹

Modern science has its origin as a part of western Christian thought, and it is possible to engage with its assumptions in a way which makes a fruitful connection. Science assumes that there are regular, mathematical patterns in nature which can be observed and described, so that theories can be made and tested. It is inherently agnostic, assuming that science itself does not have any way of discovering any purpose behind those patterns, but assuming that it can productively proceed without knowing if there is such a purpose. Yet the thinkers who prepared the way for science in the seventeenth century were people who believed that the universe had these mathematical structures precisely because there was a divine intellect behind it. Kepler, for example, discovered that planetary orbits are elliptical because he was looking for signs of divine perfection in the structure of the heavens. Here he was drawing on a biblical view of an ordered creation which reflects the character of its creator, together with a Platonist perspective which sees mathematics as a window onto the forms which structure the cosmos. This approach fits within a Johannine emphasis on the *Logos*, the divine rationality which underlies all things.

The fact that there are such mathematical patterns in the cosmos, that such an underlying rationality exists and can be apprehended by the human intellect, can connect to a Christocentric structure based on ideas from John. Christ, the *Logos*, is the order behind the cosmos, and the light which enlightens us, and the one through

⁷⁹⁷ Torrance, 1970, p. 128

⁷⁹⁸ Torrance, 1998, p. ix-xi

⁷⁹⁹ McGrath, 2002, p. 267

whom we have been created in God's image. The very fact that the universe is intelligible to us is a consequence of the Christological nature of all reality and all truth. This approach sees the universe as an expression of a divine rationality; and it sees the human mind as, in some way, a reflection of that divine mind. That connection between the *Logos*, the structure of creation and the human intellect is what makes the universe intelligible to us, and which does allow us to perceive something of God through his creation.

There need be no fierce conflicts between science and theology, or any fears that the success of science will disprove or overwhelm Christianity. The founding assumptions of science itself can connect to a belief in Jesus as the *Logos*, and science can function as it is within that belief. The progress made by science actually gives more weight to this view of reality.

This reassessment of science involves moving beyond some of Barth's best-defended fortifications. Yet all this is completely consistent with a robustly Christocentric approach. There is no need to fear that theology may in this way be overwhelmed by an independent system of ideas about God.

10.4 Balthasar and aesthetics

Hans Urs von Balthasar is perhaps the best example of a theologian who has been greatly inspired by Barth but has travelled widely beyond Barth's walls. Balthasar goes much further than Barth in looking for the light of Christ in other forms of thought. John's Gospel and the Letters of John are very significant texts for Balthasar, illuminating his interest in the three great transcendentals of beauty, truth and goodness.

Balthasar believes that Barth's work on the glory of God in Volume II.1 of the *Church Dogmatics* has great potential for the development of theological aesthetics. Barth's writing about the glory of God draws strongly on a number of verses from John's Gospel, including the prologue. He describes Jesus in this way:

On the one hand he is the reflection of the divine glory. In him the divine self-manifestation is accomplished. God's love becomes an event and a person, God's

fellowship, powerful and a fact. On the other hand he is the prototype of all participation by creation in the glory of God.⁸⁰⁰

Barth's exploration of divine glory leads him to a brief analysis of divine beauty. He comments: 'God has this superior force, this power of attraction, which speaks for itself, which wins and conquers.'⁸⁰¹ Yet, he remains mindful of his usual strategic concerns and declares: 'It would be an unjustified risk to try to bring the knowledge of God under the denominator of the idea of the beautiful.'⁸⁰²

Again, the incarnation remains central, which Barth describes as 'the centre and goal of all God's works, and therefore the hidden beginning of them all.'⁸⁰³ The statement in John 1.14 that 'we beheld his glory' is especially significant here. Barth has cautiously touched on a key Johannine theme, but follows it as only as far as it seems safely to support his central emphasis on Jesus Christ. Barth asserts that God has made known his glory and his beauty, but he remains wary of the dangers of allowing Christology to be absorbed into any system of aesthetics. Jesus' glory has been seen in the world, but Jesus is far more than just a way for human beings to talk about beauty.

Balthasar notes that Barth's analysis of divine perfections leads him 'to restore to God the attribute of "beauty" for the first time in the history of Protestant theology'.⁸⁰⁴ He praises the way that Barth derives this 'by contemplating the data of Scripture, especially God's "glory"', a theme which is characteristically Johannine. But he laments the fact that 'Barth with his contemplation of the objective revelation has not succeeded in really shaping and transforming Protestant theology.'⁸⁰⁵

Balthasar declares that Christianity is, for Barth, 'the immense revelation of the eternal light that radiates over all of nature and fulfils every promise; it is God's Yes and Amen to himself and his creation.'⁸⁰⁶ Yet he emphasises the outward-looking potential of Barth's Christocentrism far more than Barth does himself. He writes:

⁸⁰⁰ CD II.1, p. 643

⁸⁰¹ CD II.1, p. 650

⁸⁰² CD II.1, p. 652

⁸⁰³ CD II.1, p. 661

⁸⁰⁴ Balthasar, 1982, p. 53

⁸⁰⁵ Balthasar, 1982, p. 56

⁸⁰⁶ Balthasar, 1992, p. 26

Should we go the way of Karl Barth, who rediscovers the inner beauty of theology and revelation itself? Or (and this is perhaps implicitly included in Barth's position), may it not be that we have a real and inescapable obligation to probe the possibility of there being a genuine relationship between theological beauty and the beauty of the world?⁸⁰⁷

Balthasar's insistence on challenging Barth's boundaries is a braver application of Barth's own belief in the 'other words', pursuing much more boldly the Johannine description of Christ as 'the true light which enlightens everyone'.⁸⁰⁸ Balthasar writes:

As Christians we may not only freely admit but ought to expect that that interior religious light which falls from God-seeking souls on the historical forms of non-Biblical religions may be the same light that shines in the hearts of believers...

We could even go so far as to discover in the constructions of non-Christian religion, philosophy and art elements which more or less explicitly indicate an attitude of obedience toward the light of the self-revealing God.⁸⁰⁹

Balthasar combines an open respect for beauty, truth and goodness wherever it can be found with a Barthian emphasis on the particularity of God's action in Christ and the central importance of the incarnation. Balthasar still regards Christ as the source, centre and measure of all truth. Commenting on a series of passages from John, he writes: 'By being the historical existent who, in his (human) positivity, makes present the Being of God for the world in an unsurpassable manner, Christ becomes the measure, both in judgment and in redemption, of all other religious forms in mankind.'⁸¹⁰

Barth would be nervous of this interest in the whole realm of human thought, wary that human systems might overwhelm divine revelation. But Balthasar explores with integrity the Johannine and Barthian emphasis that Christ is the truth and the light of the world.

⁸⁰⁷ Balthasar, 1982, p. 80

⁸⁰⁸ John 1.9

⁸⁰⁹ Balthasar, 1982, p. 168

⁸¹⁰ Balthasar, 1982, p. 171

10.5 Conclusion

Barth's use of John's Gospel in the *Church Dogmatics* is a wise and appropriate response to the problems of his day, leading theology in a retreat away from its submission to hostile philosophies. Barth seeks to be faithful to the content of God's distinctive revelation of himself, so that theology can genuinely be about God. He therefore emphasises Christology and the doctrine of the Trinity in a way which, like the work of the Church Fathers, relies strongly on John's Gospel. He restructures the whole of theology around the Word made flesh, so that all areas of theology look towards God's gracious decision to be incarnate, rather than being influenced by outside forces.

However, Barth's work is incomplete and is distorted by this strategic response to the philosophies of his day. The shape of his theology is strongly influenced by the presence of the particular opponents against which Barth builds his defences. His avoidance of Bultmann's existentialism leads to the silencing of an important set of themes within John's Gospel. His expansion of the significance of the character of Jesus Christ reshapes the background to the story, its setting in space and time, the understanding of the other characters and the structure of the narrative itself.

This use of John's Gospel shows Barth's strategic goals rather than a concern for the drama of the story itself. His struggle to proclaim the revelation of Jesus Christ leads him to turn John's dualism into a dualism of truth and falsehood. Furthermore, because of his retreat, he sees only some of the implications of John for Christians today.

In addition to the existential and cognitive themes found by Bultmann and Barth, other writers find rich resources in John's Gospel for the exploration of Christian spirituality and sacramental theology. Furthermore, Coleridge's work points towards ways in which the *Logos* can be the unifying principle which brings all areas of human knowledge and experience into their true relationship with one another. John's Gospel has a breadth of vision which is only partly explored by either Barth or Bultmann.

Towards the end of the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth explores how the light and glory of Jesus might be found in other words and other lights, but his writing never gives

much space to exploring particular examples. Now that theology is confidently established around its true centre, a process of reengagement which seeks to reconnect with other expressions of truth is needed. Balthasar's work on aesthetics and Torrance's work on science are good examples of how Barth's approach can be used as the starting-point for theology which is centred on the scriptural revelation of Jesus Christ and yet also open to the encounter with truth wherever it may be found.

While Barth's work of retreat and restructuring enabled him to respond well to the challenges of his time, a process of reengagement may be of more significance for Christians now. In today's world, which tolerates many diverse sub-cultures, it is possible for Christian churches and communities of theologians to operate within their own realms, following different assumptions and rules from others, without needing the kind of struggle for independence fought by Barth. However, in these approaches, Christianity is often perceived as divisive and idiosyncratic, or outdated and irrelevant. Such perceptions would not be challenged by the processes of retreat and restructuring alone.

In seeking to develop a theological interpretation of John's Gospel for today, attention should be paid to the ways in which it can bring together the many fragmented and specialised forms of human knowledge. The Church is called to bear witness to the *Logos*, the rationality underlying all things, the light which gives light to all people. Such a witness does require careful attention to the scriptural account of the Word made flesh and the refusal to submit to any alien system of thought, so that theology can be true to God's revelation, as Barth showed. However, it also requires the confidence to engage in dialogue with all people, in the faith that all truth finds its origin and its context in Jesus Christ.

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