

Faithful Disbelief: Christopher Morse Between Foucault and Barth

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“And what do you do?” As a graduate student studying Christian theology in a country that increasingly expects education institutions to focus primarily on the production of tech-savvy laborers,¹ this is quite an awkward question. What role do academic theologians play in this kind of educational system? What is the task of theology in this context? In pursuing answers to these questions, I return to one of the first works on theology I studied, written by one of my first theology professors: Christopher Morse’s *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief*.

In *Not Every Spirit*, Morse examines the task of theology (in particular, dogmatics, that field of theology concerned with the faithfulness of claims regarding God), and rehearses the theological work he prescribes. As I will be focusing on the task of theology in this paper, I will engage with the corresponding section of Morse’s book here. *Not Every Spirit* begins with Morse’s claim that “to believe in God is not to believe in everything.” In other words, while the emphasis in some churches may be on what ideas about God or authorities on God are to be believed, such belief necessarily implies a disbelief of other ideas and authorities. Christian faith is, then, a matter of “faithful disbelief.”²

Morse clarifies this notion of faithful disbelief by comparing it to doubt and skepticism. Doubt refers to the “distrust of God that remains present even within our struggles to be faithful.” Skepticism is centered on the claim that one should not believe something without having been presented sufficient evidence. Faithful disbelief, by contrast, is a matter of discerning what one is called, by faith, to disbelieve. It is not about the distrust of God, but the distrust of what is not of God. It is not about the justification of belief in God, but about what that belief rejects as unjustifiable.³ So, while doubt and skepticism are each of value to an academic theologian and likely to any Christian, Morse rejects them as orientations that are definitive of theology, in favor of faithful disbelief.

This provisional rejection is grounded in Morse’s reading of the Bible, rather than in a philosophical opposition to doubt or skepticism. This notion of a call to faithful disbelief, as well as the title of Morse’s book, is drawn from 1 John: “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are

1 See, for example, current President Barack Obama’s website, which emphasizes the role of education in training people for jobs and aiding in the international competitiveness of the US economy. <http://1.barackobama.com/issues/education/>

2 Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief*, 2nd ed., (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 3.

3 *Ibid.*, 5–7.

from God.⁴ It is this kind of faithful disbelief that characterizes Paul's claim that love "is faithful in all things" in 1 Corinthians 13:7.⁵ This faithful love is shown to practice a "testing of spirits" in Philippians 1:9–10 and 1 Thessalonians 5:19–22, in which Paul closely associates love for God and God's Spirit with the discernment, in love, of what is good and of God from what is evil.⁶

Morse further explains faithful disbelief in contrast to what could be called unfaithful belief, which is marked by allegiance to those things that are not from God. As an example of such unfaithful belief, Morse focuses on false hope, particularly as it is rejected by Rachel, who was the mother of Joseph and Benjamin (the ancestors of three of the twelve tribes of Israel), according to Genesis. Rachel, who died giving birth to Benjamin and may have been buried near Bethlehem, is mentioned in Matthew's gospel, in a quote from Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."⁷ Morse focuses on the image of Rachel's refusal to be consoled in the light of what had just been narrated in Matthew, the mass execution of the children of Bethlehem by King Herod's order. Any explanation that would offer comfort in such suffering through reference to God is rejected by Rachel. In Matthew, it is only in the coming of God into human flesh that there seems to be a hopeful response to Rachel's lament. Only what comes from God is to be faithfully accepted; all other hopes are false and acceptance of their consolation is unfaithful.⁸

Through the notion of faithful disbelief, Morse addresses the question of what defines the task of Christian theology. In his view, Christian theology is the critical study of Christian disbeliefs, performed in the interest of discerning what, among Christian doctrines, is not of God.⁹ This view of theology will serve as my starting point in questioning the particular task of academic theology in the context I described above, in which education is primarily positioned as a strategic investment supporting national economic competitiveness. In order to think along with Morse as I consider this question, I will turn to two thinkers whose works together illuminate elements of Morse's work that are particularly relevant to my question. Specifically, I will discuss the work of Swiss theologian Karl Barth as it intersects with the insights of French thinker Michel Foucault in order to investigate the ways in which power influences Christian understandings of the Word of God.

Of Barth's many works, *Church Dogmatics* I.1 stands out as particularly, though not uniquely, relevant to an attempt to look into what Morse means when he discusses the "spirits" Christian theologians are to test, and how those spirits come to make claims upon Christians. When Morse discusses spirits, those claims which are to be faithfully believed or disbelieved, he writes in much the same

4 1 John 4:1a (NRSV)
 5 Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit*, 3–4.
 6 *Ibid.*, 7–8.
 7 Matthew 2:18, quoting Jeremiah 31:15.
 8 Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit*, 7–11.
 9 *Ibid.*, 31.

terms as Barth does when discussing church proclamation. According to Barth, human speech that presents itself as proclamation claims to be

human speech in and by which God Himself speaks like a king through the mouth of his herald, and which is meant to be heard and accepted as speech in and by which God Himself speaks, and therefore heard and accepted in faith as divine decision concerning life and death, as divine judgment and pardon, eternal Law and eternal Gospel both together.¹⁰

This is very similar to Morse's notion of spirits, which are ideas passed on in human language by people who claim divine origin for these ideas.¹¹ Barth is somewhat more specific regarding the types of speech that can claim to be proclamation, restricting this field to two types of speech: preaching (which can be either written or spoken) and sacrament. Barth takes preaching and sacrament to be the specific types of speech to which Jesus commissioned the church.¹² Theology, the particular concern of this paper, is a separate task from proclamation but cannot be understood apart from it as dogmatic theology takes proclamation as its object of study.¹³

In order to understand how Barth relates dogmatic theology to church proclamation, and through that understanding to gain some perspective on the role of academic theology today, it is necessary to look closely at two of Barth's lengthy discussions of the Word of God, the word to which proclamation claims to witness. In paragraphs four and five of *Church Dogmatics*, Barth discusses what the Word of God is (its nature) and how the Word of God comes to humanity (its forms). It is important to note that in presenting these two subjects, I will be reversing Barth's order of discussion. While I will discuss what Barth takes the word of God to be before explicating how it comes to humans, Barth significantly takes the reverse approach, for a reason that should become clear shortly.

Barth discusses the nature of the Word of God under three interrelated headings: the Word as speech of God, the Word as act of God, and the Word as mystery of God. By speech, Barth means "the form in which reason communicates with reason and person with person." I take Barth to be using the term reason here to refer more or less to a capacity to make meaning of things in relation to each other and, by extension, to all things in the world. Such definitions are provisional, at best, when used in reference to Barth's work, for the same reason that his presentation of the Word of God reverses mine. With that in mind,

10 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Volume I.1, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, study ed., ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. G.W. Bromiley, Harold Knight, and G.T. Thompson, (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 49. First published in German 1932–1938 by Theologischer Verlag Zürich. Gendered language is in the original text.

11 Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit*, 3–5.

12 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Volume I.1, 53–55.

13 *Ibid.*, 48.

though, Barth seems to say that speech is rational in the sense that both speaker and listener will make sense of what is said in relation to their understanding of the world. This speech is remarkable, if not seemingly impossible, in that it is between divine reason, founded in perfect understanding of the world, and human reason, built upon an understanding of the world that is distorted insofar as it differs from the divine understanding.¹⁴

Equally important, the Word of God is personal speech. God's speech is personal insofar as that speech, the Word of God, is God's own person. As with human persons, God's Word is irreducible to a system of ideas bound in human language. As such personal speech, God's Word is unknowable apart from its coming to us as the person of God, specifically in the person of Jesus Christ.¹⁵ It is this personal nature of God's Word that explains both Barth's choice to present the "how" of God's Word before its "what" and the unsuitability of seeking neat definitions for Barth's chosen terminology. Barth structured his treatment of God's Word as he did because the nature of God's Word, in his view, cannot be understood apart from how it comes to us. Barth's terminology eludes precise definition because Barth rejects the idea that he could capture the object of those terms, God's Word, in neatly systematized theology.

Accordingly, we can know this personal speech of God only as speech that is directed toward us and not as a thing in itself. From the character of this speech as directed toward us, three points of immediate interest follow. First, the Word of God is not spoken by humans to humans. It comes to us from outside that which we perceive as our world as something new each time we hear it. Second, the Word of God, as it is spoken by the one who defines our reality, "smites our existence." It challenges our perception of reality neither by answering our questions nor by questioning our answers. Instead, it challenges our perception of reality by coming to us as the ground of reality, a ground for which we have no explanation and, likely, no conceptual room. Third, the Word of God, as directed to us, shows us that God does not wish to be without humanity, but instead wishes to reconcile our relationship with God.¹⁶

The Word of God is not only a declaration of God's wishes. In human speech, there seems to be a gap between our words and actions. What we say can be disconnected in time from the actions those words promise. What we say can, in fact, have no connection at all to what we actually do. Humans can lie and break promises. God's speech, however, is itself God's act. While humans experience a rift between even sincere words and acts such that "mere word is the mere self-expression of a person, while act is the resultant relative alteration in the world around," God's self-expression is the alteration that we would expect to follow (either chronologically or logically) that word.¹⁷

As the act of the one who defines reality, God's Word is God's "ruling action." Through judgment and promise, the Word of God claims and binds

14 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Volume I.1, 132.

15 Ibid., 134–137.

16 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Volume I.1, 137–139.

17 Ibid., 140–142.

those who hear it.¹⁸ Whenever we act, God's decision judges the meaning of that action.¹⁹ God's Word condemns our attempts to escape the divine one who gives us life. As God's promise, however, God's Word accepts us and offers us life even in that judgment. This status of the Word of God as an act of judgment and as the giving of life offers some idea of why proclamation deserves attention. Human words that claim to witness to the Word of God are not relaying mere words. They claim to point to the judgment and healing enacted by God. Insofar as it claims to witness to God's action, proclamation positions itself as that which illuminates the claiming of humans (communally, as the Church, and individually) through divine judgment and promise. Proclamation claims to herald our transformation into a new humanity, a humanity that perceives the world in ways directed by God.²⁰ Proclamation would tell those who hear it what they are and what they are becoming.

While proclamation claims to witness to the Word of God, it can never claim to master God's Word, capturing it perfectly within human words. The Word of God, as God's speech and God's act, is always God's mystery, eluding our firm grasp. Beyond its personal nature, which resists any capture by human words, the Word of God itself determines whether or not we really speak of it at all when we claim to do so. We cannot construct for ourselves an accurate idea of the Word of God over against which we can judge whether or not supposed proclamation has witnessed to the Word.²¹

That is not to say that the Word's form is wholly foreign to us. Rather, the Word of God is mysterious precisely in its thoroughly worldly form. When God speaks through humans, God really speaks *through* humans, using human modes of address. Preaching is not only proclamation; it is human address. The Word of God is not mysterious solely in the foreignness of its content, but also in the delivery of that foreign content in surprisingly familiar form. This meeting of holy and secular in the Word of God can perhaps be best understood in light of Barth's identification of the Word of God with Jesus Christ, in whom God took on human flesh.²² As in the person of Jesus Christ, the Word of God is not hidden behind human form, for us to cleverly detect, but takes up that humanity as its own form. In its secular form, the Word claims humanity for God just as God offers us life through the content of the Word.²³

In examining its form, we turn from a discussion of the nature of the Word of God (as God's speech, act, and mystery) toward an enumeration of the forms in which it comes to humanity, making a transition that requires a clarification. Up until now, I have written of the *form* taken by the Word of God. Barth, however, actually lays out three forms in which the Word of God comes to us. The distinc-

18 Ibid., 146–147.

19 Ibid., 158–159.

20 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Volume I.1, 150–153.

21 Ibid., 160–161.

22 Ibid., 162–166.

23 Ibid., 172–176.

tion of these three forms from one another structures Barth's discussion of the *how* of the Word of God, in contrast to its *what*.

The form of God's Word discussed first by Barth is the form most explicitly relevant to an inquiry into theology along Morse's lines: proclamation, or "the Word of God preached." Proclamation stands in relation to the Word of God in four ways that are related to each other in such a way that Barth compares them to "four concentric circles." First, the Word of God stands as the commission upon which proclamation is to be justified. True proclamation is not justified by the search for answers to human problems; it is founded upon a divine command that transcends the human motivations into which the Word of God insinuates itself. This relation of commission is the "outermost circle" among these relations, as each subsequent relation of Word of God and proclamation assumes this first relation.

Second, the Word of God is the theme of real proclamation. Speech necessarily has a theme, and the various academic disciplines and forms of literature take the assorted objects of human perception as their themes. Objects as varied as subatomic particles, ecological systems, human emotions, international politics, and existential questions are each discussed by various ways of speaking. The theme of proclamation, however, is not primarily an object of human perception. Insofar as it is truly proclaimed, the Word of God is not directly perceived and reported by its proclaimer. Instead, it asserts itself as the theme of proclamation. Third, as was discussed above, the Word of God is the judgment and criterion of its own proclamation. While proclamation can be judged by human standards as far as its rhetorical elegance or clarity are concerned, there is no human test for its status as true proclamation. As the theme of proclamation challenges human perception, human judgment falls short as the criterion of proclamation. Finally, in the innermost circle of these relations, "the Word of God is the event itself by which proclamation becomes real proclamation." Proclamation does not only find its commission, theme, and criterion in the Word of God. In the event of real proclamation, God takes on the form of human words and acts in our world making proclamation what it claims to be.²⁴

According to Barth, the church engages in proclamation "in recollection of past revelation and in expectation of future revelation," relating to two modes of revelation which, as each refers to the Word of God, are identical to one another. This recollection is directed toward something that comes from outside the church and is not the recollection of a knowledge that is inherent in humanity. Insofar as Christians undertake such recollection, Barth argues, we turn to the Bible, the second form of the Word of God.²⁵ As the written Word of God, the Bible is the means by which we recollect past revelation, but it is a record of and witness to that revelation and not the revelation itself.²⁶

The Bible is not, then, some kind of timeless deposit of revelation, bearing witness to the essence of the Church. As the means of the recollection of past revelation, the Bible stands in relation to the ongoing proclamation of the Church

24 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Volume I.1, 85–90.

25 *Ibid.*, 96–98.

26 *Ibid.*, 108.

as something both similar to and different from it. It is similar to proclamation in that it is temporally bounded, being a record only of past proclamation. In reporting past proclamation, the Bible also witnesses to the Word of God and stands in a continuity of such witness with ongoing proclamation, with "Jeremiah and Paul at the beginning and the modern preacher of the Gospel at the end of one and the same series."

However, all terms of this series are not equal. The modern preacher stands as the successor to and subordinate of Jeremiah and Paul, among others. She or he is in the presence of an authoritative teacher when reading from the Bible and proclaiming in light of its witness. Further, the Bible is not changed by the situation of the Church (translation would seem, for Barth, to be open-ended and practically necessary exegetical commentary on the Bible rather than alteration of it), as ongoing proclamation necessarily is. Instead, the Bible is determinative of proclamation. Scripture "confronts" the Church in its proclamation as the Word of God which is the basis of such proclamation. Ultimately, like proclamation, Scripture is the Word of God only insofar as God speaks through it and claims its hearers in faith.²⁷

Both proclamation and the Bible witness to, but are not themselves, the third form of the Word of God: Jesus Christ, the Word of God revealed. The definitive revelation of God, by God, to humanity is the Incarnation. In Jesus, the full reality and glory of God took on human flesh, revealing once-for-all that God, wholly different from us, is with us. The person of Jesus Christ is identical to the Word of God revealed. It to this person, then, that proclamation and Scripture witness, though none of these forms of the Word of God is known to us apart from the others:

The revealed Word of God we know only from the Scripture adopted by Church proclamation or the proclamation of the Church based on Scripture. The written Word of God we know only through the revelation which fulfills proclamation or through the proclamation fulfilled by revelation. The preached Word of God we know only through the revelation attested in Scripture or the Scripture which attests revelation.²⁸

The three forms of the Word of God are unknown apart from each other, but they are not identical and they relate to one another through what could be thought of as a chain of witnessing, in which Scripture is subordinate to revelation and proclamation is subordinate to Scripture. That is, in the person of Jesus Christ, God spoke through God's own lips. Scripture refers away from itself to the reality of God revealed in Jesus and is the Word of God insofar as God speaks through that witness to revelation. Proclamation is bound by its commission in the

27 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Volume I.1, 98–107.

28 *Ibid.*, 113–118.

Bible and thus witnesses to the reality revealed in Jesus only as guided by Scripture.²⁹ To summarize, revelation is mediated to us by Scripture, which is mediated to us by proclamation, while proclamation is authorized by Scripture, which is authorized by revelation.

It is now, finally, possible to meaningfully discuss how Barth relates dogmatic theology to proclamation, the Word of God preached, and therefore to gain a better understanding of Morse's notion of testing the spirits and the task of academic theology today. For Barth, theology is by no means a capturing or cataloguing of God and God's attributes within systems of human language.³⁰ Rather, it is a critical study of proclamation. It is not the source of proclamation, but instead seeks to test the coherence of proclamation to the Word of God as it has been received in other times and places.³¹ Theology is by no means a foolproof corrective to false proclamation and its success is not marked by a renewed understanding of the Word of God, but instead by a sense of uneasiness about the potential for proclamation to go astray from its commission to witness faithfully to the Word of God. It is, therefore, an open-ended task that is itself subject to continual testing,³² as Morse also recognizes.³³ How, though, can we think of these false spirits or false proclamation that Barth and Morse would have theology challenge?

It is in further exploring this critical function of theology that Foucault will be particularly helpful. The central task of dogmatic theology seems to be an investigation of a gap or discontinuity between the Word of God and at least some of the words that claim to bear God's Word. Such discontinuities between human words and the things to which they seem to refer are prevalent objects of study in Foucault's work. In order to focus the disparate sites of Foucault's investigation on this theme of discontinuity, I will organize my discussion of Foucault through reference to Gilles Deleuze's *Foucault*, which includes a trio of essays on precisely this theme under the heading "Topology: 'Thinking Otherwise'." As Deleuze offers a fairly abstract distillation of works that were tied to studies of particular situations, I will punctuate my explication of Deleuze's reading of Foucault with Foucault's own writings on those situations as such connections seem helpful.

In *Foucault*, Deleuze suggests that Foucault's investigations into history were to a great extent inquiries into ways of seeing and ways of saying in particular times (particularly in Europe). Deleuze refers to these ways of seeing as "visibilities" and to ways of saying as "statements."³⁴ Before discussing the discontinuity between these visibilities and their corresponding statements, between ways of seeing and speaking about what seem to be the same objects, it will be helpful to more clearly explain what statements and visibilities are and what they are not.

29 Ibid., 108–111, 145–146.

30 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Volume I.1, 136–137.

31 Ibid., 48.

32 Ibid., 73.

33 Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit*, 34.

34 Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Seán Hand, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 48. First published in French by Les Éditions de Minuit, 1986.

As ways of saying, statements are not reducible to "words, phrases, or propositions." Rather, these elements of language constitute the material that is shaped by statements. Statements are not the products of speaking subjects. Instead, statements arise from a "great murmur," in which individual speaking subjects cannot be identified.³⁵ The internet can serve as a helpful, if imperfect, analogy for this great murmur. Vast amounts of information circulate from person to person on the internet, but much of it can hardly be traced back to an individual originating source. We can repeat information we have read on the internet and, sometimes, might not remember that we had read it at all; it may seem self-evident. In a sense, it is as though the information we have read, but for which we have no clear source, speaks through us and spreads optimistic economic forecasts or suspicions about certain foods. Out of the great murmur, a mixture of analog and digital communication, arise ways of speaking that seem to naturally suit various situations in which and objects about which we can speak.

In *The Order of Things*, Foucault (looking at the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries rather than our information age) discusses a shift in the uses of language that illustrates the rising of statements from out of the great murmur. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, according to Foucault, language was assumed to be the medium through which all things were known. Knowledge was thought to be a process of speaking with increasing precision about a world in which words could correspond to things on a one-to-one basis. In the nineteenth century, as European linguists transformed language itself into an object of study, Foucault notes the rise of distinct ways of using language. Scientific symbolic logic uses language, much as in the preceding centuries, to construct representations of observed phenomena. Literature, however, develops certain ways of playing with language that reject the use of language to represent or investigate observed objects, including language itself.³⁶ Most novelists, poets, and songwriters put words together in ways that would have little meaning in a scientific journal and most scientists put words together in ways that would be not be very meaningful in a poetry anthology. They can use the same words, even the same sentences, drawn from the same murmur of language, but they are not saying the same things. Given their vocations, they do not have access to the same statements, and Foucault works to delineate and track these different ways of speaking.

Visibilities can be thought of in much the same way as statements. Irreducible to visible objects or scenes, visibilities are the ways in which those objects and scenes are visible. In Deleuze's reading, Foucault rejects the notion that seeing is an unmediated activity. People cannot look at an object or scene and see it as absolutely anything; we see what we think can be seen. For light, reflecting from an object, to be seen as a ball or, reflecting from a scene, to be seen as a riot, balls and riots must be thinkable. Most people do not see aliens when they look into the same night sky as those who report UFO sightings. Much as statements seem to

35 Ibid., 52–56.

36 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 294–300. First published in French as *Les Mots et les choses*, by Editions Gallimard, 1966.

precede our speaking them and do not originate from us as seeing subjects, visibilities shape how we see.³⁷ I take this notion of sight to be theoretically inclusive of other forms of sensory perception, though Foucault himself focused on the visual. It would seem, though, that we similarly hear or taste *as*, such that these insights would not apply only to seeing people.

To a great extent, statements and visibilities together compose human knowledge. We know, on some level, that which we sense or speak about. Most importantly, for this paper, common sense (or perhaps simply the mechanics of the English language, though French was Foucault's native tongue) would suggest that if I see a light in the sky and say to a child, "Look, a star," that I have seen and spoken about the same thing. Knowledge seems to involve the smooth input and output of the same information in different forms. By Deleuze's estimation, though, Foucault denies that the object of one's senses and the object of one's words are one and the same.³⁸ If I say to a child, "Look, a star," I intend my words to direct the child's attention to the object I see. My words, however, in fact refer to an idea of a star and not the object that I see. My words, in a sense, have attempted to reach out and capture that shining object as a "star," rather than as a flying saucer or an angel.

Foucault illuminates this gap between seeing and speaking early in his career, in *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. Examining the development of the understanding and diagnosis of melancholia and mania in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Foucault argues:

The essential thing is that the enterprise did not proceed from observation to the construction of explanatory images; that on the contrary, the images assured the initial role of synthesis, that their organizing force made possible a structure of perception, in which at last the symptoms could attain their significant value and be organized as the visible presence of the truth.³⁹

Ideas structured by words played the definitive part in understanding and diagnosing the psychiatric conditions of melancholia and mania, such that visual observations were interpreted in accordance with these ideas, and were not the origin of these ideas. Melancholia, as an idea, came into the seventeenth century in association with coldness, darkness, and heaviness. Over these centuries, melancholia was variously explained by an overabundance of cold, dark, and thick black bile in the body, the failure of overly thick, heavy blood to circulate to the brain, and the sluggish vibration of excessively damp nerve fibers. Melancholia's behavioral symptoms ranged from lethargy to isolation from others. The idea of mania, by contrast, was associated with heat, dryness, and excitability. Like melancholia,

37 Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, 52–57.

38 Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, 61–63.

39 Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 135. Translated from the abridged edition of *Histoire de la Folie*, first published in French by Librairie Plon, 1961.

mania was explained in relation to these ideas, by bodily fluids that are semi-gaseous and insufficiently restricted in their movements around the body and brain and by nerve fibers that are taut and dry. Mania's behavioral symptoms included inattention to cold and erratic physical gestures.⁴⁰ The psychiatrists studied by Foucault were guided in understanding their observations by the ideas of melancholia and mania. From out of the many observations that could have been made about these people, the psychiatrists saw as coherent illnesses those behaviors and characteristics that were compatible with these organizing ideas. Perception was shaped by articulable concepts, but not in abstraction from those in whom madness seemed to manifest. Rather, "the madman's body was regarded as the visible and solid presence of his disease."⁴¹

Madness and those with whom it is associated are different objects: madness is an articulable idea, while people are, on the level of visual observation, material objects. However, these different objects, come together, such that a person can come to be seen as not just a person, but as a *mad* person. Statements and visibilities, our ways of speaking and seeing, come together, despite lacking common objects. When we speak, we are restricted by the objects we perceive and seek to speak about. However, our very perception of those objects is shaped by the speech of others.⁴² Words, before we have the chance to speak them, reach out to capture the objects we see. How does this happen, though, in such a way that we come to believe that we rightly see a crazy person?

Visibilities and statements, the elements of knowledge, do not come always together haphazardly. Instead, knowledge is molded in institutions and is shaped by power.⁴³ Before applying Foucault's insights to the theological thoughts of Barth and Morse, I will briefly discuss Foucault's notion of power and its relation to knowledge-shaping institutions. As Foucault lays it out in a well-known passage in *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1, power is marked by several qualities that differ from the ways in which power is often spoken of. In the context of his book's examination of the ways in which sexuality has been regulated socially, Foucault argues that power is not held by individuals or groups, but is a matter of relations between them. It is not external to relationships, but is the effect of inequalities in relationships and produces inequalities. Power is not impressed upon smaller units, such as businesses or schools, by larger units. Instead, the relations of inequality that thrive in businesses or schools sustain the larger-scale dynamics of inequality in entire societies. Finally, power relations are "both intentional and nonsubjective." The actions that result from and sustain these inequalities in relationships work toward the end of sustaining these inequalities. This is not to say, however, that there is a mastermind or sinister cabal directing all the relationships that constitute power. Instead, like statements, power arises from a great murmur, guiding

40 Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, 117–131.

41 *Ibid.*, 159.

42 Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, 65–68.

43 Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, 75–77.

the actions of those who stand in positions of privilege in various relationships without clearly originating from any.⁴⁴

In this last sense, in particular, one can see that the mechanics of power could mesh with the gears of statements and visibilities. Power relations become entrenched in society through the shaping of knowledge in institutions. Through institutions, such as the state, power relations are brought in line with each other, such that there comes to be a pattern that links power relations across society: as an example, men have advantages over women in US workplaces partly because institutions in this country (e.g. family, schools) promote locally performed ways of seeing and speaking about women as less suited to success in workplaces (as less assertive or career oriented, for example), and these ways of seeing and speaking shape individual relations between workers, managers, and employers. Deleuze clarifies the nature and role of institutions:

There is no immediate global integration [of power relations]. There is, rather, a multiplicity of local and partial integrations, each one entertaining an affinity with certain relations or particular points. The integrating factors or agents of stratification make up institutions: not just the State, but also the Family, Religion, Production, the Marketplace, Art itself, Morality, and so on. The institutions are not sources or essences, and have neither essence nor interiority. They are practices or operating mechanisms which do not explain power, since they presuppose its relations and are content to 'fix' them, as part of a function that is not productive but reproductive. There is no State, only state control, and the same holds for all other cases.⁴⁵

Institutions (e.g., the family) change over time as the practices of knowledge that constitute them (e.g., parenting) change. Such institutions reproduce the power relations which shape them through the ways of seeing and speaking that provide them with a sense of coherence. It is in considering proclamation as the knowledge shaping practice that defines the institution of the church that the insights of Foucault can be applied to the theological work of Barth and, in turn, Morse.

Foucault, particularly as read by Deleuze, demonstrates that through the gap between their objects, ways of speaking shape ways of seeing and, in doing so, entrench relations of inequality. Proclamation can be thought of in this way. When a preacher speaks, either in the context of preaching or the administration of sacraments, his or her words can shape the perceptions of his or her congregation. Particular humans, groups, or even the earth itself can be made to appear righteous or sinful, capable or needy, trustworthy or deceitful, important or unworthy of consideration, desirable or revolting. Preachers can do this shaping explicitly,

⁴⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1, trans. Robert Hurley, (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 92–96. First published in French as *La Volonté de savoir*, by Editions Gallimard, 1976.

⁴⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, 75.

by naming their objects as sinful or turning certain people away from the communion table. This shaping can be done implicitly, as well, when a preacher simply does not speak on a certain issue or regularly links certain biblical characters who are perceived as capable, righteous, etc. to certain people or groups in the world.

These shaped ways of seeing then affect the actions of the congregation. Congregants who are healthcare providers may act differently to the apparently sinful than to the apparently righteous. In their interactions with social services, congregants may advocate effectively for themselves or fail to do so depending on whether or not they view their needs (e.g., living in a situation of intimate violence) as resulting from their own sinful behavior or that of others. Congregants who are teachers may act differently to the apparently capable and the apparently needy. As a congregation or even as a denomination, entire ministries may be shaped by these ways of seeing. These ministerial decisions include who can be married, who can be ordained as a minister, where and among whom church buildings should be placed, and what stance churches should take regarding mass incarceration or immigration law. Foucault opens up this way of seeing the power relations that are tied to preaching.

With this understanding of preaching in view, Barth can be read as suggesting that dogmatic theology is the task of criticizing this shaping of perception by preachers and as pointing to the criterion by which such criticism should make its judgments. The criterion of proclamation, for Barth, is the Word of God. The Word of God, as both the speech and act of God, is “not merely, or even primarily, the object of human perception.”⁴⁶ Reading Barth through Foucault, then, preaching is to be judged by the extent to which it is speech shaped by the Word of God rather than speech seeking to capture the Word of God as an object of perception. The task of a theologian is, then, to ask, “Is this the Word of God that I hear or read being preached?” From this guiding question, three more narrowly focused questions seem particularly useful for the critical work of theology, in Barth’s sense.

First, in speech that claims to be proclamation, is God’s Word being witnessed to as the speech and act of God or is an attempt being made to capture God’s Word through human words? According to Barth, the Word of God is simultaneously God’s speech and God’s act, while human words are separated from our acts. Like Foucault, Barth recognizes that the objects of human words do not match up with the objects perceived by humans. We can intend our words to direct others to our acts, but such direction is an attempted shaping of the perception of our acts by those others. As God’s speech is God’s act, however, there is no such gap into which power can insinuate itself. Insofar as there is a gap between speech and act in the supposed Word of God to which proclamation points, God is not speaking through this proclamation as when, for example, God’s healing and saving action is preached as dependent upon the actions of a human figure of authority, upon the acceptance of certain beliefs by a preacher’s audience, or upon their monetary donations.

⁴⁶ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Volume I.1, 88.

Second, in speech that claims to be proclamation, whose speech is shaping the perceptions of the audience? For both Foucault and Barth, words can have the power to shape those who hear them. Deleuze uses the term *visibilities* to encapsulate Foucault's thoughts about the ways of perceiving that are shaped. Barth writes in terms of old and new humans: those whose perceptions of the world are shaped by human words and the Word of God, respectively, not that any of us live fully as new humans. In criticizing proclamation, then, theologians can ask whether the words of the preacher reflect ways of speaking that are reproduced by the institutions that have shaped the preacher, and that he or she now reproduces, or new ways of speaking that may reflect the Word of God, ways of speaking that are productive of something new and not simply reproductive of the old.

Third, in speech that claims to be proclamation, what kinds of institutionalized power relations are being supported, reproduced, or produced, and which are being challenged? Foucault writes of power relations in terms of inequality and of institutions that take these inequalities and propagate them, promoting widespread patterns of exploitation in which some humans are placed above others. Insofar as we can understand the Word of God as shaping power relations between humans, it would not be in terms of these human inequalities. The only inequality implied in the coming of the Word of God to humanity is the inequality between a God who can heal and humans who need to be healed. Theologians can ask, then, whether a preacher promotes institutions and associated power relations that place some humans above others, or institutions and power relations that would place all humans in relations of healing with God.

For now, then, I argue that asking such questions is what academic theologians do, particularly in the context of an educational system that seeks to capture all things within the ways of speaking and seeing reproduced by an exploitative global market. In each of these three questions, what is required of theologians is both a looking toward the Word of God as witnessed to in various times and places, and an analysis of the interactions of power and knowledge in the act of proclamation. Each of these investigative tasks, as well as their synthesis, would necessarily be open-ended, given that theologians are not, by any means, those who most clearly hear the Word of God, but are so often those who most easily succeed in the very academic, economic, and ecclesial institutions that would seek to capture the Word of God and those who would hear it.

Lest I lose sight of what guided me to this way of thinking about the task of theology, I conclude by expressing my hope that this kind of critical theological inquiry embodies that testing of spirits that is characterized by Christopher Morse's faithful disbelief. The call to challenge the separation of God's speech from God's act is an extension of Morse's rejection of false comfort of the sort that was offered to Rachel. Just as Rachel refused to believe that God's healing would come in the form of empty consolation in the midst of evil, theologians can deny those words that would squelch lament and seek any consolation short of the healing power displayed in the Resurrection. The call to challenge the shaping of human perspectives by institutions that coordinate exploitative power relations rather than by a healing God, is inspired by Morse's insistence that theologians test the origin of

the spirits that come to them in Christian doctrine. The call to challenge preaching that would promote or reproduce these exploitation-propagating institutions follows from Morse's denial of those things that are not from God, but that would claim our allegiance. Finally, in turning to my teacher for guidance I hope that I have demonstrated, if not explicitly theorized, the importance of the communal nature of this theological task of faithful disbelief.