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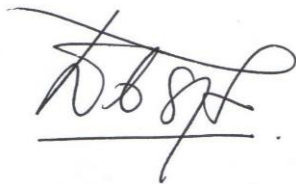
Disruptive Presence: The Ontology, Theology and  
Ethics of Reading the Bible as Scripture in Karl Barth's  
Theological Exegesis

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Doctor of Philosophy  
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# Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis has been composed by me. The work presented in this dissertation is mine and has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D.B. Saragih', with a horizontal line underneath the signature.

Denni Boy Saragih

July 2015

## Abstract

The dissertation offers a new reading of Karl Barth's hermeneutics in relation to the task of the church in reading the Bible as Scripture. The study argues that the distinctiveness of Barth's hermeneutics lies in its complex coordination of several doctrinal loci in construing biblical hermeneutics. In this reading, the church's interpretation of the Bible is theologically located in the reality defined by the Trinitarian decision to be God in Jesus Christ. The relationship between the Word of God and the word of man is decided by God's election of God's being in Jesus Christ.

As a contribution to Barth studies, the work offers a corrective reading of Barth's earlier account of biblical hermeneutics in the doctrine of revelation by drawing the insights of Barth's later theological ontology in the doctrines of election and Christology. The church's reading of scripture is reformulated in the ontology of being in becoming in which the freedom of God in revelation is coordinated with the history of God in Jesus Christ. As such, it maintains the continuity and the discontinuity between the biblical natural history and the divine address to the church.

The practical implication of this approach is not a method of interpretation but an ethics of biblical interpretation as a human response to God's communicative presence. As an activity of listening to the Word of God, the church's reading of the Bible is marked by moral freedom in obedience and responsibility to the Word of God. But the divine presence is not only communicative but also commanding, and it remains "a disruptive presence" that challenges the church to be faithful to her calling as a creature of the Word of God.

## Lay Summary

The dissertation offers a new reading of Karl Barth's theology of interpretation. There are two major contributions of this dissertation to its academic community. First, it offers a new analysis of the structure and coherence of Barth's theological hermeneutics as a contribution to Barth's scholarship. Second, it offers a new analysis of the distinctiveness of Barth's hermeneutics as a contribution to broader discussions of the conditions and aims of textual interpretation.

In relation to the first, this work presents a synthetic account of Barth's theology in relation to the task of the church to read the Bible as Scripture. It offers a new reading of Barth's hermeneutics by i) drawing upon the insights of earlier commentators on Barth's theology of the Word of God, but ii) reading and adjusting this material through the lens of Barth's subsequent work. Specifically, this work identifies and analyses the underlying intellectual commitments that forms Barth's hermeneutics from its earlier development to its mature reformulation.

In relation to the second, this work offers a new constructive account of Barth's hermeneutics in sharp contrast to some other influential analyses of the dynamics of meaning and understanding. The work argues that the strength of Barth's theology lies in its ability to coordinate several theological loci to formulate a complex account of human understanding. In this regard, this dissertation interprets Barth's hermeneutics in his early theology, and analysed it in conjunction with his mature theology to provide a new constructive account. The synthetic result is strongly recommended for its theological specificity. The presentation of this new synthesis is structured as Barth's ontology, theology and ethics of interpretation.

The five main chapters of this study can be divided into two parts. Chapters 2-3 survey the scholarship and the background of Karl Barth's hermeneutics. The purpose is to highlight the distinctiveness of his hermeneutics and the interrelation of various doctrinal loci in his early formulation of theological interpretation. Chapters 4-6 are a constructive interpretation based on a thematic reading of Barth's later writings and a close examination of some important sections. The reading is an empathetic attempt to understand the logic of Barth's hermeneutics within his theology as a whole, while also questioning and engaging Barth's thinking in a wider context of hermeneutical and ethical theories.

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## Abbreviations

<i>CD I/1</i>	<i>Church Dogmatics</i> , vol. I, part 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2 <sup>nd</sup> ed., 1975)
<i>CD I/2</i>	<i>Church Dogmatics</i> , vol. I, part 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956)
<i>CD II/1</i>	<i>Church Dogmatics</i> , vol. II, part 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957)
<i>CD II/2</i>	<i>Church Dogmatics</i> , vol. II, part 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957)
<i>CD III/1</i>	<i>Church Dogmatics</i> , vol. III, part 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958)
<i>CD III/2</i>	<i>Church Dogmatics</i> , vol. III, part 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960)
<i>CD III/3</i>	<i>Church Dogmatics</i> , vol. III, part 3 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961)
<i>CD III/4</i>	<i>Church Dogmatics</i> , vol. III, part 4 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961)
<i>CD IV/1</i>	<i>Church Dogmatics</i> , vol. IV, part 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956)
<i>CD IV/2</i>	<i>Church Dogmatics</i> , vol. IV, part 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958)
<i>CD IV/3.1</i>	<i>Church Dogmatics</i> , vol. IV, part 3: first half (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961)
<i>CD IV/3.2</i>	<i>Church Dogmatics</i> , vol. IV, part 3: second half (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1962)
<i>CD IV/4</i>	<i>Church Dogmatics</i> , vol. IV, part 4 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1969)

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## Chapter I: Introduction

This study is entitled “Disruptive Presence: the ontology, theology and ethics of reading of the Bible as Scripture in Karl Barth’s theological exegesis.” There are two major contributions of this dissertation to its academic community. First, it offers a new analysis of the structure and coherence of Barth’s theological hermeneutics as a contribution to Barth’s scholarship. Second, it offers a new analysis of the distinctiveness of Barth’s hermeneutics as a contribution to broader discussions of the conditions and aims of textual interpretation.

In relation to the first, this work presents a synthetic account of Barth’s theology in relation to the task of the church to read the Bible as Scripture. We offer a new reading of Barth’s hermeneutics by i) drawing upon the insights of earlier commentators (e.g. Webster, Jüngel, etc.) on Barth’s theology of the Word of God up to *CD I/1*, but ii) reading and adjusting this material through the lens of Barth’s subsequent work. Specifically, this work identifies and analyses the underlying theological commitments that forms Barth’s hermeneutics from its development in *the Epistle to the Romans* to its mature reformulation in the *Church Dogmatics*.<sup>1</sup> As a new reading this study offers a corrective treatment of Barth’s early hermeneutics in *CD I/1* by adopting an interpretative strategy of Barth’s theology, associated especially with Bruce McCormack,<sup>2</sup> to demonstrate how Barth’s early account of biblical interpretation can be revised and refined by a theological-ontological construct based on his expositions of the doctrines of election (*CD II/1*) and Christology (*CD IV*).

In relation to the second, this work offers a new constructive account of Barth’s hermeneutics in sharp contrast to some other influential analyses of the dynamics of meaning and understanding. The work argues that the strength of

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter, the acronym *CD* will be used. This work uses the new study edition of the *Church Dogmatics* that consist of 31 volumes published by T&T Clark in 2009, but paginated according to the standard edition. Accordingly, the citations are paginated according to the standard edition of Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, 13 Vols*, trans. G. W. Bromiley and Thomas Forsyth Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956-1975).

<sup>2</sup> On Bruce McCormack’s account see specially our discussion on the ontology of interpretation in chapter 4.

Barth's theology lies in its ability to coordinate several theological loci to formulate a complex account of human understanding. In this regard, this dissertation follows a line of interpretation of Barth's early theology, associated primarily with John Webster,<sup>3</sup> and analysed in conjunction with his mature theology to provide a constructive account of Barth's hermeneutics. The presentation of this new synthesis is structured as Barth's ontology, theology and ethics of interpretation. The synthetic result is strongly recommended for its theological specificity.

The word 'presence' in the title refers to the faith of the church that the divine presence accompanies the church's reading of Scripture. Thus a more proper title is "Graceful Presence" rather than disruptive. But the title is used to convey the theological sense against modern hermeneutics which emancipates text from speaking, and how in particular, this emancipation assumes the absence of a discoursing author. We claim that this notion does not apply to the biblical text when it is read as Scripture. For modern hermeneutics, the presence of an author is disruptive to a process of interpretation.<sup>4</sup> It works on the assumption that reading a text is different from listening because, as a discourse fixed in writing, a text cannot interact with the reader in the way a speaker interacts with the audience. The relationship between author and reader through the text is completed when the author cannot interrupt the event of interpretation. The reader can read the work as an isolated text without the disruptive presence of an author. In this construal, the presence of an author who constantly evaluates the process of interpretation based on authorial intention constrains a reading experience.<sup>5</sup> A free reader requires the death of the author. In other words, the emancipation of writing from speaking is the birth of a text in modern hermeneutics.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast, according to Barth's theology, a reading of the Bible as *Scripture* assumes the divine communicative presence, in which God is not only speaking but also commanding the church in and through the text. The speaking God is the

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<sup>3</sup> On John Webster's contribution to Barth's early theology, see our discussion in chapter 3.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 147.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

theological condition for such reading to be possible. Rather than emancipating the text from God's speech, Barth's theology binds the text of Scripture to the divine communicative presence. Whenever the church reads the Bible as Scripture, she encounters God's 'disruptive' presence that challenges her understanding and commands her ministry. This faith calls for a theological exploration and a hermeneutical task of accounting for God's presence in biblical interpretation. This is the task that this study seeks to explore. But in what follows I will specify further the subject matter and the aim of this study.

The subject matter of this study is Karl Barth's theology in relation to the church's reading of the Bible as *Scripture*. I assume that the Bible can be read merely as a literary product (as a letter, a poetry, a story, a history, etc.), but such readings are not necessarily a reading of the Scripture. Different interpretations of the Bible are a result not only differing methods but also different construal of the Bible as a text. As a text, the Bible can mean different things to different people: a story, a text, a tradition, a history, a library, etc. Our study focuses on the Bible as Scripture which, in the theological sense, is inclusive of these categories. As a theological exploration, this study does not disregard what in Barth's theology is called the humanity of Scripture (its history and linguistic reality). However, to read the Bible as Scripture assumes that it is read by the church in an act of theological exegesis. It is not a particular instance of a general reading, but an act of reading *sui generis*. It is different from a reading of a scholar, an Asian man/woman, a Westerner or any other forms of human existence. Specifically, a reading of the Bible as Scripture is an act of a community of faith, which is inclusive of these forms of human existence, but which is ultimately defined by her being as the creature of the Word of God. However, because the church consists of human readers and the text is written by human authors, biblical interpretation involves the humanity of the Scripture. It responds to the complex hermeneutical questions of human understanding. Nevertheless, it does not assume that it deals with these questions exhaustively, but only limitedly, i.e. from the point of view of Barth's theology. In this sense, this study explores the questions of human understanding in its relation to the text, reader and author in biblical interpretation and offers a constructive proposal of a theology of reading the Bible as Scripture.

The aim of this study is to construct a theological hermeneutics of the Bible with and after the manner of Barth's theology. The question this study seeks to answer is the question of God's communicative presence in the church's interpretation of the Bible: what are the meaning, the implications and the practical consequences of the claim for hermeneutics. The questions of the text, the author and the reader will be explored only from the point of view of the church's faith in God who speaks in and through the Bible.

From a methodological point of view, this study offers a corrective and constructive reading of Barth's theology of interpretation. Since his theology underwent developments throughout his theological career, following the common sense, we will read his earlier theology to understand the development of his later hermeneutics. However, at the critical point of his theological-ontology, it is his later theology that will be used to reinterpret his earlier ontological presuppositions (McCormack's thesis). Specifically, this way of reading will be used with regard to Barth's ontology of interpretation and how in particular Barth's Christology and election provide a revised ontology to his earlier expositions. After a constructive reading of Barth's ontology of interpretation, we will propose a theology of interpretation and the practical implications of the construal. As such, the study is structured under the themes of the ontology, theology and ethics of interpretation. Specifically, the study offers the insights of Barth's theology in presupposing a different reality (ontology), focusing on the Word of God (theology), and recommending a particular morality of interpretation (ethics) for the task of reading the Bible as Scripture.

There are alternative readings of Barth's theological ontology in relation to the development of his theology, particularly the ontological relationship between the election, Christology and Trinity.<sup>7</sup> This work does not seek to propose a new way of

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<sup>7</sup> The primary alternative reading ("weak reading") is associated with Paul Molnar and George Hunsinger. For an introduction to the current debate, including the papers and responses by McCormack, Molnar, Hunsinger and other alternative readings, see collective essays in Michael T. Dempsey, *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*, ed. Michael T. Dempsey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011). This work follows McCormack's "strong reading" on the ontological relationship between election and God's being. The terms "strong" and "weak" have nothing to do with the strength of the argument but rather in view of the significance of God's election to God's being. A "strong" view means that election logically precedes God's being, and as such construes God's being

resolving the debate, but rather to highlight and to draw the insightful implications that results from the line of interpretation associated primarily with Bruce McCormack. From practical reasons, to do justice to the debate, the scope of the work would be too extensive and would eclipse the main arguments that we offer. Secondly, in relation to the subject matter of the thesis, it is McCormack's line of interpretation that offers the possibility of a new reading to Barth's earlier account of biblical interpretation. The alternative reading offers no material change to the ontology of Barth's Dogmatics, and in this respect, offers no substantive correction to his earlier theology of interpretation.

The five main chapters of this study can be divided into two parts. Chapters 2-3 survey the scholarship and the background of Karl Barth's hermeneutics. The purpose is to highlight the distinctiveness of his hermeneutics and the interrelation of various doctrinal loci in his early formulation of theological interpretation. This twofold message is explored in the schematic presentation of the three aspects of Barth's hermeneutics: the ontology, theology and ethics of theological interpretation. Chapters 4-6 are my constructive work based on a thematic reading of the *CD* and a close examination of some important sections in *CD*. My reading is an empathetic attempt to understand the logic of Barth's hermeneutics within his theology as a whole, while also questioning and engaging Barth's thinking in a wider context of hermeneutical and ethical theories.

Chapter Two contributes to scholarship by providing a map of contemporary studies of Barth's hermeneutics. With the growing number of studies in Barth's hermeneutics, it can be a challenge to get a sense where one may place an approach in comparison to the others. This chapter provides an orientation to various

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in actualistic ontology, i.e., God is the Lord of God's being. A "weak reading" means that the being of God precedes God's election, and as such it is more in line with the essentialist approach to God's being, i.e., God's election is the expression of God's being. For the main articles of "weak reading" see, inter alia, George Hunsinger, "Election and the Trinity: Twenty-Five Theses on the Theology of Karl Barth," *Modern Theology* 24, no. 2 (2008): 179-98; Paul D. Molnar, "Can the Electing God Be God without Us? Some Implications of Bruce McCormack's Understanding of Barth's Doctrine of Election for the Doctrine of the Trinity," *Neue Zeitschrift Fur Systematische Theologie Und Religionsphilosophie* 49, no. 2 (2007): 199-222. For McCormack's response see inter alia Bruce L. McCormack, "Election and the Trinity: Theses in Response to George Hunsinger," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 63, no. 2 (2010): 203-24; Bruce L. McCormack, "Let's Speak Plainly: A Response to Paul Molnar," *Theology Today* 67, no. 1 (2010): 57-65.



approaches by considering the main proposals in the scholarship. We divide the studies into five approaches: *the non-hermeneutical* proposals that argue that Barth does not have a hermeneutics, *the hermeneutical* proposals that construe Barth's theology of interpretation from a hermeneutical point of view, *the exegetical* proposals that construe Barth's hermeneutics from his exegesis, *the genetic-theological* proposals that interpret Barth's hermeneutics in the context of the development of his theology, and *the theological-historical* proposals that attempt to understand his hermeneutics from the internal logic of his theology. While the final two approaches are significantly intertwined, we differentiate them for the purpose of highlighting the difference in emphasis and how these approaches contribute to our study in construing ontology and theology of interpretation. In this context, we are situating our approach as a dogmatic proposal that sees Barth's hermeneutics as an insightful coordination of Christian doctrines arranged as the ontology, theology and ethics of interpretation. The three themes are defined from a theological point of view, and they are constructed to provide a schematic arrangement of the material dogmatic. In some ways our approach will resemble the genetic-historical and the historical-theological proposals, but we offer a new way of coordinating Barth's theological ontology with his theological hermeneutics and ethics of interpretation. In other words, we offer a constructive reading of Barth's theology of interpretation that is shaped by his later theological ontology and which recommends a theological ethics for reading the Bible as Scripture.

Chapter Three narrates the development of Karl Barth's hermeneutics as the result of two important aspects of his life and work in the early period: biblical exegesis and the studies of reformed theology. In this chapter we argue that what was crucial for the formation of his reading of Scripture was not some novel ideas and methods such as dialectics, Hegel's philosophy, Neo-Liberalism/Orthodoxy, German Idealism, etc., but a quiet but steady development in exegesis and his study of reformed theology. Barth spent most of his time in the final period of pastoral work in Safenwil and in the early period as a professor of New Testament Exegesis and Reformed Theology in Göttingen, doing and teaching biblical exegesis, and studying and teaching reformed confessions and theologies. His intense engagement in these activities helped Barth to reformulate his thinking on how to account for the presence

of God in the church's reading of the Bible, and how this theological conviction must inform and form the practice of biblical exegesis. The chapter notes that during this formative period, the distinctiveness of Barth's hermeneutics was taking shape in coordinating several doctrinal loci to provide an account of biblical interpretation, and this proposal can be structured by a threefold dimension of his theological hermeneutics: the ontology, theology and ethics of reading the Bible as Scripture.

Chapter Four explores the first dimension, Barth's ontology of interpretation. In a way, this chapter is the material groundwork for Chapters Four and Five, and we offer a new reading as a theological exploration into the ontology of hermeneutics with and after the manner of Barth's theology. While this chapter has greatly benefitted from recent discussion of Barth's theological ontology, it moves beyond the insights of such studies and offers a constructive work on Barth's ontology of interpretation. We do not claim that our discussions on the theological ontology of Trinity, Christology and election are an original contribution to the field, but rather that by drawing up this work we can offer some original insights into Barth's ontology of Scriptural interpretation. To this end, we offer a proposal that the Trinity is being as self-interpreted being, Jesus Christ is the being of language, Jesus Christ is the primal history, and election is the foundation of being. In this way we engage in the study of hermeneutics at the ontological level by using Barth's theological ontology as a metacriticism of general hermeneutics. This engagement is born out of a conviction that general hermeneutics is shaped by certain anthropological doctrines in relation to the question of reality, specifically human reality. Ontology in this sense is a philosophical reflection on human existence. In turn, the doctrine of the human as historical being brings about a historical study of a text, and similarly the doctrine that a human being is a cultural being results in a cultural approach to the text. Understanding as such is not merely knowing, i.e., standing in a subject-object relationship to the text, but a deeper level of existence, something deeper and more primitive than knowledge. It is seen as a primordial experience of human existence. But such a construal relies heavily on a specific anthropological doctrine, i.e., that the human being is the originator of authentic understanding. It is against this conceptual indebtedness of a general hermeneutic to anthropological doctrines that we offer Barth's theology as the basis of an ontology

of interpretation. Our contention is that the decision of God to be God in Jesus Christ defines the reality in which the church exists and acts, and by implication reads the Bible as Scripture. We propose that this theological ontology has a profound hermeneutical consequence. This means that the history of Jesus Christ as witnessed in the gospel is not alien to the being of God, and that because there are the political, historical, cultural, linguistic and existential dimensions in the life of Jesus, as witnessed by the gospel, the church can approach the Bible from these points of view. The difference is that now these approaches are theologically grounded, and thus can be theologically explored and elucidated. But more importantly, our proposal places God as the originator of textual meaning, and as such replaces the human being as the locus of the hermeneutical problem. In our proposal, the locus of the hermeneutical problem is the being of God, not the being of the human. Meaning and understanding have their roots in the Trinitarian life of God who elects Jesus Christ as the being of God for humanity. He is the true Word of God.

In Chapter Five, we argue that such ontological construal requires a perceptive response to the divine communicative presence in and through the biblical text. The specific elaboration of this approach to the text comes through Barth's theology of interpretation as a *sachlich* hermeneutics. A *sachlich* hermeneutics is an approach where the purpose of reading is not to understand the author or the text, but the subject matter that the authors witness and the text conveys. In other words, it is to understand what the author of the text understands. This is certainly not an original idea of Barth's theology. The originality of Barth's theology lies not in the so called method of *Sachkritik* but rather in Barth's elaboration of the *Sache* of Scripture. This chapter not only elaborates the threefold Word of God in relation to Barth's understanding of the Word of God, but also explores the threefoldness of God's speaking in his *sachlich* hermeneutics. Since, for Barth, God and the Word of God are not two things but one, Barth's theology suggests that the nature of the Word of God is God himself in the speech, action and mystery of God's presence in the church. In this context the history, the human language and the linguistic dimensions of the text are the Christological implications of the Word of God as the being of God. The human dimensions of biblical interpretation (history, language, text) are

witnesses of the Word because God elects them as the enactment of what is taking place in the inner life of the Trinitarian God.

Chapter Six argues that the concrete articulation of this hermeneutical construal comes not in the form of a method of interpretation but in an ethics of interpretation. While it may sound strange at first, a method is an instance of ethical deliberation in which one wants to ensure a truthful process of acquiring knowledge or a proper way of understanding something. In this way, a method of interpretation is closely connected to the ethical convictions of an interpreter. But more importantly, in Barth's dogmatics, ethics is an integral part of the theological reflection. His dogmatics is inherently ethical; and ethics is an integral part of his dogmatics. Barth's ethics of interpretation in this regard is informed by an ethics of freedom, and takes the forms of the church's responsibility and obedience in her theological interpretation. A church reading of the Bible as Scripture as such is not only an instance of a hermeneutical event but more importantly an ethical deliberation that makes moral demands upon the reader, and specifically upon the church, where she encounters the commanding grace of God. Our proposal on Barth's ethics of interpretation highlights the fact that it is not just any text that the church is exploring, but the Word of God in the reality created and sustained by the divine commanding presence. It identifies the space of the reality of Christ within which the reading takes place. This is not only in contrast to the academic setting within which a method of interpretation acquires its existence and justification, but more importantly, it shows that the church is mostly defined by its theological existence as a creature of the Word of God. The church is in Christ, understood ontologically and theologically, and an act of scriptural reading is not only an act of worship, rife with the risk of irreverence, but also a communication of the divine truth that requires both the church's understanding and obedience.

This study does not undertake specific exegeses in Barth's writings. There are several studies along this line, and they can be consulted in our survey in Chapter Two. There are two reasons why this study does not embark in this direction. For a pragmatic reason, we lack space and time to undertake such a study. But more importantly, Barth's exegesis is marked by creativity that each exegesis is executed in view of a biblical text's particular way of witnessing and the point of view in

which the subject matter of Scripture is presented. Rather than dealing with specific exegesis, we are exploring the salient features of his exegetical practice, specifically, the theological reading and dogmatic presuppositions that shape his interpretation. Nevertheless, having studied these features, the interaction between exegesis and theology (exegesis in theological reflection and theological reflection in exegesis), both in exploring biblical passages and in reflecting on theological questions, is the proper sequel to what we are attempting in this work. Such exploration will benefit from and be complemented by the groundwork we have undertaken in this study.

## Chapter II: Perspectives on Karl Barth's Hermeneutic and Exegesis

### 1. A Survey of Approaches to Karl Barth's Hermeneutics

Various scholars, in one way or another, find Karl Barth a profound reader of Scripture.<sup>1</sup> Whether they agree or disagree with his exegesis, they cannot but acknowledge that Barth understood the Bible in the way that resembles the insightful meditation of the church fathers. A few examples will suffice. Commenting on Barth's *the Epistle to the Romans*, Brevard Childs remarks, "When you read Barth on *Romans*, whether you agree or not, you know you have confronted someone who understands Paul. It reminds one, again, of Augustine or Chrysostom."<sup>2</sup> Reflecting on his theological growth in reading the Bible, theologian Thomas F. Torrance testified, "When I opened the pages of Karl Barth's books and read the Holy Scripture in the light of the startling questions he asked about the strange new world within the Bible and dynamic nature of the Word of God, my study of the Bible changed into a higher gear."<sup>3</sup>

According to his life-long closest friend, Eduard Thurneysen, Barth must be understood primarily as a student and a teacher of the Bible that "whoever tries to understand him as other than this will not understand him at all."<sup>4</sup> But what is it exactly that makes Barth's reading of the Bible so insightful? And in what way should we understand his reading that we could learn from Barth, not only in the way

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<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, even from the beginning of the dialectical theology movement, there were scholars who did not think that Barth was a good interpreter of Scripture, for example, Ernst von Dobschütz, "Die Pneumatische Exegese, Wissenschaft und Praxis," in *Vom Auslegen des Neuen Testaments: Drei Reden* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1927), 50; also Johannes Schneider, "Historische und Pneumatische Exegese," *Neue Kirchliche Zeitschrift* 42 (1931): 728. Cf. Bruce L. McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 97.

<sup>2</sup> Brevard S. Childs, "Karl Barth as Interpreter of Scripture," in *Karl Barth and the Future of Theology: A Memorial Colloquium*, ed. David L. Dickerman (New Haven: Yale Divinity School Association, 1969), 35.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 83.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Barth and Eduard Thurneysen, *Revolutionary Theology in the Making: Barth-Thurneysen Correspondence, 1914-1925*, trans. James D. Smart (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1964), 13.

he approached the task, but also in the theological presupposition and critical self-understanding of the task? These questions have generated studies that attempt to grasp the hermeneutics and the theological convictions of Barth's engagement with Scripture. By way of survey and critical engagement with some of the major proposals, we propose that there are five ways of approaching the question at hand. There is always a risk of simplification and generalization in mapping various positions in relation to a complex topic such as Barth's hermeneutics. The purpose of our mapping, however, is not to provide a comprehensive taxonomy that exhausts the approaches and contributions of the scholars under consideration. Rather, each of the scholars we list here explores a wider terrain, and continues to explore the subject, and in various degrees, merits a more detailed engagement than the scope of our study permits. The purpose of this survey is to place our study in relation to the state of the scholarship on Barth's exegesis and hermeneutics. With this in mind, we propose that there are five types of descriptive conceptualization to Barth's exegesis and hermeneutics: the non-hermeneutical proposals, the hermeneutical-oriented proposals, the exegetical-oriented proposals, the genetic-theological proposals and the theological-historical proposals. The following survey provides a short description of the insights and the critical engagements with the approaches to Barth's hermeneutics and exegesis. This survey will also clarify the argument that will be pursued in the remainder of the thesis.

### **1.1. The non-hermeneutical proposals**

There are some scholars who see in Barth's theology little or no room for hermeneutics. Barth's theological description of the divine activity, it is argued, suggests a subversive attitude to the insights and the constructive roles of hermeneutical theories in biblical interpretation. Edgar V. Knight argues that, for Barth, "the identity of the subject matter (God, Christ, grace, etc.) of the text of the Bible... solves the problem of distance and makes meaning possible in the present."<sup>5</sup> In similar fashion, Peter Stühlmacher notes that "Barth's conception of the principle of revelation, and his opposition to an exclusively historical-critical analysis of the

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<sup>5</sup> Edgar V. McKnight, *Meaning in Texts: The Historical Shaping of a Narrative Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 66.

text hindered him from seeing the hermeneutical problem in its full breadth.”<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, Barth is prevented from proposing a method that actually might help the exegetes to focus on the theological subject matter of the Bible.<sup>7</sup> The root of Barth’s theological attitude, according to Anthony C. Thiselton, can be identified in the conviction of the discontinuity between human knowledge and the reality of God because “no natural point of contact already exists between man and the Word of God, and that this discontinuity, therefore, can and must be bridged not by hermeneutics but by the work of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>8</sup> Thiselton argues that the discontinuity between hermeneutics and theology is so strongly emphasized that he seems to downplay that “the Spirit works *through* the normal processes of human understanding and neither independently of them nor contrary to them.”<sup>9</sup> As a result, Barth’s theological attitude to the problem of hermeneutics implies that “there would be no need for hermeneutics.”<sup>10</sup>

To be fair to this approach one must recognize that it is commonly a comment on a side note of comparative study between Barth and other theologians (e.g. Bultmann or Schleiermacher), and mostly does not come from a close reading of a particular Barth text. This indicates the impression of general scholarship, which is quite imprecise in describing the relationship between Barth’s theology and hermeneutics. However, it also shows that Barth’s theology may appear to be quite unsatisfactory in helping to formulate the contribution of hermeneutics for the interpretation of Scripture, which is at the heart of the concern of some theological engagements with general hermeneutics. This is correct to the extent that Barth refuses to submit theology to the agenda of modern hermeneutics, especially to the question of method and understanding. But the estimation that Barth’s theology creates a discontinuity between the normal process of understanding and the

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Toward a Hermeneutics of Consent*, ed. and trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 51.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1980), 88.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>10</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (London: HarperCollins, 1992), 231.



theological content of the Bible is off the mark. Barth does not reject that the Holy Spirit works through the natural process of understanding, but raises a deeper theological question, i.e., in what way this natural process must be understood in relation to the living reality of the Word of God. Thiselton suggests that by correct analysis of the natural process of understanding, with the insights of general hermeneutics, we can arrive at a clear understanding of the theological content of the Bible. Barth, however, questions this conviction insofar that the theological content in question is not simply a collection of theological ideas, human symbolic meanings or even the profound new horizons created by symbolic fusion between text and human understanding, but the living reality of God in relation to God's decision to address humans in their sinfulness. Furthermore, Barth's strong emphasis on the freedom of God makes his proposal open to the criticism that hermeneutics has little or no room in his dogmatics. But to emphasize too strongly on this side, is to ignore the other side of Barth's theology, i.e., the role of human activity in Barth's theological anthropology. We cannot conclude Barth's reflection on the human process of understanding simply by the implications made from his theology of revelation. We must explore parts of his theology where he actually discusses the topic extensively. Barth's emphasis on the divine activity will be understood in a more nuanced way, particularly in relation to the human process of understanding, but only once the dialectics of divine discourse and human activity is understood properly.

### **1.2. The hermeneutical-oriented proposals**

If the previous proposals see little contribution from Barth's theology to hermeneutics, the hermeneutically-oriented proposals, on the other hand, see that many insights can be gained from Barth's hermeneutics. Thus this approach explores Barth's writings from the standpoint of current hermeneutical theories and compares Barth's ideas with certain prominent thinkers in theology or in a wider academic context such as Bultmann (Werner G. Jeanrond), Paul Ricoeur (Mark I Wallace, Stephen H. Webb), and Derrida (Graham Ward, Isolde Andrews).<sup>11</sup> These proposals

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<sup>11</sup> Inter alia, Werner G. Jeanrond, "Karl Barth's Hermeneutics," in *Reckoning with Barth*, ed. Nigel Biggar (Oxford: Mowbray, 1988), 80-97.; Werner G. Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 120-57; Mark I. Wallace, "Karl Barth's

engage in a critical conversation that aims at a new constructive proposal by combining the insights of the participants under consideration. In the following we will provide some important examples of such engagement and consider the value of their respective proposals on Barth's theological hermeneutics.

Werner G. Jeanrond concentrates his studies on the early part of the *Church Dogmatics* (I/1 and I/2) and argues that Barth's hermeneutics emphasizes the material content of theology, and the hermeneutical question is essentially a question of "God's revelation in history."<sup>12</sup> In his estimation, Barth's hermeneutics is "a passionate hermeneutics" that reads the text of the Bible through the axiom of epistemological disjunction between God and man, and combines this insight with the conviction that Jesus Christ is the ultimate revelation of God's love.<sup>13</sup> Within these convictions, Barth then proposes that the subject matter of the text will be able to make itself known to the reader.<sup>14</sup> According to Jeanrond, Barth's hermeneutics bears a similarity to Gadamer's hermeneutics which proposes that the truth will reveal itself to the reader.<sup>15</sup> But this emphasis, according to Jeanrond, has made Barth unable to appreciate the important insight of hermeneutics into the conditions of human understanding. According to Jeanrond while Barth is correct that methodological reflection cannot guarantee the material content of the Word of God, Barth is wrong in underestimating its role for responsible hermeneutics.<sup>16</sup> The best way to proceed, according to Jeanrond, is to appreciate both Barth's emphasis on material content of theology and the hermeneutical insights for proper method of interpretation.

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Hermeneutic, a Way Beyond the Impasse," *Journal of Religion* 68, no. 3 (Jul 1988): 396-410 ; Mark I. Wallace, *The Second Naïveté: Barth, Ricoeur, and the New Yale Theology* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1995); Stephen H. Webb, *Re-Figuring Theology: The Rhetoric of Karl Barth* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1991); Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Isolde Andrews, *Deconstructing Barth: A Study of the Complementary Methods in Karl Barth and Jacques Derrida* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996); George A. Lindbeck, "Barth and Textuality," *Theology Today* 43, no. 3 (1986): 361-76.

<sup>12</sup> Jeanrond, "Karl Barth's Hermeneutics," in *Reckoning with Barth*, 84.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

Mark I. Wallace concentrates his studies on *the Epistle to the Romans* and certain exegeses in *Church Dogmatics*. He compares Barth and Ricœur, and argues that both of them share a common interest in the text's subject matter and attempt to reach a second naiveté that moves beyond a critical exegesis to a post-critical hermeneutic. In this sense, both affirm a strong claim that the Word of God confronts the readers in the interpretation of Scripture.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, both attempt to move beyond historical criticism that explores textual meanings in the historical artefacts and their reconstruction, and beyond literary criticism that locates textual meaning in the intra-linguistic sphere. These shared convictions correspond to their similar methodological procedures that interpretation begins with an *understanding* of the subject matter of the text, followed by an *explanation* of the hermeneutical circle between part and whole, and finally, reaches the fusion between the worlds of the text and of the reader in the *appropriation* of the subject matter to the reader's life-world.<sup>18</sup> Wallace, however, realizes that the two also have their important dissimilarities. First, while Barth sees the world of the biblical text in a more anthropocentric horizon, Ricœur sees it in a cosmocentric horizon; and second, while Barth's understanding of the Word of God is too Christocentric, Ricœur interprets the Bible from the perspective of a universal human possibility with its polyphonic and polysemy possibilities of understanding.<sup>19</sup> Ricœur's insights, Wallace argues, can help Barth's Christological concentration and its anthropocentric horizon, be broadened for constructing a post-modern approach to the reality of revelation by recognizing the plurality and diversity of meanings within the facticity of the biblical text.<sup>20</sup> In this way Wallace hopes to offer "a new possibility in... hermeneutics, a new suppleness in... understanding of what it means to say and experience that God reveals God's self to us".<sup>21</sup>

Graham Ward, although not strictly discussing the problem of hermeneutics, presents a complex analysis in comparing Barth and Derrida on language. Ward

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<sup>17</sup> Wallace, *The Second Naiveté: Barth, Ricoeur, and the New Yale Theology*, 51.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 118-19.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

reads Barth across various writings, but behind his complex presentation the basic thesis of his book is that Barth and Derrida are struggling with the same philosophical problem: i.e. the “ineradicable otherness which haunts discourse and yet the impossibility of transcending metaphoricity and positing a real presence.”<sup>22</sup> To this problem, according to Ward, Barth’s answer is strikingly similar to Derrida’s once Barth’s thinking is interpreted in the context of Derrida’s philosophy of language. Barth’s “ultimate concern is to move on from a theology of Scriptural discourse to a theology of discourse itself.”<sup>23</sup> In this context, Barth sees that language operates in two modes which are antithetical to each other: the communication model and the semiotic model.<sup>24</sup> According to the first, language has its origin in God and its operation as such follows the analogy of faith where God uses it in a perfect harmony between thought, word and reality. But, on the contrary, according to the second mode, language operates in a constructivist manner which construes the relationship between words and reality as practically arbitrary. According to Ward, Barth fails to provide a satisfactory explanation how these two antithetical models could be resolved, and he only offers a Christological analogy which does not provide a coherent answer to the question of how to account for the presence of the divine Word in the human words.<sup>25</sup> To this problematic question in Barth’s theology of language, Ward proposes that Derrida’s ‘economy of *différence*’ provides an analytical device on how this problem can be resolved. In Ward’s view Barth’s theology of language should be understood as “a rhetorical strategy presenting both the need to do and the impossibility of doing theology”<sup>26</sup> and the “goal is to hold open indefinitely a space beyond human language for the eschatological appearance of a God who, here and now, is absent.”<sup>27</sup> With Derrida’s insights to how language

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<sup>22</sup> Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology*, 247. Cf. Bruce L. McCormack, "Graham Ward's *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology*," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 49, no. 1 (1996): 93.

<sup>23</sup> Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology*, 21.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>27</sup> McCormack, "Graham Ward's *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology*," 101.

functions, Barth's problematic linguistic construct can be accounted for how the divine Word can be made coherent with the semiotic nature of the human discourse.

These proposals have a distinctive sophistication in employing complex hermeneutical insights and analyses for describing Barth's potential contribution to hermeneutics. The merit of these approaches is in their appeal to non-Barthian audiences who have limited familiarity with Barth's theology and his rather perplexing way of thinking and writing. This approach is also quite fruitful because it serves a comparative purpose in a broader academic context, i.e., to understand Barth as one of the great figures in modern culture. They are also correct in showing that Barth's theology is not an isolated discourse but find common themes that have been the quest of other important thinkers. They show that theology shares the same questions with broader intellectual engagements in its particular dogmatics expositions. Barth believes that it is the call of a Christian theologian to engage in such conversations and be confident that only by entering them from the particularity of Christian dogmatics can Christian theology make a fruitful contribution.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless the common limitation of this approach is the general lack of attentiveness to the inner logic of Barth's theology in relation to his hermeneutics. It does not mean that those who study Barth along this line have not noticed the prominent role of theology in Barth's hermeneutics, but this feature is eclipsed by the interest to compare Barth with others and to focus more on Barth's ideas that are deemed hermeneutically significant.

Jeanrond's evaluation of Barth's hermeneutics is based on non-theological convictions, i.e., his transcendental anthropological assumptions of human understandings and its conditions with its root in existential phenomenology.<sup>29</sup> It is the role of these assumptions as a transcendental theory that have pre-empted the merit of Barth's consistently theological approach to hermeneutics. In a similar vein, Wallace's attempt to bridge Barth and Ricœur is an attempt to supply an assumed hermeneutical deficient in Barth's theology by Ricœur's phenomenological

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<sup>28</sup> *CD I/1*, 11.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. John Webster, *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), 51.

hermeneutics. This attempt fails to give full weight to Barth's theological concerns because Wallace has already set himself within the multiple symbolic meanings of revelation in human existence. Furthermore Wallace miscalculates the relationship between history and meaning in Barth's hermeneutics which stands in a closer relationship than Wallace's proposal is suggesting. In regard to Ward's analysis, while the work has much to say on the wider intellectual problem of language, his attempt to construct Barth's theory of language is quite unsuccessful because Barth's theological description of the Word of God is, in its core, a theology, and not an attempt to construct a theory of language. Barth's concern is on the Word of God, that is, language in the freedom of God to address humanity, and not in providing a general theory of language from which the communicative and semiotic aspects of language could be put into a coherent conceptuality.

### **1.3. The exegetical-oriented proposals**

Generally, the scholars in this group do not share the confidence of the previous approach. In contrast, they perceive that Barth's approach to hermeneutics is ad hoc and does not entail a hermeneutic in the fuller sense of the word. But this does not mean that Barth has nothing to contribute to the study of hermeneutics. However, this contribution must be explored from a close study of Barth's exegesis rather than from Barth's scattered remarks on hermeneutics. Among the studies along this line is that of Mary Kathleen Cunningham who explores Barth's hermeneutics from his exegesis of Ephesians 1:4-5 in the light of John 1.<sup>30</sup> Cunningham argues that the only way to honor the pattern of Barth's thinking is by exploring the genius of his exegesis because Barth's hermeneutical remarks are ad hoc comments arising from specific engagements with specific texts, and as such there is a methodological flaw of reading back Barth's hermeneutical remarks into his exegesis.<sup>31</sup> In this context, Cunningham proposes that the study of Barth's exegesis is the best way to appreciate Barth's insights to hermeneutics, and to concentrate on his hermeneutics will only distract one's attention from "the tremendous creativity [Barth] actually exhibits

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<sup>30</sup> Mary Kathleen Cunningham, *What Is Theological Exegesis: Interpretation and Use of Scripture in Barth's Doctrine of Election* (Valley Forge, Pa: Trinity Press, 1995), 12.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

when working with specific texts.”<sup>32</sup> Cunningham argues that in contrast to the historical study, which commonly focuses on the layers of tradition behind the text, Barth reads the Scripture as a unified whole and as a coherent witness, thus, confident enough to read Ephesians in the light of the Gospel of John.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, Barth interprets the Bible from a canonical perspective and explores the unified theme that reflects the common witness of its authors.<sup>34</sup> Barth believes that the true subject matter of the Bible is Jesus Christ, and this theological presupposition is very different from the common presupposition of the historical approach. Thus “while Barth insists that there cannot be any question of sealing off or abandoning historical-critical investigation, he does suggest that there should be a radical reorientation concerning the goal to be pursued by this scholarship.”<sup>35</sup>

In a similar vein, Paul McGlasson, whose work primarily explores Barth’s exegeses in the *Church Dogmatics*, argues that Barth’s hermeneutical remarks are “generated by the intramural concern of Barth’s theological explication; they are not, therefore, easily converted into the practiced and disciplined world of contemporary theological hermeneutics.”<sup>36</sup> In relation to his exegesis, McGlasson observes that it cannot be put into a single category but is “irreducibly pluralistic methodologically,” but within these varieties of approaches, one could recognize the presence of some kind of “*conceptual analysis*”.<sup>37</sup> In conjunction with conceptual analysis, McGlasson argues, there is also found a narrative exegesis which has various forms such as saga, realistic story, narrative of revelation, God’s story, and events of common history between God and humanity.<sup>38</sup> These analyses, conceptual and narrative, are interconnected to shape Barth’s hermeneutical practice, and it can be recognized in the dialectics between his exegesis in theology and his theology in exegesis.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>36</sup> Paul McGlasson, *Jesus and Judas: Biblical Exegesis in Barth* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1991), 2.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 123-26.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 133.

Nevertheless, in McGlasson's estimation, Barth's narrative reading leans to a dominant side of his exegesis, that is, the conceptual analyses of the text.<sup>40</sup> This conceptual analysis resembles a kind of close textual reading where the text in its unified theme witnesses to the divine revelation i.e. "the text *depicts* its object."<sup>41</sup> This 'object' is God which as such created a problem of epistemology, not primarily in view of the human sinfulness or the inferiority of human language, although these are also included, but primarily because of the unbridgeable glory of the living God which can only be known to the readers by the gracious presence of God, or by what McGlasson calls, the "analogical depiction."<sup>42</sup> The concept of witness gives shape to Barth's focus in his exegetical procedure, that is, the "Christocentric exegesis," where in various ways the texts are interpreted conceptually ("in the light of Christological concepts") or personally ("in the light of the person/character Jesus Christ").<sup>43</sup> This Christocentrism, however, creates a theological pressure on Barth's exegetical decisions, such that at times it can be the source of his exegetical genius, but at other times, in McGlasson's estimation, the root of his exegetical disaster.<sup>44</sup>

Another important study along the same line is David F. Ford's exploration of Barth's interpretation of biblical narratives (under the themes of election and creation).<sup>45</sup> Ford proposes that Barth's interpretation of the narratives shapes his theology and provides many of its important ingredients. Ford's work provides a richer account, compared to McGlasson, of Barth's theological dynamics and methodological approach, and argues for the thesis that Barth's "procedure has much in common with literary criticism of the genre of realistic narrative."<sup>46</sup> In literary criticism there is an insightful attempt to recover the sense of historical reality

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 86-88.

<sup>45</sup> David Ford, "Barth's Interpretation of the Bible," in *Karl Barth: Studies of His Theological Method*, ed. S.W. Sykes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979). See specially p.56, and also, a more elaborated argument in his monograph, David Ford, *Barth and God's Story: Biblical Narrative and the Theological Method of Karl Barth in the Church Dogmatics* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1981).

<sup>46</sup> Ford, "Barth's Interpretation of the Bible," in *Karl Barth: Studies of His Theological Method*, 57.



without reducing it to its ostensive reference, i.e., the realization of the sense of “the ‘Here and Now’ of our daily experience, the ‘Then and There’ of memory,... the deep sense of ‘happening’... which has struck, and strikes, reader after reader.”<sup>47</sup> This sense of factuality and actuality cannot be reduced to the meaning of the story or its illustrated ideas while ignoring its essential form as a narrative, and Barth’s approach is commendable for its quality which overcomes the methodological reduction of modern historical criticism.<sup>48</sup> Barth’s “way of rendering reality is one in which form and content are inseparable.... The meaning is built up cumulatively and in an irreducible temporal form, and amount to a rich reality to which abstractions and generalizations cannot do full justice.”<sup>49</sup> But while Ford highly appreciates this narrative rendering, he questions Barth’s Christocentric concentration of the biblical narratives, circled around the death and resurrection of Christ, which in his opinion have to do with Barth’s unnecessary theological rejection of the natural theology and of the role of some forms of historical falsification for theological construction.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore Barth’s theological concentration creates a tendency “to load the story of Jesus Christ with significance in such a way that it twists under the strain of its main character” and in this way Barth may at times, obscure the realistic or even the literal sense, and is restrictive in his discussion of the possibilities of the meaning of the biblical narratives.<sup>51</sup>

The strength of these proposals lies in its parallel with Barth’s engagement with Scripture who gives “priority to actual exegesis over hermeneutical reflection” and who at one time “refused to involve himself in a discussion which was purely about the method of exegesis.”<sup>52</sup> Through a detailed analysis of Barth’s exegesis, one observes carefully the creative and insightful interactions between theological questions, biblical narratives, and Barth’s constructive work on Christian doctrines

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 83-84.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 85-87.

<sup>52</sup> Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth, His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (London: SCM Press, 1976), 349.

within the context of canonical interpretation or intertextuality. However, the main limitation of this approach is that one cannot offer a substantial explanation on the way Barth's theology can be the inner logic of his exegesis. As such one is tempted to search for a non-theological comparison to make sense of Barth's hermeneutics. Furthermore, one may overlook a considerable body of material where Barth interacts with the hermeneutics of his time, and that Barth responds to the criticism of his exegesis hermeneutically, and reflects theologically on the task of interpretation. Also, as Richard E. Burnett notes, in German-speaking scholarship "much more serious attention has been given to Barth's hermeneutics," where there is a greater emphasis on the relationship of Barth's hermeneutics and the way of understanding God's revelation understood from within his theology.<sup>53</sup>

More specifically, while Cunningham is correct when she warns about the methodological weakness of reading back Barth's hermeneutical remarks into his exegesis, her proposal that Barth's hermeneutics is simply ad hoc is not an accurate depiction of Barth's hermeneutical principles. It is true that Barth's hermeneutics might not bear all the characteristics of modern hermeneutics, but it is the conviction of our thesis that Barth's dogmatics is not hermeneutically less sophisticated compared to modern hermeneutics in its depiction of what it means to read Scripture theologically. Also, Cunningham's description of Barth's attitude to historical-critical scholarship does not give a proper emphasis of the importance of history because Barth's theology is, in fact, insistent that history has a significant role in his theological exegesis. It is not the historical study that Barth was primarily against but the historicist biases commonly found among the historical approaches and the over-confidence in its 'scientific' quality.<sup>54</sup> In McGlasson's study, the major contribution is his argument on Barth's pluralistic approaches in his exegesis, and especially his

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<sup>53</sup> Richard E. Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principals of the Römerbrief Period* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 7. On German scholarship, see inter alia, Walter Lindemann, *Karl Barth und die kritische Schriftauslegung* (Hamburg-Bergstedt: Herbert Reich-Evangelischer Verlag, 1973); Nicholas T. Bakker, *In der Krisis der Offenbarung: Karl Barths Hermeneutik, dargestellt an seiner Römerbrief-Auslegung* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1974); Helmut Kirschstein, *Der souveräne Gott und die heilige Schrift: Einführung in die biblische Hermeneutik Karl Barths* (Aachen: Shaker Verlag, 1998).

<sup>54</sup> Bruce L. McCormack, "Historical-Criticism and Dogmatic Interest in Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis of the New Testament," *Lutheran Quarterly* 5, no. 2 (1991): 212.

observation on the interrelation between narrative and conceptual analyses. But what makes one wonder when reading McGlasson's analysis, however, is his identification of a kind of theological pressure in Barth's exegesis, which is due more to his bifurcation between theology and exegetical procedures rather than in Barth's theology of interpretation. This identification reflects more of McGlasson's ideal of exegetical procedures which assume a non-theological presupposition to hermeneutical situations in the task of exegesis. It is his hermeneutical conviction of the plurality of meanings that makes McGlasson identify the theological pressure that otherwise should be recognized as the theological subject matter of the Bible as it is in Barth's theological exegesis which is open to both plurality or otherwise. The same skepticism is found in Ford's essay. Although his comparison between Barth's approach to biblical narrative and literary criticism of realistic narrative provides an insightful perspective to Barth's hermeneutics, Ford's theological commitment to natural theology and historical method have made him miscalculate the theological integrity and originality of Barth's hermeneutics in relation to the question of meaning. In this way the insight of his analysis is also its own predicament because he attempts to understand Barth's narrative reading from a literary point of view which shadows the role of ontology and theology in Barth's hermeneutics and their capacity for accommodating varieties of exegetical procedures to biblical narratives. Finally, in relation to historical criticism, Barth, while recognizing its limits and aiming to transcend it, admitted the importance of the historical authors of Scripture and the place of their historical settings as an important part of a true theological exegesis.<sup>55</sup> Ford's criticism of the role of historical falsification is a misplaced characterization of Barth's hermeneutical weakness, which on closer inspection, actually plays a greater role than Ford's discussions suggest.

#### **1.4. The genetic-theological proposals**

If the previous approach explores Barth's hermeneutics from his exegesis, the genetic-theological approach explores Barth's hermeneutics from his historical-

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<sup>55</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 6.

intellectual context and in the development of his theology.<sup>56</sup> The proposals along this line generally agree with Hans-Georg Gadamer's estimation that Barth's early writings, especially the first edition of *the Epistle to the Romans*, stand as a hermeneutical manifesto.<sup>57</sup> Along this line, Eberhard Jüngel in his essay on "Barth's Theological Beginning", explores Barth's "Theology as Metacriticism: Toward a Hermeneutic of Theological Exegesis", and argues that Barth's hermeneutics is a kind of metacriticism which engages historical criticism at the level of methodological assumptions, particularly in relation to what Barth perceives as the German-liberal theological biases.<sup>58</sup> The essay is based on an analysis of Barth's first three forewords to *The Epistle to the Romans* which explore Barth's theological beginning in relation to his hermeneutics.<sup>59</sup> Jüngel argues that Barth's foreword is a declaration of "a hermeneutic of simultaneity," that is, a hermeneutic which bypasses historical critical insight and reads Paul as a contemporary voice.<sup>60</sup> The core of this approach is a *Sachkritik* which focuses its critical analysis on capturing the subject matter of the text and an interpretation that has universal applicability.<sup>61</sup> The short form of this criticism is captured in the phrase "consider well," that is, by asking the right questions of the text, we could arrive at the right answers if we consider well the subject matter in relation to our existence as a historical being ("consider yourself well"), which means that historical explanation and practical application of the subject matter must be considered as a unity in the interpretation.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Inter alia, Eberhard Jüngel, *Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy*, trans. Garrett E. Paul (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986); Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); McCormack, "Historical-Criticism and Dogmatic Interest in Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis of the New Testament," 211-25; Bruce L. McCormack, "The Significance of Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis of Philippians," in *Epistle to the Philippians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), v-xxv. Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principals of the Römerbrief Period*. See also Thomas E. Provence, "The Hermeneutics of Karl Barth" (Ph.D., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1980); Thomas E. Provence, "The Sovereign Subject Matter: Hermeneutics in the *Church Dogmatics*," in *A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics: Major Trends in Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 241-60.

<sup>57</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2004), 510.

<sup>58</sup> Jüngel, *Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy*, 70-82.

<sup>59</sup> Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 1-20.

<sup>60</sup> Jüngel, *Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy*, 71.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 74-75.

Additionally, Barth's hermeneutics does not only differ from liberal scholars but also from the positivist scholars in the sense that, according to Jüngel, Barth aims not to repeat the biblical subject matter but to rethink it in his contemporary context.<sup>63</sup> Barth's hermeneutics thus involves a critical self-reflection in light of the theological subject matter of the text in the contemporary self-understanding of the interpreter, and this means, in Jüngel's words, "consider yourself well by considering someone else and opening yourself to the cause he advocates."<sup>64</sup> Thus "Barth's principle of interpretation is a hermeneutical circle between that which is understood and that which is to be understood."<sup>65</sup> Specifically, in relation to *Epistle to the Romans*, it involves a theological assumption that Paul knows what he is speaking about when he is speaking of God, and in this way, opens to the interpreter a critical engagement with the text on the divine discourse which involves not only knowledge but also faith in relation to the question of God.<sup>66</sup> This hermeneutic of involvement means that the correct interpretation demands of the readers to participate in the subject matter of the text and not to stand away from the text as an indifferent observer.

Bruce L. McCormack argues that Barth's *Epistle to the Romans* constitutes a revolution in biblical hermeneutics of his era because in it "Barth is seeking to show the limit of historical-critical study of the Bible in interest of a more nearly theological exegesis."<sup>67</sup> McCormack argues that Barth's hermeneutics was born out of dissatisfaction with the then general philosophical and theological assumptions of the German theological context and attempted to show, particularly, the limitations of historical-critical study by arguing that, in itself, it has set up its own limitations.<sup>68</sup> This strategy was employed because Barth was facing a generation of scholarship that saw in the historical method the only guarantee for theology to have a scientific

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>67</sup> McCormack, "Historical-Criticism and Dogmatic Interest in Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis of the New Testament," 211.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

character.<sup>69</sup> The sharp discrimination between historical and dogmatic exegesis had failed to recognize that historical criticism has its own ‘dogmatic’ concerns. The key to Barth’s hermeneutics, according to McCormack, is to understand the proper relationship between the event of revelation and the historical sense of the Bible. If this relationship could not be substantiated from within Barth’s theology, the charge that he is an enemy of historical criticism would be established.<sup>70</sup> However Barth’s use of the analogy of faith, according to McCormack, provides a framework for such relationship because there is an analogical relationship between the content of God’s revelation and the content of human hearing of the text in faith.<sup>71</sup> This analogical relationship does not mean that divine meaning is similar to human understanding but that in the event of revelation human understanding is conformed to divine revelation.<sup>72</sup> This event of understanding lies always in the sovereignty of God in his revelatory event and provides a framework for Barth to accommodate the plurality of possible meanings, which according to McCormack, places Barth in a different position from that of the literary critics in this matter.<sup>73</sup> But against any free floating meanings, McCormack suggests, the historical senses of the text provide a limiting horizon that will guard against a subjectivist’s approach and arbitrary meaning-making. Theological exegesis starts with the historical sense that must be rectified by the church’s hearing of the revelatory event, but the conviction from the revelatory event must be guarded by the limiting horizon of the historical senses, and in turn this limiting horizon will be substantiated again by the hearing of the revelatory event, and the process continues in an unending dialectic between the historical sense and the conviction from revelation.<sup>74</sup>

McCormack’s thesis is explored further by Richard E. Burnett especially in relation to the German scholarship on hermeneutics, particularly in relation to

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 222. In a more recent article, McCormack reached the same conclusion as his earlier study, see McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 89-105.

Schleiermacher's hermeneutical tradition.<sup>75</sup> Burnett's study attempts to conceptualize Barth's hermeneutics in the light of what McCormack describes as Barth's break with liberalism in "a more or less continuous unfolding of a single material insight or intention," that is, "to ground theology in the objectively real Self-speaking of God in revelation."<sup>76</sup> This insight is placed against Schleiermacher's tradition of empathetic understanding, which Barth took as the primary conversation partner, and both are proposed as the key elements in the development of Barth's hermeneutical principles in the period when *the Epistle to the Romans* was written.<sup>77</sup> Burnett argues that Gadamer is correct in suggesting that the first edition of *the Epistle to the Romans* was a "hermeneutical manifesto" despite "all his disaffection for methodological reflection,"<sup>78</sup> because "it challenged the hegemony of a reigning hermeneutical tradition, that of Friedrich Schleiermacher."<sup>79</sup> In fact, "an important part of Karl Barth's attempt to break with liberalism was his attempt to overcome Schleiermacher's hermeneutical tradition."<sup>80</sup> Burnett's main arguments are not very different from McCormack's, but he develops in further detail the genetic-historical contexts of the role of the subject matter and interpreter's involvement in the interpretation. He also elucidates in detail Barth's idea on the hermeneutics of love (giving proper attention and respect to the author) and the role of the text of Scripture in the event of revelation (the concept of Scripture as witness).

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<sup>75</sup> Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principals of the Römerbrief Period*, 3.

<sup>76</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909-1936*, 9. McCormack gives the credit of this insight to the work of Ingrid Spieckermann, *Gotteserkenntnis: Ein Beitrag zur Grundfrage der neuen Theologie Karl Barths* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1985), 140-3. McCormack proposes a new paradigm for genetic-historical study for Barth's theological development in which Von Balthasar's thesis of two breaks paradigm is revised by the theory of one break paradigm with gradual shift from a "Dialectical Theology in the Shadow of Eschatology" (from "Process Eschatology, 1915-1920" to "Consistent Eschatology, 1920-1924") to a "Dialectical Theology in the Shadow of Anhypostatic-Enhypostatic Christology ("from Pneumatocentrism, 1924-1936" to "Christocentrism, 1936- "). In respect to the phase of historical-genetic perspective, Jüngel is quite different from McCormack and Burnett. Jüngel conceives Barth's development in two phases of dialectical and analogical periods following more or less Balthasar's thesis.

<sup>77</sup> Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principals of the Römerbrief Period*, 150-51.

<sup>78</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 510.

<sup>79</sup> Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principals of the Römerbrief Period*, 4.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

The conclusion of these studies stands quite close to what we will attempt in our understanding of Barth's hermeneutics. The great advantage of these studies is their ability to present Barth's hermeneutics from within Barth's doctrinal development in its original context, i.e., in the broader German intellectual tradition, before translating those insights to the Anglo-American scholarship, and to non-western scholarship in general. It also grasps the detailed nuances of Barth's hermeneutical remarks in the encounter, dialogue and criticism implicit within Barth's hermeneutical reflections. Furthermore, while we specifically term this approach as the genetic-theological approach, it is quite sensitive to the inner dynamics of Barth's theological thinking especially in the development of Barth's theology over that early period. If there is a limitation to this approach it is that less attention is given to Barth's explicit concern, i.e., to read Barth's commentary as a commentary and to read *Church Dogmatics* as a reflection of Barth's reading of the Scripture, and an understanding of the Word of God in the process. Barth's scriptural expositions are more often seen as part of his theological development rather than as a reflection of doing the task of reading the Scripture.<sup>81</sup> This does not mean that this approach does not see the theological dimension of the task, but that this theological dimension is not given priority or explored from within Barth's inner theological dynamics. It is thus eclipsed by different concerns of the interpreters. Furthermore because of the focus on Barth's historical contexts, a constructive dialogue with contemporary hermeneutics is given less attention.<sup>82</sup> This is not to discount the great merits of this approach but only to recognize its priority, and in this sense, the limit of inquiry taken in comparison to other studies, as seen in focusing on the genetic-theological aspects it has to refrain from exploring the inner dynamics of Barth's theology. For example, while Burnett's work is an excellent piece of research in exploring the historical context of Barth's exegesis from the prefaces of *the Epistle to the Romans*, its attention to the prefaces limits its results from an understanding of

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<sup>81</sup> Cf. John Webster, "Karl Barth," in *Reading Romans through the Centuries: From the Early Church to Karl Barth*, ed. Jeffrey P. Greenman and Timothy Larsen (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 205.

<sup>82</sup> Daniel J. Trier narrates the development of modern theological interpretation that began with Barth, and how Barth's insight can be brought in the continuing dialogue with past and present hermeneutical insights in relation to theological interpretation of Scripture, see Daniel J. Trier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008), 11-36.



Barth's actual exegesis in *the Epistle to the Romans* and Barth's theological reflection on the task of interpretation. Additionally, Donald Wood questions whether "empathetic" is really the central theme of the Romantic tradition against which is the best way to explore Barth's hermeneutics, and whether to construe theological exegesis over against Schleiermacher's tradition really is the best way to understand Barth's theological dynamics of what it means to read Scripture theologically.<sup>83</sup> Finally, as a genetic-historical piece of research, Burnett pays little attention to Barth's pastorate and its socio-political context that influenced Barth's approach to the text in a substantial way.

### 1.5. The theological-historical proposals

If the previous approach concentrates on the development of Barth's theology to highlight the formulation of his hermeneutical thinking, the theological-historical approach concentrates more on Barth's inner theological dynamics in relation to the church's task to read the Bible as Scripture, i.e., as the Word of God. This approach and the previous one are quite difficult to differentiate because both approaches take into consideration the theological and historical aspects of Barth's hermeneutics. There is, however, a clear difference in their basic priority, because, while the genetic-historical approach concentrates its exploration on Barth's hermeneutics in his historical-intellectual context and the development of his theology, the proposals under consideration read Barth's exegesis and hermeneutics primarily in the context of the theological understanding of the task.<sup>84</sup> They are not particularly convinced with Gadamer's estimation that Barth's prefaces to *the Epistle to the Romans* constitute a hermeneutical manifesto. John Webster, for example, argues Gadamer's

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<sup>83</sup> Donald Wood, *Barth's Theology of Interpretation* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 59. A better way that is suggested is by looking into the dynamic interaction between Barth's dogmatics and his theological exegesis. However, in this suggestion, we have to move from a particular instance of exegesis into a fuller examination of Barth's theological ontology for reading the Bible as Scripture.

<sup>84</sup> Inter alia: Webster, *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics*, 87-110; Francis Watson, "Barth's *Philippians* as Theological Exegesis," in *Epistle to the Philippians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), xxvi-li; Paul T. Nimmo, "Exegesis, Ontology and Ethics: Karl Barth on the Sermon on the Mount," in *Christology and Scripture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Andrew T. Lincolns and Angus Paddison (London: T&T Clark International, 2007), 171-87; Donald Wood, "Ich Sah Mit Staunen': Reflections on the Theological Substance of Barth's Early Hermeneutics," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 58, no. 2 (2005): 184-98; Wood, *Barth's Theology of Interpretation*.

assessment on the hermeneutical manifesto is “at best only half-truth.”<sup>85</sup> The concrete implication of this is to read Barth’s hermeneutics not primarily in the context of his historical setting, but in the context of his theology and its inner dynamic. The main strategy is through a close reading of Barth’s theological and exegetical texts, especially attentive to Barth’s immediate context that gives occasion to the particular text rather than to its wider cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, this approach takes into consideration Barth’s self-descriptive remarks that when he is writing a commentary, he is indeed writing a real commentary, and not a theological program in the form of biblical commentary.<sup>86</sup>

John Webster argues that Barth’s reading of Scripture was formed into a consistent theological exegesis through his reflection on Calvin’s theology in which he found a good model of theological interpretation.<sup>87</sup> During the 1920s Barth realized that God “is not only textual content but also primary agent of the text’s realization before us.”<sup>88</sup> The essence of Barth’s hermeneutics lies in his theology of Scripture especially in his reflections of the Reformed Scripture principle. As such, the concern of his hermeneutical remarks against historical criticism is not primarily a rejection of its historical method but “their expansion into a sufficient explanation of Scripture, their failure to envisage Scripture in terms of the relation of revelatory divine speech and obedient human attentiveness, and their promotion of a false anthropology of interpretative activity.”<sup>89</sup> According to Webster, for Barth, “Exegesis is an aspect of sanctification.”<sup>90</sup> This means that Barth’s exegesis maintains the two sides of Scripture, i.e. a word of witness to revelation and a sanctified human word. Thus the divinity and the humanity of Scripture are held together, because as witness “it is not identical with revelation, but an instrument through which the testimony of the prophet and apostles is set before us,” but as a

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<sup>85</sup> Webster, "Karl Barth," in *Reading Romans through the Centuries: From the Early Church to Karl Barth*, 207.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>87</sup> Webster, *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics*, 92.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

human word “it is caught up into revelation, though in such a way that it does not surrender its humanity.”<sup>91</sup> Thus exegesis must conform to the nature of the Bible as a divinely-appointed human document with its historical character. Theological hermeneutics, then, is a matter of recognizing the theological discourse on the identity of the divine communicator, which is, a grappling with the content of divine communication and a proper response of human readers in relation to the theological subject matter.<sup>92</sup>

Along the same line, but more focused on Barth’s commentaries and historical exegesis, Francis Watson argues that Barth’s exegesis and theology are so closely linked that “we cannot assess Barth as theologian without assessing Barth as biblical interpreter. And we cannot assess Barth as biblical interpreter without joining him in the attempt to read the biblical texts as divinely authorized testimony to God’s definitive saving action in Jesus and his Spirit.”<sup>93</sup> In Watson’s estimation there was a change in Barth’s exegesis during the 1920s especially when we compare Barth’s exegesis in *the Epistle to the Romans* and *the Epistle to the Philippians*. In the former there is a strong emphasis on contemporary meaning at the cost of historical meaning, that the “interpreter must break through the historical limitations of [the] text in order to disclose its universal significance.”<sup>94</sup> As a theological exegesis, the disjunction between what Paul said and what Paul says, is a major shortcoming of Barth’s earlier hermeneutics. However in the later, “the disjunction between then and now has been largely abandoned.”<sup>95</sup> Not only is the scholarly apparatus more expansive and prominent, but more significantly, it is used to show that what Paul said is also crucial for what the letter speaks in the present.<sup>96</sup> The subject matter of the text is now expressed in a more complex communicative action which involves interpersonal relationship, ethics and theological dimensions of Paul’s thinking in relation to his readers, which can be construed, as a movement

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>93</sup> Watson, in *Epistle to the Philippians*, xxviii.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., xxix.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., xxx.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., xxxi.

within the historical reality of the past, and then with the perspective of this past reality, must become a living movement again in the interpretative event of the modern readers.<sup>97</sup> This living reality that continues from the past to the present, according to Watson, is what Barth was attempting to describe in his later commentaries and what he invites his readers to join in.

Paul T. Nimmo highlights the ethical dimension of Barth's theological exegesis.<sup>98</sup> Grounding his reading on Barth's theological ontology and his actualism in biblical ethics, Nimmo proposes that exegesis, ontology and ethics are important ingredients for understanding Barth's approach to interpretation. Barth's exegesis gives priority to the role of divine activity which in a way disappoints any epistemological or methodological guarantee but also emphasizes the proper role of faith and hope in God's willingness to speak afresh in the church's activity of theological exegesis.<sup>99</sup> Barth's theological actualism means the specificity of spatial and historical location of God's ethical demands, which preserves the individual locality and personal interaction between the exegete and God, entails that the relationship between the meaning of the text of Scripture and its individual ethical significance could not be established permanently.<sup>100</sup> In this regard, Barth is insistent on the freedom of God in the text's realization. But Nimmo argues that since there is no other way to construe a theological exegesis which is true to Barth's conception of the dynamic encounter between the Word of God and an ethical agent, therefore, we must preserve both the continuity of the content of Scripture's ethical command and the specificity of its application in the church's ethical life and decision. The methodological shape of this way of reading takes the form of three moments of exegetical activity namely *explicatio* (observation), *meditatio* (reflection) and *applicatio* (appropriation).<sup>101</sup> While distinguishing these three moments, Nimmo argues that, for Barth, it must be viewed as part of the totality of exegesis and none will be complete in itself. They are best seen in a "*perichoretic*" relationship with

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., l-li.

<sup>98</sup> Nimmo, in *Christology and Scripture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 171.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 174.

one another.<sup>102</sup> In describing this activity, Barth maintains, that in itself, theological exegesis is a spiritual-communal activity, which means that it necessarily coincides with prayer and ecclesiastical life.<sup>103</sup>

The most fully expanded study along this line is Donald Wood's *Barth's Theology of Interpretation*.<sup>104</sup> Nevertheless, Wood does not try to provide a comprehensive study of Barth's hermeneutics but simply an attempt to explain "what Barth had to say about the nature of the scriptural text, the identity of its readers and the relationship between them."<sup>105</sup> While Wood concentrates primarily on Barth's earlier writings, his analysis concentrates on "Barth's more explicitly hermeneutical moments-those places where he takes up directly the question of how we ought to conceive of the church's interpretative freedoms and responsibilities before holy Scripture."<sup>106</sup> For this purpose Wood provides a close reading of Barth's earlier writings on interpretation, his early commentaries and dogmatics lectures, the survey of modern Protestant theology and several chapters from *Church Dogmatics* which explore particular themes of theological exegesis. Wood's main argument is that Barth's approach to interpretation is theologically focused; therefore the best way to understand it is by concentrating on the dynamic of hermeneutical concepts internal to Barth's theology rather than from a comparative study, either topically or *vis-à-vis* other hermeneutics.<sup>107</sup> Thus in contrast to general hermeneutics and its methodological procedures, Barth's hermeneutic emphasizes the importance of theological humility in anticipation of divine action.<sup>108</sup> Furthermore, Barth's

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 176. Cf. Mark Gignilliat, "Ora Et Labora: Barth's Forgotten Hermeneutical Principle," *Expository Times* 120, no. 6 (Mar 2009): 277-81.

<sup>104</sup> But see also other works such as Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "A Person of the Book? Barth on Biblical Authority and Interpretation," in *Karl Barth and Evangelical Theology: Convergences and Divergences*, ed. Sung Wook Chung (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2006), 25-59. Also important article by George Hunsinger, *Thy Word Is Truth: Barth on Scripture*, ed. George Hunsinger (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 29-48. And see also his earlier work, George Hunsinger, "Beyond Literalism and Expressivism: Karl Barth's Hermeneutical Realism," *Modern Theology* 3, no. 3 (1987): 209-23.

<sup>105</sup> Wood, *Barth's Theology of Interpretation*, ix.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., ix-x.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., xi.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 176.

theology describes Scripture not primarily as a human text, with its hermeneutical implications, but theologically as a witness, which is the locus of divine discourse in God's freedom and in God's salvific action.<sup>109</sup> In this context the reader is not construed as an autonomous agent, able to exercise a reading free from human distortions, but precisely as a creature under the judgement of God, who alone is able to strip off the idols of human imagination, thus, the most proper form of theological exegesis is prayer.<sup>110</sup>

### **1.6. Conclusion: a dogmatic approach**

The line of analyses taken in the last proposals is the closest one to what will be pursued in our thesis. The strength of this approach is obvious. In giving priority to theology it patiently charts Barth's exegesis within the dynamic of his creative theological moments. It takes seriously Barth's exegesis as a real exegesis rather than a theology in the disguise of commentary and considers seriously the claim that the *Church Dogmatics* is a genuine theological reflection on Scripture rather than a philosophy in the disguise of theology. Various lines of analysis in the proposals along this line constitute the best way to construe Barth's hermeneutics. The limitation of this approach is that it generally gives less attention to Barth's actual dialogue with his cultural surroundings; a dialogue that may prove fruitful for Barth's continuing contribution to wider issues in hermeneutics. Furthermore, there is one particular approach to Scripture we would like to move beyond some of the proponents of this approach. Watson and Webster construe their approach in what might be called hermeneutics within the concept of Scripture in relation to God's economic act to humanity.<sup>111</sup> We however will propose a theological analysis that engages with the ontological being of Scripture in relation to Barth's Trinitarian ontology as has been suggested by McCormack.<sup>112</sup> This ontology is formed by

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 177-78.

<sup>111</sup> Francis Watson, "Bible," in *Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 60-61. See also John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 16.

<sup>112</sup> See particularly, Bruce L. McCormack, "The Being of Holy Scripture Is in Becoming," in *Evangelicals & Scripture: Tradition, Authority, and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 55-75.

theological material of Barth's dogmatics and in turn informs Barth's theological decisions. But certain aspects of this hermeneutical circle are best described from the point of view of ethics. While our argument will be structured as the ontological, theological and ethical, the material content of the argument is the distinctive approach of Barth's theology in coordinating several doctrinal loci for construing biblical hermeneutics.

In this thesis we term our approach a dogmatic approach to Karl Barth's hermeneutics. It aims to construe Barth's hermeneutics by elucidating the way in which his theology coordinating several doctrinal loci for the task. Ontology in this sense is not a doctrine of being separated from theology. The doctrines provide the material insights for construing the vision of reality within which the act of scriptural reading is taking place. In this regard, the doctrines of Trinity, Christology and election in Karl Barth's theology provide the formal and the material constitution of such ontological construal. The theology of interpretation is thus construed as an elaboration of the doctrine of the Word of God in relation to the witness of the Scripture. Since, for Barth, God and the Word of God are not two things but one, the Word of God as the subject matter of the Scripture is essentially the communicative and commanding presence of God in church reading of the Bible. Thus, such construal, while not restrictive of methodology of exegesis, is more appropriately elucidated in terms of ethics of interpretation. The dogmatic approach as proposed in this work shows how doctrines are coordinated in construing Barth's theological hermeneutics and is structured as the ontology, theology and ethics of interpretation.

Furthermore, there is a valid place for studies where the insights of Barth's theology are brought into conversation with important insights of general hermeneutics. This conversation will certainly bring to light various dimensions of Barth's hermeneutics that will be stay hidden without it. It can be suggested that Barth's text itself anticipates some of the hermeneutical dialogues and it is not necessarily alien to the facticity of the subject matter of Barth's theology.<sup>113</sup> This is to say that we anticipate the limits of inquiry on our own analyses. Various

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<sup>113</sup> Cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, "On Historical and Theological Hermeneutic," in *Basic Questions in Theology: Collected Essays* (London: SCM Press, 1970), 137-81.

contributions and approaches are necessary ingredients for a complete picture of Barth's hermeneutics. In this regard, our approach will be a contribution to a further conversation in this area. Specifically, our study is carried only along the line of the dogmatic approach with its own specific theological aims and with its own particular limitations. This not to say that the thesis will have nothing to say to comparative concerns in the study of hermeneutics, but insofar as it does, it will bear the mark of an engagement from a specifically theological perspective. In this way we hope to avoid what we often found in such comparative studies, that is, the flattening out of Barth's dogmatic material to make it domesticated for easy comparison. Only with a true appreciation of Barth's theological dynamic within his dogmatic exposition can a real conversation be taking place. This study is a first step toward such objective. In the next part we will define in more detail the sense in which we use the terms ontology, theology and ethics, and the theological imports of such terms in this work.

## **2. Defining the task of theological interpretation of Scripture**

In the study of hermeneutics, the term ontology of understanding is primarily used as the phenomenological description of the human experience of understanding. It is viewed as a primordial event of existence. As Paul Ricœur argues, the primordially of hermeneutical phenomenology lies in its ontology of being that is anterior to the subject-object relationship of the epistemology of knowledge.<sup>114</sup> It explores human understanding at a precognitive level, i.e., a level of understanding prior to the conceptual formulation of the natural or human sciences and their respective methodological convictions. At the ontological level, it nullifies the competition of the two sciences, or the current priority given to the natural sciences. It attempts to grasp the horizon of experience in what it believes the primitive form of *Lebenswelt*.<sup>115</sup> Either this ideal is achieved by a leap of the mode of being (as in Husserl and Heidegger) or by a semantic long-route, which gives room for the place of method to initiate symbolic senses (as Ricœur suggests),<sup>116</sup> the aim is, nevertheless, the ontological description of the primordial experience of

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<sup>114</sup> Paul Ricœur, "Existence and Hermeneutics," in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* (London: Athlone Press, 2000), 3-11.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-3.



understanding. This aim can be carried with either a full confidence of its plausibility or with a judicious reservation in its ability to describe reality at an ontological level.

Barth, on the other hand, questions this form of transcendental ontology, specially its anthropological presuppositions, and describes an event of understanding that incorporates human understanding to the theological description of God-human relationship without neglecting its fullest and various human expressions. He does not reject the necessity of interpretation, but the reason for this necessity is not the subjectivity of human existence, but because “God’s Word has come to us in the form of human words.”<sup>117</sup> This necessity enters reality by the eternal decision of God to become the God who incarnates, whereby, the Word of God enters creation, and places himself in the interpretative sphere of human discourse. For Barth, this is the most ‘primordial’ event because the event of understanding originates in the triune being of God, anterior even to the primitive form of human *Lebenswelt*. Thus meaning and understanding are not primarily the expressions of human symbols, meaning and imagination, but an expression of the freedom of God to be the God who presents God-self in the ordinary function of human language, while taking into consideration its irreducibly semantic, historical and existential field of meanings.<sup>118</sup>

Barth’s ontology of hermeneutical discourse is a theological description of reality which subsumes the whole dynamic of human understanding under a theological perspective of reality, that is, God’s created world. In its crucial sense, it is a reversal of the modern hermeneutics which begins with Schleiermacher that subsumes theological interpretation as a special application of general hermeneutics. Modern hermeneutics have pushed the church’s reading of Scripture into a situation where its confidence in the capacity of doctrine to guide its interpretation is not only questioned but mostly disqualified, and, as such, it is obliged to be supported by some sort of general hermeneutics.<sup>119</sup> The critical problem of such a requirement is the problematic conviction that any theological thinking of God could not begin

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<sup>117</sup> *CD* I/2, 699.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 701.

<sup>119</sup> Webster, *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics*, 49-50.

without explicating first the conditions of human understanding and the modern prejudice that a preconceived theological conviction stands in the way of a truthful interpretation.<sup>120</sup> While an exploration of such conditions has its own rightful place, its status as a prerequisite for church reading has given an unnecessary transcendental role to general hermeneutics and in many ways has a delimiting effect on the spiritual dimension of the act of reading as a theological exercise. In contrast, Barth argues that it is the theological reality of God that makes the church's reading of the Scripture a particular event, which expresses the true nature of the church as a creature of the Word of God. John Webster argues that, for Barth, "the *presence* of Jesus Christ the risen one... undermines the necessity of large-scale hermeneutical theory as an essential prerequisite for making the gospel meaningful."<sup>121</sup> One's reflection on human understanding must be carried with a healthy dose of seriousness, and theological description of interpretation must be fully confident with the role of doctrine in guiding the church's reading of Scripture.

The ethical expression of this theological conviction is not, as such, a repression of freedom that necessitates interpreters to have a rigid attitude by always being in agreement with the text.<sup>122</sup> The response of modern-critical scholarship to this "theological" pressure was one of the original moral impulses behind the rise of liberalism. One of the ethical virtues of liberal theology is its "earnest search for radical truth," that is, the freedom from 'dogma' by way of historical-critical research, that as such it hopes to arrive at the true knowledge of Jesus Christ and its implications for Christian faith.<sup>123</sup> This important development, however, is not accompanied by the crucial awareness that historical research has only a "relative validity" and as such cannot serve as the foundation of faith and truth.<sup>124</sup> It only goes half-way to the truth, that is, a freedom from dogmatic delimitations. It is this self-awareness, of its liberal heritage and limitations, according to Bultmann, which had

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Cf. Charles M. Wood, *The Formation of Christian Understanding: An Essay in Theological Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 15.

<sup>123</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, "Liberal Theology and the Latest Theological Movement," in *Faith and Understanding*, ed. Robert W. Funk (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 29-30.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 30.

driven Barth to a critical investigation of his liberal heritage and to a reconsideration of the Christian truth by a fresh examination of the relationship between faith and history.<sup>125</sup> Barth later realized that liberalism was not free enough to consider the possibility of freedom under the Word of God, which aimed at a level of freedom purer than liberalism had been satisfied with. This helps make some sense of why Barth proposes the ethical foundation of Christian hermeneutics under the discourse on freedom, i.e., a purer freedom by the grace of God.<sup>126</sup> This freedom has all the ingredients of what might be called the freedom of human conscience, but the essence of it is the freedom *for* the Word of God over against freedom *from* it. This does not mean that the interpreter must always agree with the text of Scripture but that the interpreter should have an ethical attitude to be always in agreement with the truth, or as Barth puts it, to be free under and for the Word of God, that is, a theological attitude born of a conviction that the divine grace is the source of the freedom and truth, and therefore that obedience and responsibility are the freest ethical forms of the interpretative ethos.<sup>127</sup>

These three great themes, ontology, theology and ethics, are presented here as constituting the structure of Barth's hermeneutics. More importantly, our elaboration is materially informed by Barth's first order dogmatic exposition, i.e., theological exegesis and more explicitly by his second order dogmatic expositions, i.e., theological analysis. As such, these themes are used as the structure of Karl Barth's hermeneutics in a way that reflects the inner dynamic of Barth's theology and at the same time generates a fruitful conversation on theological hermeneutics in which theology can also contribute to wider discussion on general hermeneutics. The following part is devoted to the task of clarification. We will present elaborate definitions of what we mean by ontology, theology and ethics, and of hermeneutics and its sub-species.

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>126</sup> CD 1/2, 696. Barth's title for the section on biblical interpretation in §21.2 is "Freedom under the Word".

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 697.

### 3. Defining ontology, theology and ethics

Ontology, as a field of philosophy, encompasses the study of reality, its features, the philosophical assumptions in describing such reality, and the way in which such a task can be achieved, i.e., its methodology and its limitations. In using this terminology to describe Barth's hermeneutics and exegesis we do not propose that Barth has a separate ontology from which he constructs his hermeneutic. Barth does not have this kind of ontology,<sup>128</sup> and it is his conviction that such an isolated ontology is not plausible as the task of dogmatics.<sup>129</sup> Barth makes ontological description in response to the task of the theological exposition of the Word of God and other doctrines. In other words, it is a theological ontology that frames Barth's hermeneutics as he describes the meaning of the Word of God. In this context, what we propose as Barth's ontology of hermeneutics is the dogmatic exposition of the threefold form of the Word of God. It is termed "ontology" in our argument because, by implication, it describes the reality of meaning and understanding, though conceptualized from a strictly theological point of view. It is understood strictly in the context of the event of the Word of God, and as such explicates its nature in itself, in preaching and in Scripture.

A clarification of the term hermeneutics and its sub-species is in order. According to Werner G. Jeanrond, hermeneutics can be broadly defined as a "reflection upon the conditions and possible methods of the human understanding of *texts*."<sup>130</sup> It is quite common to differentiate between hermeneutics and interpretation, the subject matter of hermeneutics, and between hermeneutics and epistemology,

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<sup>128</sup> Cf. Alan J. Torrance, *Persons in Communion: An Essay on Trinitarian Description and Human Participation, with Special Reference to Volume One of Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 248.

<sup>129</sup> It is interesting that Paul Ricoeur argues that "a separate ontology is beyond our grasp." When it is used in his hermeneutics, Ricoeur's ontology is the nature of the thing as it comes to be known in the interpretative event, such that "only within the movement of interpretation that we apperceive the being we interpret." In this approach, the form comes into view from a conceptual analysis and comparison of their respective thinking i.e. *a posteriori* characteristic, as such the content of the concept is different from Barth's hermeneutics which defines the content as the Word of God. see Ricoeur, "Existence and Hermeneutics," in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, 18.

<sup>130</sup> Jeanrond, "Karl Barth's Hermeneutics," in *Reckoning with Barth*, 80-81.

which is concerned with the method of acquiring knowledge in general.<sup>131</sup> Hermeneutics may include a discussion on epistemological method, and in recent development it took over a significant amount of epistemological responsibilities, but it is generally more focused on a discourse of understanding beyond methodological procedures.<sup>132</sup> Hermeneutics becomes an important subject, not least in theology, because of the conviction that human understanding is ultimately textually mediated. Whether the text is written, verbal or non-verbal, Kevin Vanhoozer argues that “we have no non-linguistic access to the way things really are.”<sup>133</sup> On the other hand exegesis is generally understood as a critical investigation of specifically written texts.<sup>134</sup> At one level it involves the study of historical, cultural, and linguistic dimensions of the text, but at another level it also involves an attempt to understand the meaning of the text, its significance and relevance to the contemporary world. However, what is sometimes absent from such definitions is the fact that the term ‘understanding’ does not mean the same thing to everyone.<sup>135</sup> The same case can be argued in relation to the concepts of meaning, significance and relevance. On many occasions, these terms are used, whether consciously or unconsciously, with some sets of phenomenological assumptions that place themselves as the transcendental presuppositions of human existence.<sup>136</sup> Theological hermeneutics, without ignoring the way hermeneutics is understood in general, aims at describing what it means to read the Scripture as the Word of God theologically without necessarily having to burden itself with the prerequisite of making a foundational inquiry into the philosophical construction of human understanding, but rather as Webster rightly argues, it is “a matter of making a Christian theological construal of the field of reality within which such reading occurs.”<sup>137</sup> This does not mean our exposition of

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>132</sup> Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work, An Ariadne Book* (Boston: Beacon, 1978), 165.

<sup>133</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 20.

<sup>134</sup> Jeanron, "Karl Barth's Hermeneutics," in *Reckoning with Barth*, 81.

<sup>135</sup> Webster, *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics*, 57.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 58.

Barth's hermeneutics will not find continuity and discontinuity of themes and reflections in relation to the text, reader and author as commonly found in general hermeneutics, but such comparative interests will not be the main focus of our thesis, rather, it is a more theologically focused thesis on Barth's hermeneutics.

“Theology” as it is used in this thesis refers primarily to the discourse on Christian critical self-understanding of its doctrines as it is initiated by the event of the Word of God. Theology is not simply a collection of theological propositions, nor simply an expression of human existence, nor simply a communal language in a specific faith-culture, i.e., a grammar of Christian community.<sup>138</sup> It may have dimensions that could be described in such fashions, and it has been understood primarily so in some theological proposals.<sup>139</sup> It is true that Christian theology contains propositional truth, but it is not proposition as a first order discourse summative of the gospel, but as a second order explication of the gospel and its ecclesiastical proclamation. Theology is not simply an existential description of human religious experience, although it describes the content of the divine discourse as the One who is for humanity, and therefore implies a theoretical description of what it means to exist as a human being i.e. to be human is to participate in God's redemptive drama. Theology is not simply a description of the faith of the church, although it is properly called the ‘science’ of the church, with its unique theological grammar that as such does not need to oblige itself to satisfy the criteria of the wider modern scientific endeavour, though not necessarily be at odds with it, but it sets its own norms in accordance with the church's function and responsibility as a creature of the Word of God.<sup>140</sup> In our dogmatic description of Barth's hermeneutics, we perform our work as a theological task which means that “theology demands theological perception, theological thought and theological involvement”.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> For discussion of these alternatives, see George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (London: SPCK, 1984), 30-45.

<sup>139</sup> Lindbeck suggests that the main differences in theological positions have to do with respective understanding of the nature of doctrine, that is, whether it is understood as a proposition (evangelical), an expression of human experience (liberal) or, as he proposes, a grammar of communal praxis (post-liberal).

<sup>140</sup> *CD* I/1, 6-7.

<sup>141</sup> Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century: Its Background and History* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 1.

The final term, ethics, is generally understood as a critical reflection of the noetic, deontological and telic dimensions of human dispositions and actions as a response to the question of what is good. As it is applied in hermeneutical studies it is generally more focused on the ethics of method that is defined as “a second order methodological reflection on the ethos and morals of biblical studies.”<sup>142</sup> The point of the exercise is about the morality of legitimate interpretation for using particular approaches (methods) in biblical interpretation. Nevertheless, without ignoring the development in the dialogue between ethics and hermeneutics,<sup>143</sup> our use of the term will be more restrictive to ethics as a dimension of dogmatics in Karl Barth’s theology. As such, ethics is not simply an implication of theological reflection, i.e. ethics that is inspired by theology,<sup>144</sup> but ethics under the conviction that “Christian dogmatics is inherently ethical dogmatics.”<sup>145</sup> Thus ethic is not as a supplement to theology, and it is explored within the conviction that “dogmatics, precisely because its theme is the encounter of God and humanity, is from the beginning moral theology.”<sup>146</sup> In this context, the being and identity of God, as understood theologically, shapes the being and identity of the interpreter. As such human action is ordered around her identity as a person in the presence of God who addresses her in his decision to be God for humanity. Ethics is being-in-action as an implementation of a theological anthropology in response to God’s decision to address humanity in the salvific event. In other words, human moral action follows the Christological determination of God’s communicative action. To define ethics this way is not to ignore the themes and discussions in the general conversation of the study of ethics, but that in entering such conversation this thesis engages it in a consciously theological perception of the task.

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<sup>142</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107, no. 1 (1988): 195.

<sup>143</sup> E.g. see Daniel Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 1.

<sup>144</sup> Cf. Stanley J. Grenz, *The Moral Quest: Foundations of Christian Ethics* (Downers Grove, Ill. : InterVarsity Press, 1997), 19.

<sup>145</sup> John Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 8.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

These definitions, which include our theological paradigm of the terms, will be employed in the arguments of this study. Our argument is not only to put forward the form of Karl Barth's hermeneutics, but to propose that several doctrinal loci are interrelated in such a construal. This in turn will be proposed as the form in which we can engage in the modern task of theological hermeneutics. As a paradigm, we propose that different approaches to theological interpretation of Scripture constitute not only different anthropology of interpretation but more deeply, a difference in the ontology of interpretation. A different ontology results in a different approach in interpretation, and this difference is not just a matter of methodology, but in a broader context, it is also a matter of the ethics of interpretation. In the next chapter we will show how these themes were developed in the early period of his theological exegesis and how they are shaped by the material development of his theology.



### Chapter III: Karl Barth's Hermeneutics and Exegesis in the Early Period

Barth's hermeneutical approach in the early period<sup>1</sup> was the outcome of his intensive and critical engagements with two sets of texts: the biblical text, especially the New Testament, and the confessional texts of the Reformed tradition.<sup>2</sup> The shape of hermeneutics that come from these textual engagements is a variety of exegetical approaches that are generated by his understanding of the textual subject matter. For example, in *The Resurrection of the Dead*,<sup>3</sup> Barth sees that the resurrection of Christ is the key to unlock the meaning of Paul's pastoral exhortations. At another occasion, Barth employs the interpersonal relationship between Paul and his addressee as the context for Paul's theological admonitions.<sup>4</sup> Barth's exegesis is thus marked by a certain flexibility and creativity. However, despite this creativity, we will argue in this chapter that there are certain ontological convictions, theological themes and ethical deliberations that are generated by his reading of the texts and in turn shape the practice of his theological exegesis.

At the beginning of his textual engagements, Barth's hermeneutics is more akin to instinctive perceptions of what is the right theological reading of the Scripture. But it was later on elucidated in explicit terms through his engagement

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<sup>1</sup> Barth's early period is a common designation for Barth's formative years that roughly covers the years of 1919 (the publication of the first edition of *the Epistle to the Romans*) to 1932 (the publication of the *Church Dogmatics*). However there is no need for a strict chronological timeline since the theological thinking in *the Epistle to the Romans* was already formed in Barth's lectures in 1915-1916, and partially presented in the lecture on *The New World in the Bible* (1917). On the other hand, many of the themes in the *Church Dogmatics* are already presented in Barth's academic lectures during 1920s for example in his exegetical lectures, the Reformed theology, and especially in *the Göttingen Dogmatics*. For a clear and well-argued proposal on the genetic-historical development of Barth's theology see McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909-1936*.

<sup>2</sup> John Webster, *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 67. The direction of this chapter owes much to various essays of John Webster who fills the gaps in the studies of Barth's early theology which commonly focused on Barth's more combative texts while ignoring the more reflective and academic writings on exegetical lectures and analyses of the Reformed documents. See Webster, *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics*; John Webster, *Barth's Earlier Theology: Four Studies* (London: T&T Clark, 2005); Webster, *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason*.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Barth, *The Resurrection of the Dead*, trans. H. J. Stenning (Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Philippians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 14.

with Reformed confessional documents. Reading across Barth's interpretation of these documents and informed by his occasional lectures during the period, we will argue for what is the basic form of Barth's theological hermeneutics. The basic form is a procedure of biblical interpretation that is shaped by an ontology of God's communicative presence, generated by Trinitarian theology and the Reformed Scripture principle and performed in an ethic of reading inherent in such onto-theology. This formulation provides the form of the argument of our overall thesis and will be elaborated in the following chapters. It is not only a matter of the dimensions of his hermeneutics, but also how they are interrelated in a way that profoundly shapes his theological exegesis. The burden of this chapter is to show how these themes arise in Barth's early writings and how they provide a framework for our constructive proposal of how to construe Barth's theological hermeneutics, and how this will in turn help to shape our contemporary paradigm of theological hermeneutics.

Specifically, we will argue that Barth's hermeneutics was taking shape in a period that was intensely "textual and exegetical" rather than, as sometimes assumed, confrontational. Barth's confrontations with other theologians played an important role in Barth's early development; but it must be emphasized that his textual engagements had a greater and more lasting impact in shaping Barth's theology and hermeneutical convictions. It is our contention that Barth's preoccupations with exegesis of Scripture and interpretation of Reformed documents are the critical contexts for understanding his hermeneutics. First of all, his intensive biblical exegesis provided stimulus for a reflective description of what it means to interpret the Bible as *Scripture*, i.e., not just as a text in general terms.<sup>5</sup> These lessons were enriched and found a further substantial elucidation by his study of the Reformed tradition, especially the Reformed Scripture principle, found in the confessions and Calvin's theological writings.<sup>6</sup> Barth did not first formulate his hermeneutical principles and then construct a methodological approach for his exegesis. On the

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<sup>5</sup> Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 12. To call it an intensive study is only half way to reflecting what was a very frantic time of studying and writing biblical commentaries, not to include Barth's own habit to do a serious biblical research for his sermon preparations.

<sup>6</sup> Webster, *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason*, 67.

contrary, his procedure was to start with the exegesis of Scripture, and while concentrating on the content of the Scripture, he reflected on what can be said theologically of such activities. To his great satisfaction, the material content of the Reformed tradition provided the stimulus and the proper theological elucidation for what it means to read the Scripture theologically.

These two tasks, theological exegesis and analysis of theological traditions, occupied most of the academic work of Barth's professorship in the 1920's in Göttingen and Münster, and in the early 1930's in Bonn. While these were not the only activities of Barth's academic life, these two tasks occupied much of his thinking and writings such that no interpretation of Barth's early theology will be accurate without giving serious attention to these aspects.<sup>7</sup> Yet, as Webster rightly observes, "Barth's exegetical lectures have had remarkably little impact on the interpretation of his work."<sup>8</sup> Instead many interpreters focus primarily on the philosophical, socio-cultural or political backgrounds of his theological exegesis. Even though these approaches are fruitful for understanding Barth's earlier theology, they "failed to give a sufficient account of the fact that in Göttingen and beyond Barth's mind was crammed with Scripture and with the texts and ideas he had discovered in Calvin, Zwingli and others."<sup>9</sup>

Most of the studies on the early Barth commonly focus on the occasional writings between *the Epistle to the Romans Commentary* and the *Church Dogmatics*, usually based on the papers in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*,<sup>10</sup> *Theology and Church*,<sup>11</sup> at times with the amplification of *Fides Quaerens Intellectum*<sup>12</sup> and,

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<sup>7</sup> Webster, *Barth's Earlier Theology: Four Studies*, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Webster, *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason*, 66.

<sup>9</sup> Webster, *Barth's Earlier Theology: Four Studies*, 2.

<sup>10</sup> An earlier translation is Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (New York: Harper, 1957). A new translation is Karl Barth, *The Word of God and Theology*, trans. Amy Marga (London: T&T Clark, 2011). Our reference will be mainly based on the later translation.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Barth, *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings, 1920-1928*, trans. Louise Pettibone (London: SCM Press, 1962).

<sup>12</sup> Karl Barth, *Anselm, Fides Quaerens Intellectum: Anselm's Proof of the Existence of God in the Context of His Theological Scheme* (London: SCM Press, 1960).

more rarely, *Die Christliche Dogmatik*,<sup>13</sup> and approach these writings simply as a transitional document without a distinctive insight in their own right.<sup>14</sup> The image of Barth as the result of such an approach is one in which Barth is pictured as a dissident theological voice while eclipsing the important aspect of Barth's formative period wherein he was attracted to take the role of the church's theologian i.e. one who offers a constructive theological voice built upon his exegetical works and analyses of the church's traditions.<sup>15</sup> This misguided paradigm is further enhanced by a misconception that what can be known about Barth's hermeneutics could be isolated to the *Romans* era (1919-1922), especially in the prefaces, while overlooking the development of his exegetical practices in other works (e.g. Philippians, 1 Corinthians, and John) and his rediscovery of the Reformed doctrine of Scripture.<sup>16</sup> The outcome was that various concepts of Barth's hermeneutics that were theologically reductive and abstract, perceiving Barth mainly as 'a failed product' of his intellectual culture, were eclipsing his theological and ethical concerns regarding reading the Bible as Scripture. It is our contention that in the earlier period Barth had already worked out a proper theological coordination between the theological emphasis of the divine sovereignty in revelation and the human-moral responsibility in the face of the divine ethical summons, and its implication for theological reasoning on the relationship between the communicative event of God's presence and the dynamic of the human agency, in Scripture and in the interpretation of Scripture.<sup>17</sup> This is not only a feature of Barth's later theology but something that already took its shape in his early works. Therefore, Barth's early hermeneutics was already marked by his theological convictions about the Bible, the ontological assumptions of such convictions (on revelation, divine presence and human history) and the ethical implications for human response to the divine revelatory presence.

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<sup>13</sup> Karl Barth, *Die Christliche Dogmatik Im Entwurf*, ed. Gerhard Sauter, *Gesamtausgabe* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1982).

<sup>14</sup> Webster, *Barth's Earlier Theology: Four Studies*, 3.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Webster, *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason*, 67.

<sup>17</sup> Webster, *Barth's Earlier Theology: Four Studies*, 4.

This chapter consists of three analyses of Barth's exegetical practices and their hermeneutical implications for the task of biblical interpretation. Our analysis is based on Barth's engagement with the text of Scripture and on his preoccupation with the Reformed tradition. The primary purpose is to provide an historical sketch of Barth's exegetical practices and hermeneutical convictions in the early period with the aim of formulating the basic shape of the ontological, theological and ethical dimensions of Barth's early hermeneutics.<sup>18</sup> Our first analysis outlines Barth's exegetical practices by taking his second edition of *the Epistle to the Romans* as paradigmatic to sketch the basic picture of his exegesis, particularly in comparison to the common practice of historical-critical exegesis of his day. Secondly, the analysis is explicated further by the analysis of his later exegeses in the 1920s, mainly in connection with *I Corinthians*, *Philippians* and *the Gospel of John*, to provide a sense of a wider picture of Barth's early exegesis and the theological convictions behind it. We will argue that *the Gospel of John* provides a more complete picture of his biblical interpretation which can be arranged in the themes of ontological, theological and ethical dimensions of hermeneutics. Thirdly we will provide an outline of the theological, ontological and ethical dimensions of Barth's exegesis and hermeneutics in the early period, informed by a reading of his occasional lectures that explored biblical interpretation, but were based primarily on his hermeneutical reflections in his lectures on the Reformed tradition which took place around the same time. The conclusion of this chapter will show the interrelation of these themes based on the analyses of this chapter.

### **1. Barth's exegesis and hermeneutics in the Epistle to the Romans**

Barth's exegesis in *the Epistle to the Romans* reveals his procedure of biblical interpretation that remained the same in its basic outline, even though it continued to develop in its elucidation of the relationship between text, history and revelation, as

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<sup>18</sup> There were quite a number of commentaries written by Barth in the 1920s, in the course of his ministry in Safenwil and during his professorship in Göttingen and Münster. Five have been translated into English, i.e. *Romans*, *I Corinthians*, *Philippians*, *John* (chapter 1) and recently *Ephesians* (See Ross McGowan Wright, *Karl Barth's Academic Lectures on Ephesians. Göttingen, 1921–22: An Original Translation, Annotation, and Analysis* (unpublished PhD thesis, St Andrews University, 2006)). But there are several others, e.g. *Colossians*, *James*, *I John* and *the Sermon of the Mount*, that were delivered during 1920s as part of the one-hour course in the New Testament exegesis. Cf. Karl Barth, *Witness to the Word, a Commentary on John 1*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), ix.

shaped by his constant engagement with Scripture. Webster perceptively observes that Barth's early exegesis is "a complex arrangement of historical and textual comment, paraphrase, theological reflection and application, all ordered toward the task of explicating the *Sache* of the apostle's address."<sup>19</sup> It consists of two basic steps: a historical-critical exploration and an attempt at understanding. *The first step*, the historical exegesis, establishes "what is there" in the text "by means of translation and paraphrasing the Greek words and phrases in the corresponding modern language by means of philological, archaeological exposition of the results so achieved, and by means of a more or less plausible ordering of the individual elements according to historical and psychological pragmatism."<sup>20</sup> In this regard Barth admits that he never had any illusion of contributing new insights to the field but rather "to sit attentively at the feet of such scholars as Jülicher, Lietzmann, Zahn, Köhl, and their predecessors Tholuck, Meyer, B. Weiss, and Lipsius."<sup>21</sup> *The second step* is the interpretation of the *meaning* of the text, i.e., to understand the author (i.e. Paul) and the text as an encounter with the Word of God through written human words.<sup>22</sup> In this step Barth attempts to re-think the text in his theological context, and to press forward to the point where he can understand that, "the riddle of the subject matter and no longer merely the riddle of the document as such, where I can almost forget that I am not the author, where I have almost understood him so well that I let him speak in my name, and can myself speak in his name."<sup>23</sup> These two steps are explained in more detail in the following analysis.

### **1.1. The first step: historical exegesis**

In the first step, Barth made use of the important historical-critical resources that were common in the contemporary scholarly field. Although Barth did not contribute new historical findings (as it was not his aim), he critically engaged with conservative and liberal scholars in his exegesis. He recounted this scholarly

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<sup>19</sup> Webster, *Barth's Earlier Theology: Four Studies*, 13.

<sup>20</sup> Karl Barth, "Foreword to the Second Edition," in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, ed. James M. Robinson (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968), 91.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

engagement in his letter to Thurneysen to whom he shared his question about the worth of the significant amount of the historical materials.<sup>24</sup> The style of his commentary is one that resembles a homily in the church. However, among the critical notes, one finds discussions on textual criticisms, the use of lexica, other translations, and commentaries (including books on Pauline studies). These notes, mostly ignored in the study of Barth's hermeneutics and exegesis, reflect something quite important on what happened in Barth's personal studies and suggests that some more rigorous works had actually been done. At the very least, these notes show something significant about Barth's attitude to historical criticism and his theological convictions, especially considering that these efforts were made by a village pastor, who was not an academic lecturer, and lacked the luxury of academic conversation, time and resources, though he was not lacking in the quality of scholarly thinking.<sup>25</sup> Barth never intended to leave behind historical criticism for the sake of spiritual interpretation. In the following we will provide some commentaries on the notes that can be found in the commentary.

The first note is the discussion of the New Testament Greek text. There are two basic features of Barth's textual engagement. First, Barth wrote his own German translation (from the original Greek) and provides several short explanations of his textual decisions. Second, among the available Greek texts, he used the Nestle's Greek text, which according to Bruce M. Metzger, "represents the state of nineteenth century scholarship,"<sup>26</sup> as the basis of his translation. When Barth deviated from the main text and instead used its variants, he provided explanations for favouring a variant reading.<sup>27</sup> Barth makes clear that his purpose is not to provide a better translation than what were already available in the scholarly works. He had a more

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<sup>24</sup> Karl Barth, *Karl Barth-Eduard Thurneysen Briefwechsel, Band I: 1913-1921* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1973), 461-63.

<sup>25</sup> Not only did Barth study in the best universities in German and Switzerland, he was also an assistant editor of a leading theological journal in Marburg, the *Christliche Welt*, from 1918 to 1919. See Busch, *Karl Barth, His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, 46ff.

<sup>26</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption and Restoration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 144.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Barth, "Foreword to the Second Edition," in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, 98. See also Edwyn C. Hoskyns, "The Translator's Preface," in Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, xiv. Hoskyns argues that Barth was modifying Luther's German version as the template for his translation.

modest goal, that is, to combine the standard Greek text and the standard German translation (Luther's translation) to help him, and his readers, to understand Paul and the rest of the Bible better.<sup>28</sup> More importantly, Barth was not always satisfied with these translations, which have their differences. But his reason was more fundamental, because they did not always make good sense in the light of his understanding of the subject matter, especially the sense they gave to Paul's theology as a whole in relation to particular verses. For example, Barth decided to retain a Greek word (a second  $\nu\theta\nu$ ) in Rom 11:31 because it fits better with the "eschatological tension" of the whole passage.<sup>29</sup> At another place, Barth considered "the more recent textual critical studies," and in conjunction with a "further exegetical reflection," Barth provides his reason for revising the textual decisions of the first edition.<sup>30</sup> His procedure forms a hermeneutical circle: the text provides the basis for his understanding of the subject matter, and the subject matter in turn informs and modifies the way the text is translated and revised. This process creates a circle between the text and the content, and the way they interacted in Barth's textual discussions. However, it is the content of the text that was always decisive for Barth's textual decisions and translations.

There are seventeen textual notes in the first edition of *the Epistle to the Romans*. Twelve of them are retained in the second edition, and the other five are either modified or conform to the Nestle text.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, Barth adds nine footnotes to the second edition, and all of them are either in relation to his deviation from the Nestle text or his decision to take a more debateable reading of the Nestle

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<sup>28</sup> Barth explains that his translation is made in comparison with other commentaries, and from the notes he provides, these commentaries are, among others, those of J.T. Beck, *Erklärung des Briefes Pauli an die Römer* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1884), Theodor Zahn, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Römer, Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*, vol. 6 (Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1910), Ernst Kühl, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Römer* (Leipzig: Quelle & Meyer, 1913), Adolf Jülicher, *Der Brief an die Römer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck un Ruprecht, 1907), and Hans Lietzmann, *Einführung in die Textgeschichte der Paulusbriefe an die Römer, Handbuch zum Neuen Testament vol.8, 2nd ed.* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1910). Cf. David P. Henry, *The Early Development of the Hermeneutic of Karl Barth as Evidenced by His Appropriation of Romans 5:12-21* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985), 59.

<sup>29</sup> Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 417.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 522.

<sup>31</sup> Henry, *The Early Development of the Hermeneutic of Karl Barth as Evidenced by His Appropriation of Romans 5:12-21*, 160.



variants.<sup>32</sup> Adolf Jülicher, a respected New Testament scholar, commented that Barth “chose poorly” when he made a textual criticism.<sup>33</sup> Barth himself admitted that he is “notoriously incompetent” in this matter.<sup>34</sup> So why did he insist on making his own textual decisions and including some textual notes? The chief reason is that, informed by his understanding of the subject matter, Barth was convinced that the Nestle text does not provide the best textual decision for the subject matter. For Barth, even the best textual decision does not provide an exhaustive answer to the theological question of the text. On a more practical level, Barth explains that the notes are there to notify the place where he deviates from Nestle so those who consult the Nestle text can recognize it and follow the flow of his commentary.<sup>35</sup> Thus, while acknowledging his limitations, Barth remains an independent interpreter in regard to textual variations. On the other hand, Barth contends that if given a good ground he is “always ready to be corrected.”<sup>36</sup> He is not insistent in his textual decision, but on the other hand he does not resign from the requirement that as a theologian he has to make a responsible textual decision. Nevertheless, Barth’s acknowledgement and Jülicher’s critique show that this is not a strength of Barth’s commentary; in fact it is where the commentary is open for improvement by the progress of historical-critical research.

Secondly, in regard to the Greek lexicon, Barth used the best available lexica for his exegesis i.e. the Cremer-Kögel’s lexicon.<sup>37</sup> Cremer’s lexicon was based on the classical Greek and published before the monumental works of Adolf Deissmann’s *Bible Studies* (1895, ET 1901) and *Light from Ancient East* (1909, ET 1910).<sup>38</sup> These two works, at the time they were published, transformed the world of New Testament

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Adolf Jülicher, "A Modern Interpreter of Paul," in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, ed. James M. Robinson (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968), 75.

<sup>34</sup> Barth, "Foreword to the Second Edition," in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, 98.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Barth, *Karl Barth-Eduard Thurneysen Briefwechsel, Band I: 1913-1921*, 146. This lexicon, the *Biblisch-theologisches Wörterbuch der neutestamentlichen Gräcität*, 1866, revised by Julius Kögel in 1915, was the most widely used lexicon by Swiss and German biblical scholars at that time.

<sup>38</sup> Henry, *The Early Development of the Hermeneutic of Karl Barth as Evidenced by His Appropriation of Romans 5:12-21*, 57.

lexicography that was hitherto based on the classical Greek, into the *koine* (colloquial) Greek lexicography. However, Kögel had updated Cremer's lexicon according to Deissmann's findings. The Bauer's lexicon that made full use of Deissmann's findings, was only published in 1928, and was not available to Barth when he wrote *the Epistle to the Romans*.<sup>39</sup> The available alternative to Kögel's was Edwin Preuschen's *Greek-German Lexicon*. But this lexicon was not as highly regarded as Cremer-Kögel's lexicon. Whatever the weakness of Barth's translation of the Greek, he apparently did not take the task lightly. The fact that Barth maintained that he is not an enemy of historical criticism is not an empty statement, but represents his exegetical attempts to interpret the Bible in its original text by employing the best available scholarship.

Finally, although there is no sustained engagement with a particular commentary, Barth used commentaries from various theological backgrounds that indicate his openness to different views. Beside the works listed above, Barth had a high respect for Calvin's commentary, and to a conservative commentator, J.T. Beck, whose *Romans* commentary he regarded "a gold mine".<sup>40</sup> In a letter to Thurneysen, Barth wrote that Beck "as a biblical expositor... simply towers above the rest of the company, also above Schlatter."<sup>41</sup> While Barth used these commentaries and studies, the result of his interpretations is not determined by a particular commentary but by his engagement with what he regarded as the content (*Sache*) of the Scripture. Although he had affinities with some conservative commentaries, as he wrote in his

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>40</sup> Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6. Cf. Barth and Thurneysen, *Revolutionary Theology in the Making: Barth-Thurneysen Correspondence, 1914-1925*, 38.

<sup>41</sup> Barth, *Karl Barth-Eduard Thurneysen Briefwechsel, Band I: 1913-1921*, 148. Beside reformers and conservative commentators, Barth engaged quite widely with Pietistic writers such as Johannes Bengel (1850, *Gnomon Novi Testamenti*), C.H. Rieger (1828, *Betrachtungen über das Neue Testament*) and August Tholuck, and ancient writers such as Origen, the critical scholars such as Lietzmann, Schweitzer and Lipsius, and the socialist Hermann Kutter (1905, *Gerechtigkeit*). For general works of Pauline studies Barth used both the conservative work of Friedrich Zündel (1886, *Aus der Apostelzeit*) and the critical studies of Albert Schweitzer (1911, *Geschichte der paulinischen Forschung*). Cited in Henry, *The Early Development of the Hermeneutic of Karl Barth as Evidenced by His Appropriation of Romans 5:12-21*, 61.

letters,<sup>42</sup> his notes in the commentary are enough to show that he was attentive in reviewing the suggestions of each commentator while seriously considering and making decision about his own interpretation.<sup>43</sup>

All Barth's efforts are quite impressive when seen from the context of his pastoral life. This still remains unnoticed because the historical reception of Barth's work and his reputation as a great theologian shadow the pastoral background of the commentary. More importantly, it is theologically driven rather than compelled by some hermeneutical or exegetical principles.<sup>44</sup> The Word of God is in history while at the same time it is not of history. While at times Barth speaks in a manner that reflects some form of idealism, his theological impulse is the economy of grace in which God's communicative presence employs history and human words for expressing the eternal truth of the Word. Webster rightly argues that Barth's efforts were "precipitated by beliefs about God and the economy of God's act toward his creature, beliefs which were themselves generated and sustained through attention to Scripture and which could best be articulated by scrupulous scriptural exegesis."<sup>45</sup> This theological conviction means that establishing "what is there" must be an expression of the best responsible acts that are possible for a "human reading" of Scripture. The conviction cultivates an ethics of reading which shapes Barth's meticulous interaction with the historical scholarship. In particular Barth appreciates more interpreters for whom an understanding of human words is an expression of God's Word. Barth also is quite critical toward interpretation that he deems as "far-fetched" explorations in regard to comparisons of the religious ideas and the socio-cultural origins of the biblical writings. Barth does not disregard the fact that the biblical text has its historical genesis and development. However, he questions the

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<sup>42</sup> In his letter to Thurneysen Barth wrote "I have read the whole of Tholuck and discovered all kinds of remarkable things, but more remarkable than satisfactory," Barth and Thurneysen, *Revolutionary Theology in the Making: Barth-Thurneysen Correspondence, 1914-1925*, 42.

<sup>43</sup> Henry, *The Early Development of the Hermeneutic of Karl Barth as Evidenced by His Appropriation of Romans 5:12-21*, 59.

<sup>44</sup> Cunningham, in our opinion, is quite inaccurate in framing Barth's exegesis as being shaped by "the linguistic world of the Bible", see Cunningham, *What Is Theological Exegesis: Interpretation and Use of Scripture in Barth's Doctrine of Election*, 83.

<sup>45</sup> Webster, "Karl Barth," in *Reading Romans through the Centuries: From the Early Church to Karl Barth*, 213.

view that the exploration of Scripture's natural history could in itself suffice to explain its meaning and as such ignores the ontological nature of Scripture as a text caught-up in the economy of God's salvific communicative action.<sup>46</sup> On the other hand Barth's ontological convictions of the text as Scripture provide a solid ground for exploring its "natural history". Thus, rather than submitting to the unexamined methodological convictions, or worse, historicist presuppositions, Barth proposes to ground such activities in the theological presupposition, that is, God's communicative presence determines the examination of the resources of the historical-critical approach.

### **1.2. The second step: an attempt at understanding**

In discussing Barth's second step, the first three prefaces of *the Epistle to the Romans* will be taken up as the textual basis of our analysis. In these prefaces, Barth explains what he means by "an attempt at understanding." They also provide Barth's intense engagements with various reviewers that reveal what he regards as the key questions and critical issues in his interpretation of the Bible. These discussions also help to clarify what Barth does not intend to do e.g. the pneumatical-approach that has less respect for historical criticism, and the subjective-approach, that disregards the role of the human author (Paul) in interpreting the meaning of the text. What Barth wanted to achieve is a genuine understanding of the historical Paul, but not in the sense of his religious ideas or experiences. Barth aims to understand what Paul understands about the Word of God, that is, the reality that Paul witnessed. This witness, which was written into the Scripture, designates the inseparability of Paul's words and the Word of God while maintaining their distinction.

Barth begins his preface to the first edition by highlighting the historical character of the letter: "Paul spoke to his contemporaries *as a child of his age*."<sup>47</sup> But this remark is just an initial observation, and it is complemented by a second and a more crucial observation, that Paul "speaks as a prophet and apostle of the Kingdom of God."<sup>48</sup> This reveals what Barth perceives as the decisive purpose of biblical

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>47</sup> Barth, "Foreword to the Second Edition," in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, 61.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

interpretation in his commentary: “seeing *through* the historical into the spirit of the Bible, which is the eternal Spirit.”<sup>49</sup> There is an idealist flavour to Barth’s contention, but it must not distract us from a more important contention that is based on his theological conviction of reality. The way Barth phrased his hermeneutic is open to the impression that history might not have an important role in Barth’s hermeneutic. But the emphasis lies elsewhere, not in the denial of history for theological interpretation, but rather in the importance of the subject matter (the Word of God) under consideration for a true understanding of the historical Paul.

What was once serious is still serious today, and what today is serious, and not just arbitrariness and whim, stands also in direct relation to what was formerly serious. Our questions, if we understand ourselves aright are the question of Paul, and Paul’s answer, if their light illumines us, must be our answers.<sup>50</sup>

Eberhard Jüngel comments that in this remark Barth makes “the declaration of a hermeneutic of simultaneity.”<sup>51</sup> According to Jüngel, this approach challenged the consensus of historical-criticism of Barth’s day where the historical gulf between the interpreters and the texts was a fundamental presupposition. The hermeneutic of simultaneity could be perceived, then, as a naïve hermeneutical statement in the face of such a gulf.<sup>52</sup> Jüngel’s comment is useful as a descriptive tool for a comparative purpose, i.e., to see where Barth was different from his contemporary interpreters. But it should not eclipse what is more important, that is, Barth’s statement is an expression of his insistence that a good interpretation should be focusing on the “subject matter, content and substance” which is something Paul and an attentive modern reader should share in common, and as such, to read the Scripture with “more attention and love upon the meaning of the Bible itself.”<sup>53</sup> Barth did not regard historical inquiries as unimportant, but, as Emil Brunner perceptively observed, he

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Jüngel, *Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy*, 71.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> These last two quotations are taken from the drafts of the preface to the commentary, see Barth, “Preface Draft I,” in Burnett, *Karl Barth’s Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principals of the Römerbrief Period*, 277.

concentrates on “making the central thought of the Bible really the central point that influences everything else.”<sup>54</sup> In this context, “the letter to the Romans applies itself as soon as it is understood, as soon as one has pushed through from a mere outward understanding of the words—for which modern science offers us splendid means—to an understanding of the content.”<sup>55</sup> In Rudolf Bultmann’s assessment, “Historical and psychological exegesis establish primarily that this or that has been thought, said, or done at a particular time and under such and such historical circumstances and psychological conditions, without reflecting on the meaning and demands of what is said.”<sup>56</sup> Against the convention of the day, Barth takes a different approach:

The historical-critical method of biblical research has its place; it points to a preparation for understanding that is never superfluous. But if I had to choose between it and the old doctrine of inspiration, I would resolutely choose the latter. It has a greater, deeper and more important place because it points directly to the task of understanding, without which all preparation is worthless. I am happy that I do not have to choose between the two. But all my attention has been directed toward seeing through the historical spirit of the Bible, which is the eternal Spirit.<sup>57</sup>

Barth considers that the choice between the doctrine of inspiration and the historical-critical method, while not necessary, is *a possibility*. It is important to note that in suggesting a more important place Barth is not discrediting the method of historical research. In Brunner’s estimation, Barth was quite “well-equipped” to write something akin to a modern critical commentary if that was his objective.<sup>58</sup> It is simply because compared to the historical discussions the significance of the doctrine has “a greater, broader, and more important place.”<sup>59</sup> But the fact that Barth does not feel “compelled to choose between the two” must mean that the method of historical-

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<sup>54</sup> Emil Brunner, “The Epistle to the Romans by Karl Barth,” in *The Beginning of Dialectical Theology* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968), 71.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 65, 70. According to Brunner, Barth’s approach is in principle a break “with the optimistic concept of evolution which rules almost undisputed over [his contemporary’s] religious, moral and scientific thought.”

<sup>56</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Rudolf Bultmann: Interpreting Faith for the Modern Era*, ed. Roger A. Johnson (London: Collins, 1987), 131.

<sup>57</sup> Karl Barth, “Foreword to the First Edition,” in *The Beginning of Dialectical Theology*, ed. James M. Robinson (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968), 61.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Brunner, in *The Beginning of Dialectical Theology*, 63.

<sup>59</sup> Barth, “Foreword to the First Edition,” in *The Beginning of Dialectical Theology*, 61.

criticism can be incorporated into the theology of the Word of God.<sup>60</sup> In this way historical-criticism is appreciated with a “relative significance” and its results are a “relative result” in explicating the subject matter of the text, i.e., the Word of God.<sup>61</sup> The subject matter must be the centre of the inquiry, and in relation to it, methodologies are to be treated as ancillary to the normativity of the biblical content.

To be fair, the historical critical scholars, in general, do not refuse the possibility of the Word of God in the words of the Bible. They were, and are, aware that the historic Christian faith has always treated Scripture as the locus of revelation. But this dogmatic conviction is more often seen as a ‘constraint’, and the historical critics see a discontinuity between the Word and biblical history and try to distance themselves from it in order to preserve an ‘objective’ approach to the Bible.<sup>62</sup> On the contrary, Barth’s attitude toward historical criticism involves a theological re-evaluation of this methodological conviction.<sup>63</sup> The difference between Barth and the historical critics is not that the latter do not have a dogmatic presupposition while Barth does, but rather the difference between their respective dogmatic presupposition, between historicist presuppositions and Barth’s theological presuppositions.<sup>64</sup> Barth wanted to retain the findings of historical-critical study while also insisting on allowing the theological presuppositions to play a leading role in the process of interpretation. The most crucial presupposition is that as a human

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<sup>60</sup> Jüngel, *Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy*, 70.

<sup>61</sup> Brunner, “The Epistle to the Romans by Karl Barth,” 64.

<sup>62</sup> Jüngel contrasts the difference in the following way: “[Historical critical] scholars certainly thought that they recognized a content, a Word in the words. Their difference from Barth was only that they must have thought this matter was largely foreign to history, something that it was their duty as scholars to separate from history. For this reason, they insisted on critical distance in method, so that the interpreter could never forget that he was not the author of the text to be interpreted. For them, historical criticism meant maintaining the historical distance between the interpreter and the text and its content.... [Barth] sought a closer relationship between the text and its interpreter, despite their undeniable historical distance. For him, real understanding begins where the explanations of “the historical critics” end.” See Jüngel, *Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy*, 76.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Webster, “Karl Barth,” in *Reading Romans through the Centuries: From the Early Church to Karl Barth*, 216.

<sup>64</sup> McCormack, “Historical-Criticism and Dogmatic Interest in Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis of the New Testament,” 324.

word Scripture intends to describe the divine revelation.<sup>65</sup> It is this intention that must be given priority in the historical approach to Scripture.

In response to the first edition, there were several conversations that took place between Barth and his reviewers. One of the important reviewers was Adolf Jülicher who perceived Barth's theological exegesis as a challenge to the convention of historical-criticism.<sup>66</sup> Jülicher recognised not only its boldness, but also sensed in it Barth's devaluation of historical study and an attempt to escape from history. He stated, "Without doubt we have now to reckon with a period in the history of culture that is not historically oriented."<sup>67</sup> In his view, Barth's hermeneutical statements were a sign of an era that moves toward "a denial of history."<sup>68</sup> In his judgement, Barth's commentary does not contribute anything new to the scholarship on Paul and its significance was more in the field of practical theology.<sup>69</sup> From Barth's response in the second edition, Jülicher's review made an important impact on Barth's thinking. As Timothy Gorringer rightly argues, it forced Barth "to clarify his method, and the preface to the second edition sketched out what amounts to a hermeneutical manifesto, which remains one of the landmarks of hermeneutic discussion in the twentieth century."<sup>70</sup> We however should not overestimate the review(s), since Barth, in the preface of the second edition (1922), explicitly explained that there are various impulses that contribute to his revision, and that the reviewers' critiques were only one among many. He singled out four main factors for his revision: 1) the continuing study of Paul and Paul's epistle to the Romans, 2) the engagement with

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<sup>65</sup> Webster, "Karl Barth," in *Reading Romans through the Centuries: From the Early Church to Karl Barth*, 216.

<sup>66</sup> Jülicher, in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, 78-9. Cf Jüngel, *Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy*, 71.

<sup>67</sup> Jülicher, in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, 81.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 80. Cf. Jüngel, *Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy*, 72.

<sup>69</sup> Thus although the commentary is not "a handy collection of material for sermons", it is nevertheless "a stimulus for the direction which thought must take if it is to keep alive and arouse the spirits of present day men", See Jülicher, in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, 72. Jüngel makes an important observation that neither Barth nor Jülicher realized at this point that theology itself to be a truly scientific undertaking must attend to the practical dimension of reality, that in this sense Jülicher's remarks are in fact a testimony to the scientific character of Barth's commentary, see Jüngel, *Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy*, 73.

<sup>70</sup> Timothy Gorringer, *Karl Barth: Against Hegemony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 57.



Overbeck's thinking, 3) a better understanding of Plato, Kant, Kierkegaard, and Dostoevsky, and finally 4) the responses to the first edition.<sup>71</sup> Barth clearly emphasizes that the first point is of the utmost importance.<sup>72</sup> This, however, does not deny the fact that Jülicher's critique may have helped Barth to clarify his approach and to make a statement of the task of theological interpretation. More specifically, the critique has helped Barth to delineate in more detail what he means by theological explanation (*Erklärung*).<sup>73</sup>

In the preface to the second edition, Barth argues that explanation (*Erklärung*) must move beyond the initial steps of historical criticism and attempt "to understand (*verstehen*) Paul, that is, to discover not only how what is there can be somehow repeated ..., but how it can be *rethought*, and what it may perhaps mean."<sup>74</sup> In contrast to Jülicher, Barth sets Calvin as a prime example of what he considers to be a good commentator.

How energetically [Calvin] goes to work after he has conscientiously established "what is there" to think the thought of the text after it, that is, to come to terms with it until the wall between the first and sixteenth century becomes transparent, until Paul speaks there and the man of the sixteenth century hears here, until the conversation between document and reader is concentrated entirely on the matter (*Sache*).<sup>75</sup>

As such, a good expositor must concentrate on discovering the link between the human words with the Word of God. Barth contends,

I must press forward to the point where in so far as possible I confront the riddle of the subject matter and no longer merely the riddle of the document as such, where I can almost forget that I am not the author, where I have almost understood him so well that I let him speak in my name, and can myself speak in his name.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Barth, "Foreword to the Second Edition," in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, 89.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 93.

Barth rejects that historical-criticism is sufficient in itself to do this.<sup>77</sup> As such, he boldly claims that “the historical-critical school must become more critical in order to suit me!”<sup>78</sup> What this entails is a “more critical” approach, that is a critique of the methodological conviction that in order to be a good exegete one must distance oneself from the content of the text. It is a metacriticism of the historicist’s attitude toward biblical interpretation as an objective inquiry. Barth argues that this ‘scientific methodological virtue’ is a serious hindrance to a true understanding.<sup>79</sup> By maintaining the distance, the historical critics have created their own blind spot and eclipsed the subject matter from the reader. For Barth the key lies in the theological conviction that the reader must “confront the riddle of the subject matter,” and in confronting this subject matter the reader shares the experience of the author (of confronting the subject matter) until one can forget that one is not the author, and that in speaking of the subject matter, the reader and the author become one and interchangeable witnesses of the same subject matter.<sup>80</sup> Thus the decisive factor in understanding Scripture is the recognition of “*the inner dialectic of the subject matter*,”<sup>81</sup> and this involves, as Webster states, “allowing the matter to be the organizing principle of the commentator’s presentation, though without in any way supplanting or eclipsing the language, form and sequence of the text itself.”<sup>82</sup>

There were some reviewers who suggested that this consideration entails an interpretative ‘system’ of Barth’s exegesis. But rather than a system, Barth argues that it really is a matter of theological conviction.<sup>83</sup> Barth contends,

If I have a “system”, then it consists in my keeping in mind as constantly as possible what Kierkegaard called the “infinite qualitative difference” between time and eternity, in its negative and its positive meaning. “God is in heaven, and thou on Earth.” The relationship of *this* God to *this* man, the relationship

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<sup>77</sup> His critique aims at “the contentment with an explanation of the text which [he] cannot regard as any explanation at all, but only as the first primitive attempt at one”, see *ibid.*, 91.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>82</sup> Webster, “Karl Barth,” in *Reading Romans through the Centuries: From the Early Church to Karl Barth*, 220.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

of *this* man to *this* God, is for me the theme of the Bible and the sum of philosophy in one. At this crossroads the Bible sees Jesus Christ.<sup>84</sup>

The main insight that Barth seriously considers here is the basic conviction of God of the Bible and the human being as creature. While it is presented in the language of Kierkegaard's philosophy, the contention is not something new but the old truth that come alive in Barth's reading of the Bible. Barth wanted to think about God's presence in the human act of reading of the Bible as a serious consideration for the meaning, purpose and justification of such activity. If there is a presupposition of this activity it is a presupposition that when one reads the Bible, human witness of God in the text is trustworthy. In other words, as part of his exegetical convictions Barth begins with a presupposition that Paul really knows God when he speaks about God.<sup>85</sup> Barth is not taking this conviction simply as a hypothetical device but as the true presupposition for understanding the subject matter. Barth recognizes that this conviction is a circular presupposition in relation to the subject matter.<sup>86</sup> In this case, while maintaining his critical attitude, Barth is persuaded by the text, to uphold the presupposition that "Paul knows something about God which we as a rule do not know, but which we too could know well."<sup>87</sup> His reading confirms that the presupposition is true all along. Barth argues that this presupposition can be stated simply as "consider well," in the sense of "consider well the theme of the text," and "consider your interpretation in the light of the theme."<sup>88</sup> This entails making a considerate assumption that "the Bible is a good book, and that it is worthwhile to take its thought at least as seriously as one takes his own."<sup>89</sup> Thus Barth begins with a theological conviction that Paul knows something about God when he talks about God, and that in the letter, Paul really gives witness to the being

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<sup>84</sup> Barth, "Foreword to the Second Edition," in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, 94.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

of God and not simply to a human experience of God.<sup>90</sup> This conviction in turn shapes his interpretative process of biblical exegesis.

A perceptive reader would immediately ask: how might Barth substantiate that the Word of God has been really understood in his reading of Paul's letter? Does not Barth consider the possibility that readers, including himself, might misread the human words for the Word of God? And more importantly, how would Barth reckon with the possibility that the authors of Scripture (e.g. Paul) might have miscommunicated their own historical-cultural opinions as the Word of God? These questions bring us to the heart of Bultmann's review of Barth's *Epistle to the Romans* second edition that precisely raises these points. Bultmann argues that Barth's theological approach has failed to consider the possibility that the text does not only contain the voice of the Spirit but may also reveal the voices of other spirits.<sup>91</sup> As such, Paul's letter reveals not only the Word of God, but also human traditions and aspirations, as can be seen in "tensions and contradiction, heights and depths" of Pauline ideas in the letter.

[Paul is] dependent on Jewish theology or on popular Christianity, on Hellenistic enlightenment of Hellenistic sacramental belief,...but [Paul] is doing it from the point of view of showing where and how the subject matter is expressed, in order to grasp the subject matter, which is greater even than Paul....It is not merely a question of the relativity of the word, but also of the fact that no man—not even Paul—can always speak only from the subject matter itself. In him there are other spirits speaking besides the *pneuma Christou*.<sup>92</sup>

In Bultmann's view, Barth is not objective and critical enough because he does not differentiate the subject matter (the Word) from the word of man.<sup>93</sup> To be faithful to the subject matter, an interpreter must place the Word of God higher than human ideas and theology, including Paul's religious ideas and convictions. Barth should

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<sup>90</sup> Jüngel, *Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy*, 74-75.

<sup>91</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, "Karl Barth's Epistle to the Romans in Its Second Edition," in *The Beginnings of Dialectical Theology*, ed. James M. Robinson (Richmond: John Knox Publisher, 1968), 120. In this regard Bultmann is also a proponent of *Sachekritik*, but he understands the *Sache* in the different sense from Barth's more theological understanding. For Bultmann, the *Sache* is only to be found in the existential encounter between the text and human interpreter.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> Karl Barth, "Foreword to the Third Edition," in *The Beginnings of Dialectical Theology*, ed. James M. Robinson (Richmond: John Knox Publisher, 1968), 126.

have evaluated Pauline statements by contrasting them to the subject matter because the proclamation of Pauline theology can be contrasted with his religious backgrounds, and as such Paul's letters may contain a misrepresentation of the subject matter.

In response to this critique (in the preface to the third edition), Barth argues that it is Bultmann who is not objective and critical enough.<sup>94</sup> According to Barth "what speaks in the Letter to the *Romans* is nothing but the 'others', the various 'spirits' which [Bultmann] adduces, such as Jewish, the popular Christian, the Hellenistic, and others."<sup>95</sup> There is no human way, according to Barth, that one could point in the text to where the spirit of Christ speaks and where it can be perceived as one among competing voices.<sup>96</sup> There is no human way of discriminating between the human word and the Word of God.<sup>97</sup> Every word in Scripture is the voice of other spirits and only in the act of reading can it be known by God's revelation "whether and in how far *everything* can be understood also in the context of the 'subject matter' as the voice of the *spiritus* (of Christ)."<sup>98</sup> In other words, the subject matter of the text cannot be presupposed from the beginning of interpretation. One cannot construe some presuppositions at the beginning of interpretation and from these presuppositions to evaluate the worth of a particular statement. The Word can only be understood in the act of theological exegesis where one sees the whole in the context of the subject matter. In this act, it is the subject matter that makes itself perceivable in the interpretation of the text. It is not something that the human reader is able to perceive but rather something that comes into perception as the act of the divine Spirit.

Interlocking with Barth's argument is the conviction that Scripture is, simultaneously, the Word of God and the word of man, which is an important theme in Barth's proposal on biblical interpretation in *Church Dogmatics I/2* §§ 19-21 (see

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<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 127. In this foreword Barth also replies to Adolf Schlatter's review of his commentary, but it is Bultmann's review that is mainly discussed.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

chapter 4 and 5), but something that Barth had instinctively sensed even in this early period. To understand Scripture, Barth argues, a reader must engage in “a relationship of faithfulness with the author, intends to read him with the hypothesis that the author also knew with more or less clarity down to the last word.”<sup>99</sup> In this context Barth argues that a true interpretation is not so much reading *about* Paul but rather reading *with* Paul. The former focuses on “the other spirits” of the text and discriminates in Paul’s text between the spirits and the Spirit as Bultmann suggested. In Bultmann’s approach one assumes more of the role of an observer than a listener. As an observer, one is attempting to recognize the Spirit in the text, but one has no determination “to stand and fall” with the text, i.e., one exercises discretion in relation to the merit or the shortcoming of the text.<sup>100</sup> On the contrary, in reading *with* Paul, Barth argues, one is not ignorant of the different degrees of “the quantity of the ‘Spirit of Christ’” in the text.<sup>101</sup> But the relation of faithfulness means that one must firstly ask whether the lack of understanding has something to do with the reader rather than with Paul.<sup>102</sup> Barth admits that all human words are relative to its historical context, even Paul’s.<sup>103</sup> He also admits that “we must learn also to see *beyond* Paul.”<sup>104</sup> This, however, does not mean that a reader should doubt Paul and regard his writing questionable.<sup>105</sup> In this regard, to see beyond Paul is to see with Paul beyond our understanding of Paul as human author to the Word of God that Paul witnesses in the Bible.

The three prefaces to Barth’s commentary on *Romans* describe how Barth proposes to read Scripture simultaneously, theologically and respectfully. For Barth, an attempt at understanding ultimately means that one has to read Paul in order to understand what Paul understands about God and not merely to understand Paul’s ideas about God i.e. about his religion or morality. It involves faith that Paul knows

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

what is true about God and in understanding Paul one comes to understand together *with* Paul, the truth about God.<sup>106</sup> Barth shows that theology plays a crucial part in this process, and of particular importance is the doctrine of inspiration. He not only recognizes the presence of the Word in the human word, but also the limitations of human knowledge to recognize this presence in the text. The basis of this conviction is the nature of the subject matter, the Word of God, based on the conviction that God is beyond human comprehension. But if the interpretation of Scripture is not simply about understanding human religious ideas but its witness to the reality of God, interpretation will only be true to its purpose if one considers the meaning of the text in the light of its theological claims. In this context, a theological description of the doctrine of Scripture, particularly the doctrine of inspiration, is a primer to the reading of Scripture. For Barth, hermeneutics is not primarily a philosophical description of the event of understanding, although this also has its place, but ultimately a theological description of the Word of God in relation to human testimony and understanding. Barth's conviction about the human authors, the inexplicability of the subject matter, the Spirit of the text, and the simultaneity of biblical content are all explainable only as the implications of his theological understanding of the Scripture.

### **1.3. Conclusion: Barth's theological exegesis in *the Epistle to the Romans***

In conclusion, the hermeneutical remarks in these prefaces and the practice of theological exegesis in the body of commentary have provided the basic forms of Barth's concept of biblical interpretation. It consists of two basic steps: historical exegesis and interpretation of its meaning. In the later period Barth will no longer construe the task in terms of steps but develops a more rounded understanding of interpretation. Rather than steps, Barth will construe them as moments of interpretation where the connection between historical exegesis, interpretation and application will be more closely connected in regard to the event of understanding. Within the limits of these two editions of commentary, there are still questions about the precise nature of the Word of God and its relation to the Scripture, especially

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<sup>106</sup> This theological conviction will be elucidated in the terms of witness in Barth's later writing. But the idea itself was already present at this stage.

what it means that the Bible is inspired, whether the inspiration is the quality of the text or a divine act on the text, and what are its implications for a correct interpretation of the Bible. Barth does not yet provide a clear elucidation of his theological convictions, and this is understandable because this is a commentary and not a manual of a theological hermeneutics. It is only when we explore Barth's doctrine of the Word of God, that a more rounded account of what is entailed in the event of understanding will be more theologically comprehensive and hermeneutically explicit. These questions were however something that came firstly into focus through Barth's courses in biblical exegesis and studies of Reformed theologies (documents and interaction with its chief masters, such as Calvin, Zwingli and Schleiermacher), something that involved Barth intensely in the next phase of his career as a university professor. In this period Barth developed a more theologically explicit relationship between doctrinal convictions, historical criticism and biblical interpretation. In the next part, our analysis will present the progress in Barth's thinking on exegesis and hermeneutics as can be perceived in his exegetical works during his early period as a university professor. Our primary documents will be two other Pauline commentaries, that reveal some further developments of Barth's theological conviction of the relationship of theological exegesis to historical scholarship, and a more theologically rounded and rhetorically calm formulation in his lecture on *the Gospel of John*.

## **2. Barth's Exegesis in other Commentaries**

### **2.1. *The Resurrection of the Dead***

Until recently, this commentary was given relatively little attention. This is, however, not an accurate indicator of its significance, for as Dale R. Dawson argues, the commentary "is a work of exceptional insight and exegetical power," both in relation to the first Letter to the Corinthians and to Pauline theology as a whole.<sup>107</sup> The work was originally exegetical lectures delivered at the University of Göttingen in the summer of 1923. More importantly, it was, in Barth's view, an exegetical work that

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<sup>107</sup> R. Dale Dawson, "Editor's Introduction," in *The Resurrection of the Dead*, ed. R. Dale Dawson (Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2003), iii.



was fit for publication (1924).<sup>108</sup> As such, the exegetical decisions in the commentary can help us in drawing a better picture of Barth's early hermeneutics.

As with *Romans*, Barth's exposition gives priority of the content over the approach or method of exegesis. Although less famous, it is a very accomplished piece of exegetical work.<sup>109</sup> In the original German version, the Greek text is a prominent feature throughout the commentary. Barth continues to engage with various commentators, critical or otherwise, such as Lietzmann (quite consistently), Bengel and more significantly with Luther. However, the most distinctive feature of Barth's exegesis in this book is his conviction that 1 Cor. 15 is not only "the close and crown of the whole Epistle, but also provides the clue to its meaning, from which place light is shed on the whole, and it becomes intelligible, not outwardly, but inwardly, as a unity."<sup>110</sup> Such is Barth's conviction that he argues that 1 Cor. 15 is the key for understanding all other Pauline letters, and the testimony of the New Testament as a whole.<sup>111</sup> Barth is aware that the letter is usually treated as a collection of loosely connected themes of domestic and congregational issues, and that chapter 15 is usually seen as a new theme inserted to support Paul's pastoral responses. However Barth argues that a bigger theme runs through the disparity of themes, "a thread ...which binds them internally into a whole."<sup>112</sup> Thus in this respect the theme of 1 Cor. 15 is not only one theme among many but actually "*the* Theme of the Epistle."<sup>113</sup>

Although Barth does not elaborate on his exegetical approach, he maintains his perennial exegetical convictions, which he supports through a masterly survey of 1 Corinthians 1-14, i.e., that the priority must be given to the content over the historical backgrounds of the text.<sup>114</sup> More to the point, rather than providing the

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., iv.

<sup>109</sup> Webster, *Barth's Earlier Theology: Four Studies*, 67.

<sup>110</sup> Barth, *The Resurrection of the Dead*, 5.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Cf. David Fergusson, "Barth's Resurrection of the Dead: Further Reflections," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 56, no. 01 (2003): 66.

justification for his exegetical decisions, Barth's theological conviction that the letter is part of the Scripture, guides his conclusion that the real subject matter of Paul's letter is the resurrection of Christ.<sup>115</sup> For him, biblical exegesis is an exegesis of a text as *Scripture* i.e., Scripture as the instance of God's communicative presence. It is a theological activity which is not simply a matter of understanding a text as a linguistic entity, but rather as the place where the self-revelation of God is communicated. In this context, understanding is not a function of the reader's or the text's actualization but rather the event of God's self-communicative action.<sup>116</sup> What matters here is not that Barth is using a theme (e.g. the resurrection) to decide the overall meaning of the letter, but rather that he is reading the letter in which the resurrection is the continuing subject matter in the various issues that Paul dealt with in the congregation. In other words, the resurrection of Christ is the key event of God's communicative revelation, the substance of faith and the foundation of Christian hope without which Paul's various admonitions would not make any sense.<sup>117</sup> Barth argues that in the event of the resurrection of Christ God reveals himself in history and defines the meaning of reality which includes the contemporary reader.<sup>118</sup> With this theological conviction, Barth argues the chapter on resurrection (1 Corinthians 15), is the key theme to understand the overall meaning of 1 Corinthians.

Although many biblical scholars might be unconvinced by Barth's exegetical proposal (to read the letter in the light of chapter 15), Anthony Thiselton argued that Barth is accurate on several exegetical grounds.<sup>119</sup> The two chief problems of the Corinthian church, their distorted views of the Holy Spirit and their disputes on Christian life in an eschatological era, are dealt with by shifting their philosophical orientation to a theological orientation in chapter 15.<sup>120</sup> As such, it is with the

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<sup>115</sup> Webster, *Barth's Earlier Theology: Four Studies*, 70.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>117</sup> R. Dale Dawson, *The Resurrection in Karl Barth* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 39-48.

<sup>118</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 48-59.

<sup>119</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, "Luther and Barth on 1 Corinthians 15: Six Theses for Theology in Relation to Recent Interpretation," in *Bible, the Reformation and the Church* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 258-89.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

presupposition of the theological content of chapter 15 that Paul responded to various pastoral problems in the Corinthian church. This theological approach continues to fascinate scholars, even in the context of current research, and is theologically more relevant in comparison to other biblical scholars from the same era.<sup>121</sup> Barth's theological exegesis is not constrained by the historicism but rather explores a more complex dimension of Paul as a pastor-theologian of the church. Paul is not seen as a genius of religious ideas but a preacher of the Word and in this context moving beyond the scope of historical exploration to the theological implications of the resurrection for church life.<sup>122</sup> As such Barth's exegetical decision is not an arbitrary spiritual interpretation, but a careful and attentive reading of the textual and historical subject matter of Paul's letter to the Corinthian church for theological interpretation of Scripture. There is a strong continuity between the historical Paul and Barth's theological exegesis. Paul, in Barth's view, is a theological expositor of the faith who dealt with the local problems from a specific point of view, i.e., the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the eschatological hope of Christian resurrection.

This commentary shows that in Barth's interpretation, the history of the text and the presence of God's revelation are closely related to each other. On the other hand, there is a slight development in this commentary, compared to *the Epistle to the Romans*. Barth's confidence in penetrating through the historical exegesis to the "spirit" of the text is now more in continuity with the result of historical research.<sup>123</sup> Barth is less assertive in describing his interpretation as an attempt to listen to Paul's message here and now and more confident of speaking of Paul in historical setting.<sup>124</sup> This might be explained on the ground that Barth was more appreciative of the problem of historical reconstruction of Paul's thought. More importantly, there is a sign of development in Barth's thinking on the doctrine of God which makes clearer to him that the absolute freedom of God in his communicative action is in continuity with the historical reconstruction of the letter. We can see this, for example, in

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<sup>121</sup> A. Katherine Grieb, "Last Things First: Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis of 1 Corinthians in the 'Resurrection of the Dead'," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 56, no. 1 (2003 2003): 49.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>124</sup> Barth, *The Resurrection of the Dead*, 111-12.

commenting on 1 Corinthians 11:23, Barth argues that the ultimate setting of the interpretation is the supreme presence of revelation of Christ in the church, but this theological conviction does not exclude the fact that Paul's letter has historical genesis messages and concerns, and in this regard was influenced by contemporary of thought of Paul's world.<sup>125</sup> But with all its historical character, the letter of Paul is ultimately an apostolic message that is received from Jesus Christ.<sup>126</sup> The aim of Barth's theological exegesis is to elucidate the apostolic witness that is delivered through and in the context of Paul's historical and pastoral message.

## 2.2. *The Epistle to the Philippians*

*The Epistle to the Philippians* was first published in 1928 and was originally a series of lectures given in Göttingen (Summer 1924) and Münster (Winter 1926/1927).<sup>127</sup> In *the Epistle to the Philippians*, Barth states that although his purpose is the same as in *the Epistle to the Romans*, he does not bind himself "to the procedure earlier employed in the case of the Epistle to the Romans."<sup>128</sup> Barth does not explain in what way his exegesis is different, and we can only infer from the way he is interpreting the text, that a development has taken place.<sup>129</sup> As with *the Resurrection of the Dead*, Barth is more attentive to the historical context of the letter and the proposals of critical scholars.<sup>130</sup> There are also signs of Barth's readiness to employ the hypotheses commonly used in historical-critical studies.<sup>131</sup> Among these hypotheses are the developments of Paul's theological attitude between letters,<sup>132</sup> the possibility of literary disunity in the Epistle to Philippians (between chapters 2 and 3),<sup>133</sup> the proposals on Paul's anthropology,<sup>134</sup> and the discussion on the first-century senses of

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>126</sup> Webster, *Barth's Earlier Theology: Four Studies*, 71.

<sup>127</sup> The date of these lectures are taken from McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909-1936*, 294, 378.

<sup>128</sup> Barth, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 7.

<sup>129</sup> Cf. Watson, "Barth's *Philippians* as Theological Exegesis," in *Epistle to the Philippians*, xxviii.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., xxx.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Barth, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 33.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 99.

the words such as “bishop” and “deacon”.<sup>135</sup> Other than these, Barth continues to employ the Greek text (with notes on the Greek text in almost every verse). There are places where one can see Barth’s discussions with various commentaries (e.g. with Chrysostom, Calvin, Luther, Zwingli, Wohlenberg, Dibelius, and Adolf Schlatter),<sup>136</sup> more footnotes (more in this commentary compared to *the Epistle to the Romans* and *the Resurrection of the Dead*), and finally, more discussion on textual variants and grammatical implications of the text.

Nevertheless, as Francis Watson rightly notes, Barth’s scholarly engagement is not always penetrating or consistently carried out in all his exegesis.<sup>137</sup> However despite the limitation of his historical exploration, Barth’s readiness to use historical scholarship points to a continuous development of his earlier conviction, i.e., a close continuity between history and meaning of what Paul once said and what is significant here and now.<sup>138</sup> A further appreciation of the historical quality of the letter is exemplified in the close connection between the content of the letter with Paul’s interpersonal relationship with the Philippian church.<sup>139</sup> The content is communicated in a real communicative event between Paul and the congregation, and the communicative event in turn provides the context for the ethos of Paul’s moral admonitions. Yet this ethical dimension cannot be explained only through its historical setting alone but, more importantly, through its connection to the divine reality or the subject matter of the letter.<sup>140</sup> Thus, the theological themes in relation to God’s action in Christ provide much of the ethical grounds for Paul’s moral exhortation to the Philippians. In this way the historical setting is bound together with the interpersonal, ethical and theological dimensions of the letter.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 11. Cf. Watson, "Barth's *Philippians* as Theological Exegesis," in *Epistle to the Philippians*, xxx-xxxii.

<sup>136</sup> See Barth, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 128.

<sup>137</sup> Watson, "Barth's *Philippians* as Theological Exegesis," in *Epistle to the Philippians*, xxxi.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Barth, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 50-51.

<sup>141</sup> Watson, "Barth's *Philippians* as Theological Exegesis," in *Epistle to the Philippians*, 1-li.

The more significant feature of this commentary is its exposition of the whole epistle as a seamless text that spoke and continues to speak the Word of God. The commentary is less helpful in explaining the meaning of a particular passage in the epistle but very insightful in interpreting the whole epistle as one exposition of the role of Christ in Christian life and its implication for the church past and present. The Word of God and the correspondence of Paul with the church in Philippians go side by side so that the Word speaks through Paul's letter and Paul speaks the Word of God in his letter to the church. Barth does not speak firstly of the situation and the historical context of the letter then apply it later to modern readers, but rather he explains the epistle in the context of Paul's and the Philippian church's situation and shows how the Word of God can be understood as the truth that make sense of the whole letter and the relationship between Paul and the church.

### **2.3. *The Gospel of John***

Our final example, *the Gospel of John*, is also a collection of lectures. It was delivered first in the Winter Semester in Münster in 1925/1926 and repeated again with a slight revision in the Summer Semester in Bonn in 1933.<sup>142</sup> By this time Barth had gleaned much experience and insights from the previous seven New Testament courses (Ephesians, James, 1 Corinthians 15, 1 John, Philippians, Colossians and the Sermon on the Mount)<sup>143</sup> and developed a more theologically rounded conviction for biblical interpretation. The commentary follows Barth's earlier attitude to the value of the historical scholarship, but now with a greater confidence as a professor of both dogmatics and New Testament. A student testified that "Barth was even giving some instructions in philology"<sup>144</sup> and making a great deal of use with the concordance.<sup>145</sup> In continuity with previous commentaries, there are many discussions of textual, philological and syntactical aspects of the Gospel, but more distinctive development in comparison to *the Epistle to the Romans*, there are more sustained engagements with various commentaries, classic and modern. Barth was specially favouring the

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<sup>142</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909-1936*, 378, 416.

<sup>143</sup> Barth, *Witness to the Word, a Commentary on John 1*, ix.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

commentaries of Augustine and Calvin, but he also valued the contemporary scholars such as Holtzmann, Schlatter, Zahn and Bauer. More importantly, he had developed competence and appreciation of biblical scholarship in such a way that his theological conviction can freely and creatively make use of its resources. Nevertheless, Barth's commentary continues his emphasis on the theological exposition of the text. At this point of his development, the lecture shows a more rounded approach in his hermeneutics and exegesis. Webster is right in his comment that the lectures "offer one of the fullest examples of Barth's labours in New Testament interpretation, and from them a good deal can be gleaned about the varieties of his exegetical practices and about his conception of theological *Erklärung*."<sup>146</sup>

Among Barth's earlier exegetical lectures, the Gospel of John is where the dimensions of ontology, theology and ethics in theological exegesis first come into view as distinctive aspects of his hermeneutics. His theological exegesis considers the manner in which the revelation of God can be understood as an event in the human historicity. The basic ontology is built upon his conviction about the nature of God and the relationship between God and human being, and particularly the absolute dependence of the human to God. Barth explicitly argues that the authors of the Bible are dependent on God in everything they say about the Word of God, and on the other hand, the human reader is dependent on God's communicative presence for their understanding of the Word of God.

In construing the relationship between God's revelation and human beings, Barth employs Augustine's description of the mountains and the hills as the analogy of the apostle and the church, the proclaimer and the recipient of the gospel, in their different levels, relative to the revelation of God. While they have relative differences, both sides are still "the natural man" who "does not understand the things of the Spirit of God,"<sup>147</sup> and both sides are in need of the assistance of grace. Even so, both sides can only speak of and understand the Gospel as they are enabled

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<sup>146</sup> John Webster, "Barth's Lecture on the Gospel of John," in *Thy Word Is Truth: Barth on Scripture*, ed. George Hunsinger (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 128.

<sup>147</sup> Barth, *Witness to the Word, a Commentary on John 1*, 1.

by grace and not “as it is” in itself as an object of knowledge. The apostle can never speak of the Word of God as it is. The difference between what the apostle could say and “what it is” are due to the fact that even as “a man enlightened by God” the apostle was “still a man”.<sup>148</sup> Barth’s theological conviction takes the meaning of ‘God’ and ‘human’ in their utter seriousness as two theological words in which the gulf is unbridgeable by human work. God and human, however, are not defined by the philosophical distance between them but by the theological-ethical understandings which fills in the gaps of their ontological distance. Even though we will discuss the theological dimensions and the ethical dimension separately, both dimensions are connected to each other so that to speak of its theological dimension at the same time involves the ethical dimension, and vice versa. Here, in the form of commentary what will be the aspects of Barth’s dogmatics, i.e. ontology, theology and ethics, come into view in his exposition of the relationship between the Word of God and human understanding. These aspects can be also detected in Barth’s elaboration of the role of the author and readers of the Gospel in theological exegesis.

The first theological concept is authorship in relation to the apostleship and the historical meaning of the Bible. For Barth, the apostles are similar to the spiritual mountains, not in virtue of their natural gifts as an author (religiosity, insights, etc.), but in virtue of their enlightenment by God as an apostle. Barth employs the concept of witness, which will be more prominent later on in the *Church Dogmatics*, to delineate the apostle as the medium, as contrasted to the source, of the illumination.<sup>149</sup> Barth argues that “what the mountains impart to us is the possibility of hearing something. They cannot impart the illumination of understanding. They themselves need illumination.”<sup>150</sup> This, however, does not undermine their historicity; in fact it defines them. In regard to the historical author of the Gospel of John, Barth posits,

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 7. When Barth speaks of illumination he does not clearly differentiate between inspiration and illumination in the strict sense of the word but rather most of the time use them interchangeably.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 2.



His historicity, to which we must cling, has a place and therefore a limit in time. It shares in the relativity, the specificity, and the questionability of every historical phenomenon. This entails a reservation. He is *only* a man. He has not said it as it *is* but as he could. As we hear and understand his words we are wholly entangled in the historical problems that surround all human words. We cannot avoid them. We should not try. He is not Christ but John. He does not shine of or through himself. If we look at him we look into the darkness of history and not into the light. He passes on a light that he has himself received. ...He is not an apostle at the level of the historical phenomenon to which we are referred. ...To see him as an apostle we need the same illumination that he needed and received in order to be an apostle. He does not proclaim God without God, nor may he be known as one who proclaims God without God.<sup>151</sup>

Barth does not place the theological and the historical aspects of the Bible as two different sides that need to be taken into account. More precisely, for Barth, the text's historical character must be construed on theological grounds and it can be understood properly only from this point of view.<sup>152</sup> Thus their historical character can be understood only in the relation to their function as the witness of the Word of God. The apostles are not religious geniuses whose historicity is anterior to the Gospel they testify to. They can be understood only as the apostles whose humanity, and its historical character, are indistinguishable with their being the apostles of God. As such, the historical study of the Gospel is not to be approached from a purely academic approach but from a theological ground that their historicity is what it is as defined by a theological understanding of apostolic history. This may sound like Barth is proposing an approach to history that is, at best, other than objective. To this possible complaint, Barth provides a second theological concept of the text and its reader that answers the problem of objective history in relation to the study of the Gospel.

The second theological concept is the recipient of the Gospel in relation to the readers and the meaning of the text. For Barth the Gospel is essentially *an address*, and, as Webster rightly comments, it is "a text bearing a divine communicative act to its readers, and only rationally accessible as what it is."<sup>153</sup> It is not just a collection of

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>152</sup> Webster, "Barth's Lecture on the Gospel of John," in *Thy Word Is Truth: Barth on Scripture*, 134.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 133.

wisdom, but an address directed to the readers, which places one in a specific relation to its content. It challenges one's previous knowledge and places the question of faith in relation to its proclamation.<sup>154</sup> Thus for Barth, "We hear (and understand) the Gospel only when we do not ignore that relation between it and us, when we do not ignore the actuality or reality with which it does not so much stand over against us as encounter us."<sup>155</sup> This encounter does not mean a subjectivist/relativist interpretative approach to the Bible. On the contrary, it places the reader in a theological sphere which is defined by three objective theological aspects: baptism, church and canon.<sup>156</sup> The Gospel cannot be read as other than what it is, the Gospel, and Barth contends that "if we want to be truly objective readers and expositors of John's Gospel, however, we will not want to free ourselves from the fact that we are baptized, that for us, then, John's Gospel is part of the canonical Scripture of the Christian church."<sup>157</sup> These domains precede and enclose "the reader and from which the reader cannot extract himself without making it impossible to read the text fittingly."<sup>158</sup> Far from guaranteeing objectivity by removing oneself from these theological domains, one would only undermine the theological objectivity of biblical interpretation. Furthermore, these theological domains have the capacity to resist false objectivity, found among historical scholars who believe one is capable of inquiring into the reality of the divine address through historical research.<sup>159</sup> On the other hand, they highlight the role of divine illumination as "the inscrutable and uncontrollable work of God... for which we can only pray."<sup>160</sup> Barth's argument provides a theological basis not only for the role of canon and church in the interpretation but also as the importance of the divine illumination and the humanly corresponding act of faith and prayer. This conviction is based on the theological argument that the Gospel is an address and that baptism, church and

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<sup>154</sup> Barth, *Witness to the Word, a Commentary on John 1*, 3.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> Webster, "Barth's Lecture on the Gospel of John," in *Thy Word Is Truth: Barth on Scripture*, 134.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>160</sup> Barth, *Witness to the Word, a Commentary on John 1*, 8.

canon provide the objective theological domains for biblical interpretation, i.e., the domains where the Gospel can be read for what it is, the Gospel, rather than simply a human-historical document.

The ontological and theological dimensions of Scripture contain in it the ethical dimensions of interpretation. Barth firstly argues that the ethical dimensions of interpretation have two theological aspects. One side lies in the divine realm, i.e., the sanctification of the heart to which one could only rise up by the grace of God. But alongside this there must be “a readiness to understand that only in the sphere denoted by the terms church, sacrament, and canon can John’s Gospel be read and understood as the word of an apostle, i.e., as the word of a witness not to himself, but to the revelation imparted and entrusted to him.”<sup>161</sup> Thus, the interpretation must be open to the direction indicated by the subject matter, even if it is only a hypothetical intention, there must be willingness in the reader to obey.<sup>162</sup> Barth suggests that this willingness is rightly understood as the objectivity of theological exegesis. On the other hand, Barth admits that no one can fully shed one’s subjectivity in the process of interpretation; moreover this subjectivity is an ethical subjectivity. What Barth has in mind is the attitude of “sincere and earnest desire to read and expound the Gospel, not as teacher but as students, not as those who know but as those who do not know, as those who let ourselves be told what the Gospel, and through it the divine wisdom, is seeking to tell us, holding ourselves free for it as for a message that we have never heard before.”<sup>163</sup>

#### **2.4. Construing a paradigm for theological exegesis**

Our purpose in analysing Barth’s exegetical works is to narrate the development of Barth’s exegetical practice and in this regard to construe a theological paradigm that will make sense of the development in continuity and discontinuity of his later hermeneutics. Our analyses show that Barth continues to use and employ historical criticism in his theological exegesis. But on the other hand the way he understands the text continues to grow in more complexity from an idealistic penetration to the

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 9.

spirit of the text, into a more complex relationship that includes the Word of God, history, human authorship, canon, church, divine command and church obedience. This shows that at one level Barth's understanding of God continues to grow in a way that coordinates the being of God and human history.

As Barth engages more in theological exegesis, he becomes more aware of the complexity of understanding the Word of God in the human word. There is a "qualitative difference" between God and human, and this ontological gap requires a theological explanation so that it does not become an abstract philosophical problem. Our interpretation of Barth's early theology proposes that such explanation was provided by Barth's second activity as an interpreter of the Reformed tradition. As Barth developed his approach, the doctrine of the Trinity, Christology and election will become important in his ontology of interpretation. These doctrinal loci will then form and inform his theological reflection in construing the Bible as canon, the church as reader of the text, and the apostles and prophets as witnesses of the Word. Furthermore, these doctrines were applied to the questions of history, language and human understanding in relation to church's reading of the Bible. In what follows we will analyse Barth's second activities in the early period in his exploration of the Reformed confessions. We will read the lectures thematically to show the doctrinal conviction that undergirds his theological exegesis.

### **3. Ontology, theology and ethics in Karl Barth's early hermeneutics and exegesis**

Our analysis, in this last part of the chapter, will explore the basic shape of Barth's hermeneutics through a thematic reading of Barth's early occasional lectures. There are several themes that are recurrent in Barth's commentaries. However, as an extended theological exposition on the nature of Scripture, and its relation to revelation and its implication for biblical interpretation, the lectures offer a more explicit theological elucidation of the text. But rather than approach the bulk of the writings textually, we offer a reading with the purpose of making the themes of ontology, theology and ethics more explicitly elucidated.

### 3.1. The development of Barth's ontology of interpretation

During his period as a professor of Reformed theology in Göttingen, Barth spent much of his academic work in reading, re-thinking and teaching Reformed theology, and in many ways, thinking through his theology in relation to various theological positions, particularly Lutheranism and Roman Catholicism. Among the lectures that he delivered during this period were the Heidelberg Catechism (Winter 1921-22), the theology of Calvin (Summer 1922), the theology of Zwingli (Winter 1922-23) and the theology of the Reformed confessions (Summer 1923).<sup>164</sup> Harvesting from the abundance of writings during this period, Barth's ontological convictions are described as a complex interconnection of convictions on the doctrines of God, Trinity, election and Christology. Barth's ontological axiom is developed from a simple conviction that "God is God."<sup>165</sup> But it then was developed in a complex coordination of several doctrinal loci. At a basic level this means that God cannot be grasped and described self-sufficiently by human language. This conviction, however, was already present in Barth's commentaries and in his earlier occasional lectures. In one of the earliest, "The New World in the Bible" (1917), Barth argues that God, as described in the Bible, may appear as some kind of riddle to human reason particularly because its truth lies not on the surface level but in a deeper layer of reality.<sup>166</sup> The biblical reality of God, or what he called, "the new world of God," is beyond the grasp of human faith and imagination and it only reaches human readers in its 'strangeness', i.e., a reality that is inexpressible in words so that any descriptive attempt will end up in an imperfect theological or philosophical description.<sup>167</sup> The real content of the Bible is not the human imagination of religion, morality or history, though these have their shares in the biblical stories. "It is precisely not the right human thoughts about God that form the content of the Bible,

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<sup>164</sup> Eberhard Busch, "Preface," in Karl Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, trans. Darrell L. Guder and Judith J. Guder (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), viii.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 79. Cf. Karl Barth, *The Theology of Schleiermacher: Lectures at Göttingen, Winter Semester of 1923/24*, ed. Dietrich Ritschl, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), 183.

<sup>166</sup> Karl Barth, "The New World in the Bible," in *The Word of God and Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 26.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 19.

but rather the right thoughts of God about humans.”<sup>168</sup> This conviction places theology in a paradoxical position, which was famously expressed in the lecture, “The Word of God as the Task of Theology” (1922): “As theologians we ought to speak of God. But we are human and as such cannot speak of God.”<sup>169</sup> But even at this stage, the conviction is not just theological and ontological, but contains an ethical emphasis as well. Such conviction must be followed by the human response to give glory to God.

This idea finds a dogmatic elucidation in *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions* (1923), especially in the lecture on “The Principle of Scripture and its Grounds.” In it, Barth no longer speaks in abstract terms such as “God as origin, pure futurity, the other and so forth,” but elucidates theology in terms that are informed by Reformed theology.<sup>170</sup> Barth argues that the ontological concern that defines Reformed theology is the content and also the passion over the implication of the doctrine of “God’s uniqueness, rule and freedom” for Christian understanding.<sup>171</sup>

The concern of the Reformed in their controversy with the old church consists of a passionate interest in the *theme* of Christian doctrine as such. They are preoccupied not so much with the new formulation of its content but with the fact that this doctrine deals with *God*... Christendom must be taught anew *because* it must become clear again that the issue in this doctrine is *God*. This insight, God is *God*, has burst upon them like an armed warrior, as something totally new, alien, and surprising.<sup>172</sup>

The ontological conviction that ‘God is God’ stemmed from his biblical exegesis and was shaped by the lectures on the Reformed confessions. It provides the ground breaking principle that shapes the approach of his dogmatics and also his hermeneutics. As Webster notes, Barth’s approach to Scripture is bound up with his conviction of the divine aseity and spontaneity of God’s self-communication.<sup>173</sup> God

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>169</sup> Barth, “The Word of God as the Task of Theology,” in *The Word of God and Theology*, 117. The lecture was firstly given in Elgersburg, October 3, 1922 and repeated again in Emden, October 11, 1922.

<sup>170</sup> Webster, *Barth's Earlier Theology: Four Studies*, 50.

<sup>171</sup> Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 79.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Webster, “Karl Barth,” in *Reading Romans through the Centuries: From the Early Church to Karl Barth*, 215.

is not bound to the text, history or philosophy, but in His freedom God is the only way to understand the self-revelation of God i.e. “only *God* can speak of God.”<sup>174</sup>

This theme is elucidated further in Barth’s Trinitarian approach to the Word of God. In his earlier lectures, Barth presented the new world of God in Trinitarian terms, i.e., Father, Son and Holy Spirit as the One who creates, breaks in and implements the new world into the old world.<sup>175</sup> The Trinitarian God is expressed as a creative, redemptive and communicative presence in the biblical witness and in the reading of the church. But what is not clear in the early lectures is the problem of *the mediation of revelation*, one of the central issues that continue to preoccupy Barth up to his later period.<sup>176</sup> The problem can be stated as such: given that God is present in the creaturely world as the contingent and mediated revelation to the human being, how can God be at the same time understood as the free, transcendent and non-given God?<sup>177</sup> In other words, it is the problem of the contingency of the revelation of God who is utterly transcendent. In these early lectures, Barth offers a Trinitarian approach which employs the doctrine of incarnation as an explanatory language of his theological description.

The relationship to that which is not given comes through that which is given and the view into eternity comes *within time*. Christianity says, this *given, this time*, Jesus Christ.... What can be the meaning of the ‘Word becoming flesh’? It is not meant in the sense of a general doctrine of identity, nor is it a straightforward equation between deity and humanity in general. Its meaning is that of Christian revelation: *this* flesh, the flesh of *Christ*, the eternal Father’s Word to us.<sup>178</sup>

In undertaking this important issue Barth made a crucial theological move in which he combines his initial insight of God’s transcendence (Father) with the revelatory present of God’s immanence (Holy Spirit). The language of Father and Spirit could be interpreted as a symbol of human religious experience of the total

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<sup>174</sup> Barth, *The Word of God and Theology*, 196.

<sup>175</sup> Barth, "The New World in the Bible," in *The Word of God and Theology*, 28-29.

<sup>176</sup> Webster, *Barth's Earlier Theology: Four Studies*, 53.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>178</sup> Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 159-60.

reality, i.e., the divine transcendence (Father) and the mystical world (Spirit).<sup>179</sup> But Barth resisted such implications by coordinating the doctrine of Trinity with the incarnation of the Son.<sup>180</sup> In this context, as Webster rightly notes, the event of incarnation is “a finite, temporal given presence of God, a *contingent* presence of God – unique concrete, limited like anything else in the world, but the presence of *God*.”<sup>181</sup> This incarnational Christology provides a Trinitarian language of the contingent revelatory presence of God that holds together the transcendence and immanence of God in creation. In this way Barth can speak the immanence of God without blurring the utter distinction between the Creator and the creatures.<sup>182</sup> On the other hand, as in the emphasis of some of Barth’s early lectures, he also argues that the knowledge of God is not mediated through human activity but is unmediated in its relation to the being of God.<sup>183</sup> This does not mean that God’s communicative presence does not involve created reality. For Barth, Scripture is a creaturely existence. What Barth wanted to emphasize is the theological conviction that the revelation of God is not a kind of intensification of the existing relationship between God and creation.<sup>184</sup> It is unmediated in the sense that the majesty and the freedom of God require that revelation is understood as something isolated in Scripture. Barth argues,

The isolatedness of God generates the isolatedness of his revelation. Revelation is not this and that, not everything and anything, but rather this definite, incomparable one thing. Therefore, legitimate witness to revelation cannot be any random human word about God but rather this definite human word about God ...It is the word of Scripture.<sup>185</sup>

The coordination between the isolatedness of the revelation in Scripture and the contingency of revelation provide the ontological presuppositions for understanding the Scripture principle as the theological context of Barth’s early hermeneutics and

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<sup>179</sup> Webster, *Barth's Earlier Theology: Four Studies*, 53.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 163.

<sup>182</sup> Webster, *Barth's Earlier Theology: Four Studies*, 54.

<sup>183</sup> Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 48.

<sup>184</sup> Webster, *Barth's Earlier Theology: Four Studies*, 48.

<sup>185</sup> Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 48-49.



exegesis. The exegesis of Scripture is the function, not of a general understanding of a text and human understanding, but of the theological description of Scripture as the locus where God's revelation takes place in contingent human history. This conviction receives its proper presentation in Barth's lecture on the Reformed Scripture principle.

### 3.2. Formulating a theology of interpretation

Barth's theology of interpretation in the early period is most clearly expressed in his lecture on the Reformed Scripture principle. Barth's lecture is structured in a sustained answer to two basic questions: 1) "What is the meaning of the Scripture principle?" and, 2) "How is it grounded?"<sup>186</sup> According to Barth, in relation to the Reformed confessions, the key to understanding its theological significance is their relative insignificance in comparison to Scripture.<sup>187</sup> They are not materially significant in themselves but only as the witnesses to the truth of Scripture i.e. the Word of God.<sup>188</sup> As such the primary theses of the Reformed Scripture principle are: 1) "the church recognizes the rule of its proclamation solely in the Word of God and finds the Word of God solely in Holy Scripture"<sup>189</sup> 2) "the specific content of the Reformed confessions lies in its relation to the Word of God spoken in the Scripture."<sup>190</sup> In this context, Barth argues that Scripture plays the role of *the regulative idea* and is isolated from human speech as found in confessions and church proclamations.<sup>191</sup> Scripture is perfect because it is inspired by the Holy Spirit and the knowledge of this inspiration is grounded in the work of the Holy Spirit. This grounding of the Scripture principle in the work of Holy Spirit provides some implications for Barth's conviction of the way one must approach Scripture.

First, a reading of Scripture must be true to its nature as the locus of God's revelation and this means understanding happens under the condition "that the Holy

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 46.

Spirit here (in the reader) connects to the Holy Spirit there (in the Scripture).”<sup>192</sup> The only foundation for the doctrine of inspiration derives “from the fact that God in person speaks in it.”<sup>193</sup> This doctrine does not necessarily entail a verbal and dictated notion of inspiration, as some believe; for on this ground some have resolved to reject the exercise of textual criticism from biblical interpretation.<sup>194</sup> As in Calvin, inspiration is “a timeless, or better simultaneous act of God, by seeing as inextricably linked the then and the now, the there and the here, the biblical *author* and the biblical *reader*, objective and subjective truth.”<sup>195</sup> Thus the content of Scripture is not established or negated by historical or rational investigations, such as textual criticism, historical criticism, etc., but can only be understood as the work of Holy Spirit in the human heart and mind.<sup>196</sup> There is a more complex thinking on this matter in Barth’s later writing, but at this point it is clear that the Holy Spirit is filling much of the role of textual and authorial intentionality in Barth’s early hermeneutics. Because of this, Scripture is also understood as capable of a textual freedom that challenges and changes the presuppositions of the readers. Scripture has the capacity to surprise a reader’s expectations, and demands respect from the reader for the subject matter of the text.

Second, a reading of Scripture, as far as God’s revelation is concerned, only appears as an interaction between the reader and the author, but in reality it is “a monologue of the Holy Spirit in them and in us.”<sup>197</sup> Thus in this context the witness of the Spirit is not the presence of historical proofs, nor an inward subjective experience and conviction, nor a self-evident axiom of mathematical or rational quality.<sup>198</sup> Barth argues that in the process of understanding the Word, one cannot differentiate between the witness of the Spirit and one’s cognitive reasoning; between its foundation in the canon and the acknowledgement of faith to such

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

foundation; between the Word that shines through the text and the recognition of such truth by one's mind.<sup>199</sup> It will always act in accordance with the ordinary human reasoning while at the same time, being the work of the Holy Spirit. Barth emphasizes further that the Spirit's witness ultimately means "*the revelation of God as a sovereign act, grounded solely in God, and emerging from God in freedom.*"<sup>200</sup> In this respect it indicates the importance of the theme of election in the self-revelation of God, i.e., that revelation is based on God's decision to reveal or to withdraw from revealing God-self in the event of the Word of God.<sup>201</sup> The freedom of God is expressed in election, in the divine self-initiative to reveal God-self in and through the reading of Scripture. There is no guarantee of a hermeneutical procedure based on competencies in historical, psychological and philosophical analysis of the Bible. While all these have their proper place, for Barth election means that the discovery of the Word of God in Scripture is, in the end, a matter of God's free decision to reveal God-self.

### **3.3. Proposing an ethics of interpretation**

Barth's theological convictions include and imply an ethics of reading of the Bible as Scripture. Through the study of the Reformed confessions and Calvin's theology, Barth aimed at a specific way of relating the doctrine of God and human morality.<sup>202</sup> For him, ethics must be grounded in the doctrine of God and the problem of morality cannot be separated from theology. He insists that ethics must be regarded as "a problem, a central and burning one, posed immediately in and with the problem of God."<sup>203</sup> As Webster rightly observes, Barth's occupation with moral theology did not cease when he broke up with Protestant liberalism but he continued to search for an alternative grounding.<sup>204</sup> Thus, Webster notes that "Barth's theology of Trinity, incarnation and predestination are all expositions of the single point into which he

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Barth already connected the doctrine of election to God's revelation, instead of soteriology, in his lecture on "Biblical Questions, Insights and Vistas", see Barth, *The Word of God and Theology*, 78ff.

<sup>202</sup> Webster, *Barth's Earlier Theology: Four Studies*, 58.

<sup>203</sup> Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 149.

<sup>204</sup> Webster, *Barth's Earlier Theology: Four Studies*, 4.

had stumbled through his study of sixteenth century Calvinism, namely (and only because) God is and acts as the one he is, talk of God cannot be sealed off from the talk of creatures.’<sup>205</sup>

In this theological context, the ethics of biblical interpretation takes the form of an intentional human action to let God speak as God. The decision of God to reveal God-self in the communicative act of revelation is both an expression of God’s sovereign grace and a calling to a particular ethical human response. The implication of God’s sovereign agency in the textual explication is that the reader is called to an attentive and serious reading of the text as an instance of God’s communicative presence. One must take the reading of the text in all its seriousness as a reading about God who is active and speaks through it, and not just a reading of a ‘theme’ that can be handled as a passive object of research. Thus the exegesis of biblical content must take priority over one’s experience or previous understanding on the matter so that if there is a contradiction between them one must be ready to submit to the content of Scripture.<sup>206</sup> It cannot be regarded simply as a religious text contingent on a particular epoch in human history, but a text that calls for a particular form of obedience, i.e., to think through the subject matter from the point of view of revelation.

As such, Barth argues, there is no more pertinent ethical reading than an invocation of the grace of God in the form of prayer. In view of God’s revelation, one must realize that an invocation of God’s grace is an essential ethical step in theological exegesis.<sup>207</sup> Barth proposes further that God’s revelation demands that the ecclesiastical context is the proper theological domain for theological exegesis, although academic context also has its own proper place. In the ecclesiastical context there is a right theological reason for consulting the old and the new commentaries, and for comparing and sharing one’s findings with fellow Christians, thus taking lessons from such comparisons.<sup>208</sup> These activities are grounded in theological

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>206</sup> Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, 52.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

reasoning, i.e., in the theological nature of the church, where theological exegesis is not a solitary activity but one where sharing with one another is an essential part of growing in the knowledge of God.<sup>209</sup> In this domain, reading and preaching are closely connected to each other. In this respect, the Scripture principle recommends a theological form of preaching, that is, preaching is based on Scripture, and considered as the Word of God, as long as it is “in accordance with the Scripture.”<sup>210</sup> In this vein, Barth recommends a form of preaching that is expository rather than thematic, one that aims at the “exposition of the entire Bible.”<sup>211</sup> Barth argues that “this is how the Reformed principle of Scripture should take shape in living theological *practice*.”<sup>212</sup>

In conclusion, Barth’s ontological and theological convictions lead him to a specific ethical thinking and praxis of theological exegesis. While the place of prayer, faith, church and preaching in the reading of the Bible is not an innovation in the history of Reformed theology, their systematic connection to the ontological convictions and their grounding in theological reasoning are now found to be specifically and explicitly theological elucidations in terms that reflect Barth’s theological position as a Reformed theologian. It is this specific theological ground that prepares Barth’s complex description that interacts with the whole set of hermeneutical issues in the *Church Dogmatics*. This complex undertaking is the subject of our analysis in the next chapter.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Barth’s hermeneutics and exegesis in the early period are driven by specific theological motifs, set within particular ontological convictions and exercised in an ethics inherent in such theological and ontological convictions. The basic shape of Barth’s theological exegesis is twofold, the historical research to establish the content of the text and the interpretative reflection to understand the *Sache* of the text from an interpreter point of view. Barth uses historical research quite extensively,

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 52.

and there is a growing appreciation of its usefulness as Barth continued to study the Bible in academic contexts in Göttingen, Münster and Bonn. At one level, this might be explained biographically i.e. Barth's formative period as a theological student was spent in universities where historical criticism was the reigning paradigm. Additionally, the demand and stature of a university professor, particularly as a professor of theology and New Testament Exegesis (formally in Münster, but practically in all three German universities), obliged Barth to write and lecture in a way suited to the contextual requirement. These reasons however do not explain fully his hermeneutical stimulus. As we have argued in this chapter, the shape of his exegesis, including his re-evaluation of historical criticism, his focus on the *Sache* of the text, and his formulation of the theological procedures of biblical interpretation, stemmed from his growing awareness of the capacity of doctrines to provide a theoretical foundation for biblical interpretation, particularly, the doctrines of Trinity, Christology and Scripture. In what follows we will elucidate this theological development in terms of his ontology, theology and ethics of interpretation.

First, Barth's ontological conviction, at this stage, is a reflection of his critical thinking of what it means to take seriously the meaning of the word 'God' and its hermeneutical implications for reading Scripture. It does not take the form of a specific philosophical mode of perceiving reality e.g. actualism, objectivism, realism, and rationalism.<sup>213</sup> It is rather generated by a belief that the reality of God encompasses the whole reality, and as such, God's being takes precedence over philosophical presuppositions of what there is (reality, being, becoming, etc.). Inherent in such a belief is the conviction that the word 'God' implies sovereignty, dignity and originality that defines and constrains any theological construction of reality. In this account, the chief hermeneutical problem in human understanding is not how to bridge the historical past and the present inquiry, or the accidental history and the eternal truth, but the gulf between the inscrutable reality of God and the limitation of human knowledge. The reality of God challenges the 'scientific' certainty of human knowledge, a certainty that the theology of his day was rather keen to claim. On the other hand, Barth's ontology is defined by the convictions that God is present and is not silent. God's presence is a communicative presence in the economy of salvation. This claim is construed within Barth's understanding of the

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<sup>213</sup> For a detailed description of these philosophical motifs see chapters 2 & 3 in George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

absolute freedom of God. Specifically, Barth employs the theological theme of election and construes a theological proposal of God's sovereign revelation. From an ontological point of view, the dialectical tension between the inscrutability of God and the limitation of human knowledge on the one side, and the reality of God's communicative presence in his election on the other side, constitute the key hermeneutical problem for Barth's exegetical procedure and practice.

This ontological dialectic generates in Barth certain exegetical attitudes in reading the Scripture as an instance of God's communicative presence. It is, first of all, exemplified in the seriousness of biblical exegesis. Barth's scrupulous attention to textual criticism, historical research, and scholarship in biblical studies stemmed from his ontological belief that a reading of Scripture must be attempted in utter seriousness because Barth presupposes that Scripture talks about God (not just human ideas of God) and he accepts this presupposition as a crucial starting point. On the other hand, the presupposition relativizes the result of textual criticism, historical research and biblical scholarship in the context of human knowledge of God. He questions the scientific certainty of all creaturely experience, acts and efforts when the knowledge of God is in view. Thus while Barth has a high regard for historical criticism, he considers its outcome as a relative result for theological exegesis. What is more important is the objective status of Scripture in the economy of God's communicative action. God chooses to reveal God-self through the creaturely medium of Scripture. This conviction, which is generally elucidated in term of subject matter of the text (*Sache*), generates a certain flexibility and ingenuity in Barth's uses of historical and textual scholarship.

Secondly, the theological conviction of Barth's hermeneutic is built upon the belief that Scripture is at the same time the Word of God and the word of human beings. The chief feature of this theological conviction can be seen in Barth's dealing with the historical authors of the Bible viz. apostles and prophets. The study of historical authors is important for Barth because the human words are the medium of the Word of God. Barth believes that the Word of God comes through the word of humans and there is no other way of knowing the Word of God except through the human words of biblical authors. But the critical reason why Barth has a different attitude to historical criticism is because for him the Word of God is not identical with the human idea of God. In the later account, the historical background, genesis, development and culmination of human thought, are the keys to understanding the

Bible. As long as it is limited in human religious ideas, historical research is fundamentally adequate for acquiring such knowledge. However, in Barth's account, while all these have their proper place, the definitive key is the *Sache* (subject matter, content) of the Bible. The apostle or prophet as a person of history is not the originator of the Word of God but a witness *to* the Word of God. As a witness, their historical time and place are important, but these do not define the meaning of the Word of God. It rather *defines the witnesses*, who they were, and what kind of place and time of history they lived in. Furthermore, as a witness, the words and language that were used to communicate the subject matter are very important, including the literal sense of the words. For this reason, Barth regards the study of biblical languages (at the early period Barth's exploration was limited to the Greek texts) and text criticism as important. Barth did not disregard the historical studies of Scripture. However, they are not sufficient in themselves and have to be seen as a preliminary step for recognizing how the human word was the instance of the Word of God. Nevertheless, this theological conviction defines and constrains the extent to which Barth uses and employs the results of historical and textual criticisms.

The relationship between history and the Word of God is complex and not easily defined in Barth's early exegesis and hermeneutic. We have argued that there are some developments in Barth's exegetical practice through *the Epistle to the Romans* to his lectures on *1 Corinthians*, *Philippians* and *John*. While the priority of the *Sache* over historical-textual research continues to be a distinctive mark of Barth's exegesis, there was a growing willingness to employ and appreciate the insights of historical-textual criticisms. We have suggested that in the earlier period, when he wrote *the Epistle to the Romans*, Barth's understanding of the relationship between history and the Word of God was more intuitive than definitive. Barth sensed that the contingent nature of history makes it impossible to be the theological locus for the eternal Word of God. The Word of God cannot be mediated through the instance of history because the contingent cannot contain the eternal, thus only God can reveal the Word of God. However, in his development as a Reformed theologian Barth finds theological themes and concepts that elucidate the theological intuition in exclusively theological terms. More importantly, it makes Barth's concept of history more rounded because history can have a place in the economy of God's revelation in the form of biblical writings (a tangible codex). This conceptualization is generated by Barth's analogy between the Trinitarian theology, more specifically the incarnational Christology, and the Scripture. For Barth, Christ is the contingent



presence of God in history. This presence is limited and isolated in a particular instance of history. Christ is not available to general history but limited definitely in the biblical history. The incarnational Christology provides a theological analogy for the relationship between Scripture as the Word of God and its historical narrative and situatedness as a contingent human event. As Christ is uniquely and contingently God's presence in history, so is Scripture uniquely and contingently the Word of God in human history. The Word of God is contingently present in history in the form of Scripture. In such an account, the Word of God, while mediated by human writings, remains an unmediated event in human contingent history. This Christological construct and its theological analogy provide a backdrop to understand Barth's growing appreciation of historical research. If the Word of God was a presence in contingent historical events, revealed in and through the Scripture, then history and historical research become an important subject for theological exegesis. The study of history, aimed at understanding the witness of Scripture, provides the humanly accessible context for understanding the Word of God. It does not define the meaning of the Word of God, but it defines the world in which the Word of God was given to human beings. This theological reasoning provides a theological motif for using the insights of historical and textual criticisms.

Finally, there is an ethic of reading inherent in such ontological and theological construal. The basic shape is a corresponding human moral response to the divine communicative economy. Barth emphatically maintains something obvious that might be easily overlooked i.e. the Word of God is essentially an *address*. It addresses the reader to become involved in the *Sache* of Scripture. This address places an ethical demand for the reader in relation to the seriousness of its claim i.e. who is God, what is human life, and the relationship between this God and our humanity. To read the Bible with this ethical conviction means one cannot stand at a distance as an objective inquirer of the biblical *Sache* without being morally irresponsible. Also, one cannot judge the text according to one's evaluation of the worthiness of its subject matter. On the contrary one stands under the judgement of Scripture. More to the point, one must be willing to maintain a relationship of faithfulness to the text i.e. that the text testifies divine revelation and that this testimony is a subject of one's moral compliance. This conviction delineates Barth's attitudes to historical and textual criticisms. Barth maintains that the general ethos of his critics is the willingness to set apart dogma and research i.e. one must be willing to be free from dogmatic pressure in the assessment of one's critical reasoning. This

academic virtue, which is respectable as far as it goes, does not mean, as Barth argues, that historical research can establish or evaluate the Word of God by virtue of its methodology. More importantly, to establish or to evaluate the *Sache* of Scripture is already to commit to an ethical stance of placing one's understanding of the truth above the truth of Scripture i.e. the Word of God. On the contrary, the proper ethical attitude in theological exegesis is marked by obedience, attentiveness and seriousness to the content of the biblical text.

This ethical deliberation, Barth maintains, is generated by the conviction that God speaks to the church in and through Scripture. Thus, Barth speaks of grace, faith and prayer in relationship to theological exegesis. It is made possible by the grace of God who decides to reach out to human beings in the communicative divine act. The real *Sache* of Scripture is not human thinking of God but divine thinking of human beings. To engage in biblical exegesis with this belief however is already an act of faith by which one maintains that exegesis is first of all a human response to the divine address. As such the most appropriate exegetical method takes the form of a prayer i.e. theological exegesis is a form of prayer by which Barth believes it is ultimately about the Spirit in and through the text speaking to the interpreter. It is a spiritual exercise defined by a belief in divine inspiration by the Holy Spirit i.e. inspiration encompasses the inspiration of biblical authors and the illumination of contemporary readers. For Barth, biblical exegesis is an act of prayer fraught with the risk of human irreverence.

## Chapter IV: Karl Barth's Ontology of Interpretation

This chapter examines Barth's theological ontology which shapes his hermeneutics, specifically, his theological vision of reality in which a Christian theological interpretation of the Bible takes place. For Barth, ultimate reality is Jesus Christ. To state that Jesus is the most real reality or revelation as "*concretissimum*" (the most concrete reality) is certainly not an obvious truth to everyone. From common sense or reason alone it is an obscure claim.<sup>1</sup> Ingolf U. Dalferth is right to argue that Barth's view of reality is not based on observation or rational deduction of reality but on "the eschatological realism" of Christ's resurrection.<sup>2</sup> For Barth, the resurrection of Christ is "the reality which determines what is to be counted as real and what isn't."<sup>3</sup> Dalferth notes that, "The eschatological reality of the resurrection which Christians confess in the Credo has ontological and criteriological priority over the experiential reality which we all share. The truth-claims of the Christian faith are the standard by which we are to judge what is real, not vice versa."<sup>4</sup> For Barth, true reality is not a private or an imaginary reality by way of social or philosophical construction. The reality of Christ exists independently of our opinions or beliefs and cannot be exhausted by human description.<sup>5</sup> For Barth, reality is known through the revelation, and Christ is the ultimate reality of all being.<sup>6</sup> In hermeneutical terms, Christ is ultimately what is "being interpreted." As Barth argues, a hermeneutics of reality outside revelation is a distorted 'theological' speculation, a figment of human speculation which is constructed by an imperfect and sinful human mind.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *CD I/1*, 136, 137.

<sup>2</sup> Ingolf U. Dalferth, "Karl Barth's Eschatological Realism," in *Karl Barth: Centenary Essays*, ed. S.W. Sykes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 22. See also Graham White, "Karl Barth's Theological Realism," *Neue Zeitschrift Fur Systematische Theologie Und Religionsphilosophie* 26, no. 1 (1984): 54-70.

<sup>3</sup> Dalferth, in *Karl Barth: Centenary Essays*, 22.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>6</sup> *CD I/1*, 119.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

If Barth argues that Christ is true reality, it is worth pondering what he means by this and, in relation to our research, what it entails for Barth's theological hermeneutics. The underlying question of this chapter concerns the relationship between Barth's ontological convictions and the hermeneutical problem of theological interpretation. Is Barth working from a philosophical foundation for his ontology or is it more a matter of theological elucidation for the purpose of providing an interpretative ontology? While we will argue that the latter is the case, we want to make clear two things for which we are not arguing. First, philosophical ontology is not to be rejected simply because it is philosophical, and theological ontology is not simply true because it is theological. While both have their rightful places, it is theological ontology that gives warrant to faith that accepts the reality of God as a necessary determination in an ontological construct. Second, a theological ontology does not necessarily lack philosophical features and implications in its construal and content. As a mode of human cognitive activity they share the same traits of logical persuasion. What is important about the two is that they lead and show the way reason has to proceed. Specifically, a theological ontology works with specific doctrinal convictions that have crucial purchase for an ontological discussion of philosophical hermeneutics. It is the specificity of theological doctrines within which we build an ontology that makes the endeavour a distinct one. In this way the use of the term 'ontology' will not be understood as a philosophical doctrine of being independent of the material content of dogmatics. Rather ontology is used as an operative term in which doctrinal understanding informs the material and formal shape of our discussion on being.

The second question this chapter attempts to answer is the relationship between doctrine and a constructive study of Barth's hermeneutics. Is doctrine important for Barth's hermeneutics, if it is, in what way?<sup>8</sup> Our proposal is an affirmation to such a question, and for the purpose of ontology of interpretation, we contend that Barth's doctrines of Trinity, Christology and Election provide the

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<sup>8</sup> In a way this project will move in a reverse direction from Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), xvi-xxii. Thiselton argues for an application of hermeneutics to doctrine that "could inject life into engagement with doctrine" (xii). Ours is an application of doctrine that injects life (form and content) into the engagement of hermeneutics, specifically in relation to the church reading of the Scripture.

crucial material building blocks. They form part of an answer to this question and we will provide an analysis on Barth's doctrine of Trinity in relation to hermeneutics, the relationship between his Christology and hermeneutics, and what his doctrine of election has to do with his ontology of interpretation. On the surface, these doctrines seem to be irrelevant for the study of hermeneutics. But upon deeper reflection, we argue, these doctrines, as Barth presents them, provide the material building blocks for an ontology of interpretation, in which, the being of God is the foundation for a Christian interpretative activity. It is because of this conviction that we offer a constructive proposal on Barth's ontology of interpretation based on an exploration of his dogmatics.

From within Barth's theological vision, an ontology of interpretation does not necessarily share the same traits as philosophical hermeneutics which offers a phenomenological ontology of human understanding.<sup>9</sup> In the first chapter we discussed certain scholars who argue that Barth has no hermeneutics in a strict philosophical sense. On the other hand, there are others who argue that rather than hermeneutics, it is his exegesis that provides insightful resources for a contemporary church reading of Scripture. According to this view, Barth's practice of exegesis is his real contribution to the study of hermeneutics. Still others believe that Barth's hermeneutical insights are comparable to, and can be brought into dialogue with, theologians and philosophers on hermeneutics. Each of these opinions holds some truth and provides some stimulating thoughts on Barth's thinking.<sup>10</sup> But the common problem with these proposals is that they do not capture the unique feature of Barth's theology in which the materiality of dogmatics generates a specific ontological belief and provides the hermeneutical foundation for biblical interpretation. It is the contention of this chapter that the material content of dogmatics is crucial for Barth's ontology of interpretation. Therefore, over against some of the established views on Barth's hermeneutics, we will argue that a description of Barth's hermeneutics is possible at an ontological level; a description that is thoroughly theological.

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<sup>9</sup> Webster, *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics*, 58.

<sup>10</sup> When in February 1935 Barth said his farewell to students in Bonn, after being dismissed from his academic position, Barth urged them, "... So listen to my last piece of advice: exegesis, exegesis and yet more exegesis! Keep to the Word, to the Scripture that has been given to us." See Busch, *Karl Barth, His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, 259.

Furthermore, such a description will perform the necessary *functions* of the ontology in a theological interpretation that will replace what general hermeneutics usually claims as a universal construct of the event of understanding.<sup>11</sup> This is not to say that it will become a general hermeneutics from a theological point of view. A Christian reading of Scripture, as John Webster argues, is “an instance of itself.”<sup>12</sup> Barth never explored, in a sustained and systematic manner, a general hermeneutics and the philosophical problem of interpretation. But despite Barth’s sometimes “negative” remarks on hermeneutics,<sup>13</sup> his exposition of Christian doctrines engages with philosophical, historical, scientific and linguistic challenges of such studies. In these engagements, he makes penetrating analyses of the theological and philosophical culture of modern theology and sets its hermeneutical and philosophical presuppositions as the context of his theological exposition. More specifically, his theological exposition describes the divine reality disclosed by the event of revelation in the life and ministry of the Church, and provides a hermeneutical guideline for textual exposition. It is true that Barth’s dogmatics starts with the belief that the Word of God is the foundation and presupposition of theology.<sup>14</sup> But then he brings the dogmatic contents into dialogue with the philosophical, linguistic and scientific questions of human understanding. These engagements, we argue, provide important reflection on ontology of interpretation in the theological sense i.e.

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<sup>11</sup> Needless to say that such an abstract account is not to be found in Barth’s writings and not possible on account of his theology that is based on the concrete Christological event. But this does not mean that Barth does not engage in theological and philosophical exploration of hermeneutics. Despite his refraining from discussing hermeneutical method in isolation, Barth engages widely with hermeneutical discussion at points where material dogmatics demands so or implies a theological criticism in relation to hermeneutical methods. What Barth found problematic is a claim that a general account of universal hermeneutics is a prerequisite for specific instances of Christian reading of the Bible. This view of theological hermeneutics is advocated by, inter alia, Werner G. Jeanrond, *Text and Interpretation as Categories of Theological Thinking* (New York: Crossroad, 1988); Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance*; David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination : Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (London: SCM, 1981); David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (London: SCM, 1988). For an account that argues for Christian reading of Scripture as an instance of itself see, inter alia, Francis Watson, *Text, Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994); John Webster, "Hermeneutics in Modern Theology: Some Doctrinal Reflections," in *Word and Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Webster, "Hermeneutics in Modern Theology: Some Doctrinal Reflections," in *Word and Church*, 58.

<sup>13</sup> Eg. *CDI*/2, 466, 472.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

reflecting upon the theological reality of human understanding *in* the church's reading of Scripture.<sup>15</sup> The emphasis is in the church rather than in human understanding i.e. what theologically happens when the church truly understands the Word of God. On the other hand, it is not primarily about formal guidance for biblical interpretation but mainly about what the material content of the doctrine requires for a truly theological hermeneutical approach.<sup>16</sup> It is a movement from doctrine to hermeneutics rather than vice versa. Specifically, Barth believes that from the biblical (human) expressions of witnessing to the revelation we can learn something important about what it means to describe other things in human language.<sup>17</sup> In other words, rather than surrendering biblical hermeneutics to the anthropological explorations of general hermeneutics, doctrines can provide the needed hermeneutical insights for describing what it means to understand Scripture and, from this, indirectly to understand the text in general (general hermeneutics).<sup>18</sup>

In this chapter we will arrange Barth's comments in his dogmatic exposition into a material description of ontology of interpretation. This does not mean that we will provide a systematic theory of hermeneutics but rather will present them in an orderly manner for the purpose of analysing the hermeneutical consequences of Christian doctrines. Specifically, we will argue that Barth's dogmatic expositions of Trinity, Christology and election provide a descriptive content and language for an ontological description of a Christian reading of Scripture. This description is not necessarily prescriptive nor should it become restrictive to a methodological approach of biblical interpretation. On the other hand, it will provide something more

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<sup>15</sup> Over against the universal possibility of human understanding.

<sup>16</sup> There is a sense that epistemology coincides significantly with hermeneutics. In modern theology hermeneutics have taken over much epistemological discussion, but nevertheless it is still a considerably distinct field of exploration which focuses on the foundation (or non-foundation) of knowledge which intersects with, and in Barth's case, provides groundwork for, thinking about interpretation. For an excellent discussion of the relationship between the problem of epistemology and hermeneutics, see Paul Ricoeur's article "What is a text? Explanation and Understanding" in Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, chapter 5.

<sup>17</sup> *CD I/2*, 565-566.

<sup>18</sup> Whether general hermeneutics is inescapably theological, as Kevin Vanhoozer argues, is quite another matter. But it is true that general hermeneutics, like every other philosophical thinking, can be evaluated from a theological point of view, and in this sense, it can be found theologically inadequate. For Vanhoozer's argument see his article "The Spirit of Understanding" in Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics*, chapter 7.

fundamental, that is, a theological vision of reality in which theological exegesis takes place.

Our approach is a thematic reading of the *Church Dogmatics*, and in this regard we read it from the point of view of Barth's later theological ontology. Our method presupposes that Barth's theological ontology of being in becoming becomes more consistently explicated in terms of Christology and election in *Church Dogmatics* Book IV. As such our reading of the earlier part of *Church Dogmatics* will take Barth's later theological ontology to supplement the theological ontology of Barth's earlier treatment on revelation and the Word of God in Book I.1 and I.2. In this regard our reading while generally exegetical, is also constructive in regard to bringing in later material to revise ontological assumption of the early part of *Church Dogmatic*.<sup>19</sup> This will particularly clarify where our argument on the actualism of God in revelation will be understood in relation to the history of God's dealing with humanity in Jesus Christ. We posit that the freedom of God is defined by the election of God in Jesus as God of humanity. God is at the same time free from humanity and also free for humanity.

Our argument will consist of a five-part analysis which begins with a brief argument for the relevance of doctrine for an ontological understanding of hermeneutics. From this analysis we will offer a Trinitarian account of what is commonly known as "Barth's actualism" in relation to his theology of God's being in becoming, and, the being in becoming of reality in general. Next we will analyse Barth's Christology in relation to his ontological analogy that will provide a theological realism of being as God's determination to be God in Christ. This will bring us to a discussion on election in which God's decision of his being provides the ontological basis for the actuality of revelation and reading of Scripture as an actualization of God's freedom in human freedom. We will conclude the chapter

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<sup>19</sup> Our approach in this part is indebted to the analysis of Bruce McCormack. In his recent article, McCormack argues that there is a crucial ontological difference in Christology between *CD* I/2 and *CD* IV/1-3 that it would be a mistake to read his later Christology in the light of the earlier, but rather, it must be seen, that Barth's later Christology stands in an ontological revision of his early Christological proposal. See Bruce L. McCormack, "Karl Barth's Historicised Christology: Just How "Chalcedonian" Is It?," in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 201-33.



with the implications of this analysis for our understanding of Barth's ontology of interpretation.

### **1. The ontological significance of doctrine**

Hermeneutics cannot escape ontology. The problem of hermeneutics is ultimately the problem of being as interpreted being. In what follows we will explain what we mean by these two interconnected statements, provide criticism of their ultimate claim and argue why doctrine should replace such a claim in a Christian reading of Scripture. We agree with Gadamer and Ricœur that hermeneutics is grounded in a reflection on an ontology of understanding, but, we will argue that, theologically speaking, general hermeneutics does not give a proper account of the theological nature of reality, i.e., hermeneutics starts and ends with anthropology, thus it does not provide a proper basis for discourse on a divine communicative presence.

The development of hermeneutics from a special field of textual exegesis to a general description of human understanding was generated by a philosophical question of what it means for a human being to understand a text.<sup>20</sup> It was perceived as a necessary pre-requisite to clarify the philosophical meaning of 'understanding' before a true textual exploration is achieved. The technical problem of textual exegesis developed into a philosophical problem of meaning and language, of sign and signification. In their own characteristic way, every approach to hermeneutics has, what Paul Ricœur calls, "the ontological roots of comprehension" i.e. what existentially happens when someone comprehends a text.<sup>21</sup> Such ontological roots operate as a kind of working hypothesis or an axiomatic presupposition that underlies one's approach. It might not be clear at the beginning of the interpretative process. For some, ontology might only appear in the midst of an interpretative process or only be realized at the end of the process. Nevertheless, interpretation always involves a vision of reality in which comprehension and understanding takes place.

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<sup>20</sup> The development of hermeneutics as a discipline and how it becomes deeply involved in the problem of philosophy and historical understanding is well documented in Wilhelm Dilthey, "The Rise of Hermeneutics," *New Literary History* 3, no. 2 (1972): 229-44. Paul Ricœur discusses and provides criticism of Dilthey's account in his section on "the Origin of Hermeneutics" in Ricœur, "Existence and Hermeneutics," in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, 3-5.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Ricœur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* (London: Athlone Press, 2000), 22.

Hermeneutics derives its existence from an ontological thinking about reality, including the reality of the text or as invoked by the interpretation of the text.

In the development of hermeneutical study, reflection on the role of history in hermeneutics is very important. A human being is an historical being and situated in a specific historical lived-world. As such, understanding and history are closely connected. As a being in history, understanding is an event in a particular plausibility structure i.e. plausible within this specific historical epoch. History is the field of reality where understanding takes place and, paradoxically, about which an historical being is trying to understand an historical phenomenon historically. The hermeneutical problem of an historical human being is, as Ricœur probes it, “how can a historical being understand history historically?”<sup>22</sup> This question opens up a further fundamental problem in hermeneutics, a question of philosophical identity and the meaning of being historically. In sum, it questions whether historical reality must be understood as something purely accidental without its original meaning, or whether there is something inherently meaningful in history and in the life of a historical being. At its root it is “the problem of the relationship between force and meaning, between life as the bearer of meaning and the mind as capable of linking meaning into a coherent series.”<sup>23</sup> There is a deep ontological query involved in this regard, as Ricœur rightly notes, “If life is not originally meaningful, understanding is forever impossible.”<sup>24</sup>

On the other hand, understanding is not only historically bound, it is also linguistically mediated. At a phenomenological level, there is no meaning before speech. From a hermeneutical point of view, meaning is an expression of life in the event of a historical being. As an expression of life, meaning is objectified into a semantic structure. For understanding to be possible, it requires the interpreter to reverse this objectification process in the act of interpreting. Linguistically speaking, an interpretation of a text is a reversal process of life objectified in writing.<sup>25</sup> The

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 11.

reversal nature of interpretation brings to the fore the fact that at the linguistic level meaning is not always univocal. Hermeneutics attempts to explain that the problem of multiple meanings is not the result of confusions of understanding but a necessary reality on the ground of this reversal process in the act of interpreting life-objectified. As such, at the linguistic level, the surplus of meaning is perceived as a necessary hermeneutical reality. But a problem arises when such surplus of meaning is justified on ontological grounds. It needs a transcendental explanation that the problem of equivocality is not just rooted in a semantic predicament but also in the experience of life itself. More specifically, it requires an ontological explanation that the logic of linguistic plurality of meaning is rooted in human existence and is not simply a confusion of meaning.<sup>26</sup>

The ultimate question in this regard is the question of being as interpreted being. The ontology of understanding consists not only in the historical and linguistic existence of the human being in relation to meaning and understanding, but in the mode of being in which being understands itself as being in relation to the discovery of life objectified within the text. It is here that the problem of equivocation finds its final justification. The rediscovery of being at the ontological level provides an answer and a justification for such a problem. At this point, the transcendental explanation of understanding turns into a problem of self-understanding. Ultimately it is not merely about a semantic of equivocality but about how being discovers itself in various ways through the discovery of life within the text. In other words, the being of the human is the ultimate problem of hermeneutics. Whether being is understood in the semantic of desire (as in Freud's analysis), or in the struggle for authentic self and power (Nietzsche) or in the symbolic representation of the divine (religious studies), the being of the human is the hermeneutical problem of textual interpretation. Hermeneutics, at the ontological level, relies on a transcendental anthropology in relation to being as interpreted being. Human being as interpreted being is the ultimate problem in the ontology of general hermeneutics.

In the final analysis, the vision of reality in the study of hermeneutics is rooted in a certain doctrine of being, specifically in a phenomenological description

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 18.

of human being as interpreted being. Hermeneutics is inescapably an exploration of ontological vision that gives rise to a specific ontological version. If this analysis is correct, then there is a theological question to be asked at this point. The question is: should theology follow the ontology of general hermeneutics and begin with anthropology rather than theology proper? Should not theology begin with the doctrine of God, and explore the being of the human in the light of God's being as all-encompassing reality? We posit that this is not just a matter of a conceptual procedure of a theological analysis, whether to begin with the doctrine of humanity or the doctrine of God. More fundamentally, what is at stake here is the question whether the being of God is a reality that is prevenient or not in theological construction. If it is, the reality of God is more than a theological starting point. In other words, divine reality is not just assumed but also prevenient in textual engagement, and as such in the question of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics in general explores the problem of understanding from a point of view where human being is all there is to be considered or possible to be considered. It does not consider the being of God as something prevenient within its field of analysis. To depend solely on its insight for the church's reading of Scripture places theological interpretation in a field of vision in which human being is the sole reality, and consequently the ultimate reality. At this point we posit that theological hermeneutics needs to explore beyond the anthropological analysis of modern hermeneutics to be truly theological as a hermeneutics. It must begin with the being of God before it constructs the being of human in the church's reading of Scripture.

In distinction from general hermeneutics, Barth's theology affirms that, "the being of God is the hermeneutical problem of theology."<sup>27</sup> As a theologian of the church, Barth does not borrow a transcendental ontology from a philosophical analysis of human subjectivity, or for that matter, a teleological system of history, or any constructive vision inspired by either natural or social sciences. He believes that the language and the concept for ontological description of the church's reading of Scripture, materially and formally, should be explicated from Christian theology.

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<sup>27</sup> Eberhard Jüngel, *God's Being Is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. John Webster (Edinburgh: T.&T Clark, 2001), 10.

While he never writes an interpretative ontology, we will argue that, for him, dogmatics provides the ontological vision of what takes place in the Church's interpretation of Scripture. It is not primarily a description of human understanding, although this can be implied; nor is it a methodological prescription of interpretation, although a prescriptive suggestion is not altogether irrelevant; nor is it primarily about the text, the author and the reader, i.e., what is the hermeneutical situation in which these aspects theologically located, though they have their rightful places. For Barth, the question of hermeneutics ultimately concerns the being of God. This is because, for Barth, the being of God precedes and determines all human theological enquiry, as Jüngel posits, "God's being goes before the theological question about God's being."<sup>28</sup>

The profundity of this statement lies beyond a claim that the being of God is the presupposition of theological enquiry.<sup>29</sup> If this is what Barth means, it could be transcended by a radical questioning of such a presupposition, even if the being of God is the presupposition. Every presupposition, including the theological, is ultimately a *human* presupposition. All human presuppositions can be transcended if they are merely cognitive assertions. The being of God is not a presupposition of theological enquiry. In Barth's theological ontology, as Jüngel explains, "The being of God *goes before* all theological questioning in such a way that in its movement it paves the way for questioning, leading the questioning for the first time onto the path of thinking."<sup>30</sup> In other words, God's being proceeds to open the path of theological understanding and it precedes human theological enquiry. It is this reality that makes understanding theologically possible in the first place.

The root of this conviction in Barth's theology is not in a general belief of God's providence. Barth's theology provides a deeper layer of doctrinal conviction, i.e., the Trinitarian understanding of the eternal proceeding in the being of God in which there is already an encounter between God and human.<sup>31</sup> Specifically, this

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 10.

eternal proceeding is the event of Christ, which first of all is an encounter between the electing God and elected humanity. Put simply, the event of Jesus Christ in the eternal proceeding of God's being is the real problem of hermeneutics from a dogmatic point of view. Barth posits,

At no level or time can we have to do with God without having also to do with this man. We cannot conceive ourselves and the world without first conceiving this man with God as the witness of the gracious purpose with which God willed and created ourselves and the world and in which we may exist in it and with it.<sup>32</sup>

In this context, the ontological question is a question in light of Barth's doctrine of Trinity, Christology and Election. These doctrines, we posit, provide the formal and material description and language for Barth's ontology of interpretation. They are intricately related to each other in Barth's theology. The basic conviction is that the immanent being of God proceeds, which implies that God is a living being, both in the inner life (immanently) and in the work (economically) of God. God is always present and always active, including in the Church's activity of biblical interpretation. Divine communication is not an alien activity to the immanent divine life but a threefold reiteration of God's immanent being in the historical activity of God. In this regard, the vision of reality is shaped by the conviction that God's being is in becoming.

In what follows we will explore in what ways these doctrines provide the necessary ontological foundation for Barth's hermeneutics. We will begin with the material consequences of Barth's doctrine of the Trinity for an ontological understanding of hermeneutics. Our reading of this doctrine follows what can be called a "strong" reading of the relationship between Trinity and election.<sup>33</sup> This means that the doctrine of the Trinity and election is connected in such a way that God's relation to his being is decided in God's self-determination in Jesus Christ.<sup>34</sup> While Barth is not always consistent in his presentation of the "strong" reading

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<sup>32</sup> CD IV/2, 33.

<sup>33</sup> Paul T. Nimmo, "Barth and the Election-Trinity Debate: A Pneumatological View," in *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*, ed. Michael T. Dempsey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 163.

<sup>34</sup> For a lively debate in this matter, see the collection of essays in Dempsey, *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*.

between Trinity and election, even in his later theology,<sup>35</sup> the virtue of this way of reading is that it takes into account the development of Barth's theology in which his later reflection modifies some of his earlier conclusions.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand a "weak" reading of the doctrine, which argues that Trinity must logically precede God's election, does not give a proper account on Barth's evidently "strong" account on the relationship between Trinity and election. While a "weak" reading can still be supported by Barth's later writings, it fails to account for the fact that Barth is not always consistent in this matter. This approach tends to read passages that support "strong" readings either metaphorically or reductively.<sup>37</sup> The "strong" reading has the virtue of taking into account the developmental aspect of Barth's theology and the fact that Barth's exploration of election and reconciliation supersedes his earlier account on the Trinity.

## **2. Trinity and Ontology**

### **2.1. Revelation as God's self-interpretation**

First, we will explicate the significance of the doctrine of the Trinity for Barth's ontology of interpretation. Our reference at this point is the salient feature of Barth's Trinitarian exposition in the *Church Dogmatics* particularly I/1 and I/2.<sup>38</sup> In this volume, Barth argues that *Church Dogmatics* is a theological discourse within the context of the Church. It is not a philosophical inquiry into the possibility of transcendental knowledge.<sup>39</sup> Barth presupposes that God's revelation is heard, known

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<sup>35</sup> Among others, *CD* IV/2, 31, 345.

<sup>36</sup> See also our discussion on election and ontology below.

<sup>37</sup> Nimmo, "Barth and the Election-Trinity Debate: A Pneumatological View," in *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*, 177.

<sup>38</sup> At this point in the argument we will not discuss the genetic problem of Barth's theology in which, as McCormack perceptively sees and Matthias Gockel argues further, there is a crucial ontological shift in Barth's exploration of the doctrine of election (*CD* II/2) from an actualism with a remnant of essentialist influence to a full working out of actualism which only more consistently used in Barth's exploration of the Doctrine of Reconciliation (*CD* IV). For exploration of this matter, see McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909-1936*, 455-58; Matthias Gockel, *Barth and Schleiermacher on the Doctrine of Election: A Systematic-Theological Comparison* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 158-95; McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 213-18. For our purpose, the implication of Barth's Trinitarian ontology for hermeneutics is quite a consistent one so that we will limit our discussion on this matter and only enter into this problem in the later part of this chapter where it will become relevant.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. John Webster, *Barth* (London: Continuum, 2000), 51.

and believed in and by the Church, thus focusing his treatment on “describing how things look once one is inside the region or culture of the church.”<sup>40</sup> In this context, the foundation of theological activity is established on the ground of *the self-revealing Trinity*. It is the self-communicative presence of God that provides the material content and the formal shape of Barth’s theological epistemology. In the strict sense this is not an epistemology. There is no methodological prescription that can be construed into a knowledge system by this approach. But it is not anti-foundational either, because there is a foundation for a theological epistemology; but it is not in the form of a conceptual framework that can be readily applied to theological discourse.<sup>41</sup> Hence, Barth does not shy away from discussing and making remarks on methodological issues. Nevertheless, it is the living and active communicative presence of God that he believes generates the insights of describing the theological process of knowing God. According to Webster, for Barth, the Holy Trinity is “the methods, norms and source of theology.”<sup>42</sup>

Structurally, the doctrine of the Trinity is located (I/1) where prolegomena is generally to be expected in a systematic theology. This structural decision, as Jüngel points out, is “a hermeneutical decision of the greatest relevance.”<sup>43</sup> It means that the doctrine of the Trinity has a hermeneutical significance, not only formally but also materially, for Barth’s architectonic vision of the subject matter of dogmatics.<sup>44</sup> It is through this doctrine that Barth engages in the discussion on the Church’s responsible talk about God, a discussion which is commonly engaged in a prolegomena of Christian doctrine. Barth’s approach changes the question of

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> For an in-depth discussion of this issue see McCormack’s article “Beyond Non-Foundational and Postmodern Readings of Barth” in McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, chapter 5.

<sup>42</sup> Webster, *Barth*, 51.

<sup>43</sup> Jüngel, *God's Being Is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 16. The doctrine of Trinity as hermeneutically significant has been previously pointed in Friedrich Schmid, *Verkündigung Und Dogmatik in Der Theologie Karl Barths: Hermeneutik Und Ontologie in Einer Theologie Des Wortes Gottes* (München: C. Kaiser, 1964).

<sup>44</sup> The role of Trinity in providing structure and language for theology, not only for prolegomena but also for the whole CD has been shown by Benjamin C. Leslie, *Trinitarian Hermeneutics: The Hermeneutical Significance of Karl Barth's Doctrine of the Trinity* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991). See specially chapter 2.



theological prolegomena. It is not a question of epistemological, but rather a question of dogmatic explication. Thus, for Barth, the real question is not “how can we talk about God at all?” but what it means to talk about God as the “object” of a theological discourse. It starts with the belief that the church does talk about God. It asks about what are the meanings of this fact and it explores the implications of the theological reality.

When we turn to the doctrine of Trinity, specifically §8 and §9, Barth explores a complex relationship between God’s immanent being and God’s historical (spatio-temporal) revelation in God’s presence to the church. Barth’s argument is that God’s revelation in history is a reiteration of God’s inner being in the Trinitarian relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As Jüngel rightly points out, God’s Trinitarian being is an event of mutual self-giving in love in which “God as being distinguished and differentiated within itself.”<sup>45</sup> As such the historical self-giving of God to the human being is not something alien to God’s being. It is, at its essence, *a reiteration of God’s self-giving* of the inner Trinitarian *perichoresis* in God’s being. For Barth, God’s self-giving to humanity is already anticipated in the event of God’s Trinitarian self-giving within God-self.

The implications of such an ontological construct for Barth’s relationship to philosophy, hermeneutics and biblical studies are enormous. At any rate, it is not intended to close or to protect theology from critical inquiry. God’s self-giving to humanity, as a self-giving to *humanity*, is an event that involves humanity’s rational ability. The rational and critical engagement of dogmatics is not only theologically justified but also rooted in Trinitarian self-giving. Critical inquiry is necessary and must be endeavoured by the church as a responsible faith-response to the revealing God. On the other hand, in and by itself, there is no possibility of human rational inquiry capable of transcendental truth, that is, independent of revelation.<sup>46</sup> Barth accepts the basic Kantian assumptions that human rational inquiry is not only incapable of transcendental truth but that the subject matter itself (divine reality) is

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<sup>45</sup> Jüngel, *God's Being Is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 41-42.

<sup>46</sup> Trevor Hart, "Revelation," in *Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 41.

basically unintuitable as an object of cognitive investigation.<sup>47</sup> The theological solution to this problem is that God must make God-self intuitable to the human.<sup>48</sup> In principle, this is not something that can be deduced from a philosophical first principle but a truth of revelation that is made known by God in a self-revealing act. It is a truth of a real and concrete divine act. On the other hand, not everyone in the theological community, at Barth's time and in ours, contests the possibility of an independent rational inquiry into the divine reality as a principle of theological investigation.<sup>49</sup> Accepting this "point of contact" means theological inquiry sets itself upon a search for a link between the church's faith-based discourse and philosophical axioms, between "faith seeking understanding" and the deduction of a first principle into "a greater nexus of being."<sup>50</sup> It results in an abstraction of God's revelation as a phenomenon of historical contingency universally open for philosophical inquiry. In other words, he rejects the possibility of doing theology built upon the presuppositions of natural theology.<sup>51</sup>

Barth's specific argument to solve the Kantian epistemological problem is based on a belief that God stands not as an object of inquiry but as a subject who is actively inquiring in the event of revelation, and in this way provides God-self as an object of human knowledge. In relation to God's revelation to the church, revelation is not only God's self-revelation but also *God's self-interpretation*. Specifically, it is not a revelation of a concept or a series of propositions but of *God's being*, i.e., *revelation is a self-interpretation event of God's being*. Barth believes that any attempt to objectify God's being as an object of theological study, without the act of God's self-interpretation, is misleading and erroneous. Human knowledge cannot

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<sup>47</sup> McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 111.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, for example, criticises Barth at this point. In his letter to Barth on June 8, 1928, he wrote, "It seems to me that you are guided by a concern that theology should achieve emancipation from philosophy ... Now if the critical work of philosophy ... is ignored, the result is that dogmatics work with the uncritically adopted concepts of an older ontology. This is what happens in your case." In reply Barth argues that it is Bultmann's dependence of philosophy that makes his theology shaped more by philosophy and less by the subject matter of theology. See Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann, *Karl Barth-Rudolf Bultmann Letters, 1922-1966*, ed. Bernd Jaspert, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), 39, 41.

<sup>50</sup> *CD I/1*, 36.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Webster, *Barth*, 54.

inquire into the divine reality as an object of its investigation. Barth perceives the best way to resist the human's objectification of God is through an ontological description of God's own objectivity in God's revelation, specifically, the revelation as God's self-interpretation of his being. The way Barth achieves this objective, we argue, is by offering the divine trinity as the being in becoming in the event of revelation as the way of preserving God's objectivity in God's self.<sup>52</sup> It is as being in becoming that God is portrayed as an objective reality in God's self and to the church. God is an objective reality to God-self and to the church in the act of divine communicative grace. But does not this understanding entail a philosophical reaction to the notion of divine objectivity inspired by Kant's philosophy? Is this becoming an abstract construct that attempts to find a proper way of speaking about God?

We posit that Barth's approach is less of a reactive theological position against divine objectification and more a theological implication inspired by the material content of dogmatic exposition. It is the theological content that informs Barth's approach and not a philosophical abstraction of divine being. In this context, a divine objectivity is an objectivity of God in relation to *God's self-objectification* in revelation. Human beings cannot objectify God as something to be inquired, but God can objectify God-self in the event of revelation. More importantly, God wills to objectify God-self in revelation. The dialectic between the non-objectification of God to human reason and the self-objectivity of God in the event of revelation shapes Barth's epistemological approach to theological knowledge. As such, while the objectivity of God is acknowledged, it is not a given reality always available to human inquiry at any time and place. On the contrary, it is always an event, i.e., a subjective and a concrete act of God. God is being in action.<sup>53</sup> In the event of God's being-in-act God is making God-self available as an object of knowledge. As such, in

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<sup>52</sup> Jüngel, *God's Being Is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth*, xiv, 16-17.

<sup>53</sup> Barth is famously saying that God is "*actus purus et singularis*", *CD II/1*, 263. In the strict sense, only God is properly an event, thus others are so only derivatively. Barth posits, "When on the basis of His revelation we always understand God as event, as act and as life, we have not in any way identified Him with a sum or content of event, act, or life generally. We can never expect to know generally what event or act or life is, in order from that point to conclude and assert that God is He to whom this is all proper in an unimaginable and incomprehensible fullness and completeness. When we know God as event, act and life, we have to admit that generally and apart from Him we do not know what this is." *CD II/1*, 264.

theological knowledge, God is not firstly an object of inquiry but a subject who inquires; God is only an object of knowledge in the act of divine self-objectification.<sup>54</sup> Concretely, God's being is not only the content of revelation, but also God is the Being who comes to speak in the event of revelation. It is "*Dei loquentis persona*" (God speaking in person).<sup>55</sup> Both the form and the content of revelation have to do with God in his act, such that *the event of revelation* as well as *what is revealed* are both God's. In other words, God is the subject, the predicate and the object of revelation, or as Barth puts it, God is "the revealer, the revelation and the revealedness."<sup>56</sup> The being of God as Triune shapes the way theological knowledge is known to the human believer. Barth believes that the relationship between God's revelation and our theological knowledge will always be a miracle and an event of God's revelation.<sup>57</sup> It is always a movement from God who revealed, reveals and promises to reveal.

This theological epistemology entails the concept of an *impossible possibility*. As such, it is only possible within the Trinitarian understanding of revelation as *a miracle* and *an event*. It is a miracle because *God has decided* to reveal something the human mind cannot inquire and that there is a possibility of speaking of a theological knowledge of God. This possibility is necessarily a miracle of faith by the work of the Holy Spirit in the event of human theological knowledge. This approach implies that a theological understanding, which is based on the conviction of revelation, does not automatically ensure a right understanding without simultaneous divine guidance. It must be a miracle and an event, and only in these dual senses, is theological knowledge both possible and impossible.

What is the implication of such theological epistemology for Barth's hermeneutics? It defines the methodological limitation of hermeneutics where the question of God is involved. It invites us to an open space to discourse about the role of prayer, doctrine and church in theological interpretation. It shapes the way in

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<sup>54</sup> Webster, *Barth*, 54.

<sup>55</sup> *CD I/1*, 347.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 299.

<sup>57</sup> Hart, in *Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, 42.

which text, reader and author are understood. In this chapter, however, we will limit our analysis to explore the implication in relation to the ontology of hermeneutics. More specifically, we will explicate Barth's ontological thinking in relation to a Trinitarian understanding of God's being in becoming. It is here Barth's epistemology shapes an ontological approach that is important for understanding his hermeneutics.

## 2.2. The ontological implications for hermeneutics

Grounded in Barth's theological epistemology, we posit that Barth's theological ontology is grounded in the Trinitarian understanding of *God's being in becoming*. In a sense, Barth's ontological exploration is pursued in a different direction from the metaphysical question, "what is ultimate reality?" In the strict sense of the term, Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, as Jüngel comments, "is not an ontology; at least not in the sense of a doctrine of being drawn up on the basis of a general ontological conception within which the being of God (as highest being, as being-itself, etc) would be treated in its place."<sup>58</sup> Instead, Barth offers an account with a serious consideration of the reality of God's being as it is revealed in Jesus Christ as the basis of his ontology. In this respect, God's being precedes all human understanding, meaning that Barth's ontology is shaped by the subject matter and its description can only take the form of a following after God's revelation such that human understanding is a function of God's self-interpretation.

It will be helpful for conceptual clarification to differentiate Barth's ontology from both essentialist ontology and process ontology. In the former account, the vision of reality is constructed in terms of an actualization of substance or being that ultimately defines the field of action of an agent (if it is a person) or the characteristics of an event. As McCormack rightly comments, in essentialist ontology "what a person 'is' is something that is complete in and for itself, apart from and prior to all the decisions, acts, and relations that make up the sum total of the lived existence of the person in question."<sup>59</sup> The event itself does not have a role

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<sup>58</sup> Jüngel, *God's Being Is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 76.

<sup>59</sup> McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 211.

in determining the nature of reality, and if it involves it at all, it is understood as a manifestation of a more or less definitive essence. The dynamic of the event is rooted in the being which defines the nature of an action or an event.

On the other hand, in process philosophy, reality is an open and dynamic process in the flux of history. Ultimately, the process itself is the ultimate reality such that the changes in history shape not only human reality but also the inner being of God (in a definitive way). By implication, both the being of God and the being of the human are unfolded in and through the course of historical events. In this construal God *becomes* in the process of historical events. Ultimately God's becoming is a function of the absoluteness of process.

Barth's view of God's being in becoming is different from essentialist ontology and process philosophy. McCormack rightly comments that for Barth, "God's being is not reciprocally related to the world he created such that events that occur in the latter should exercise an influence on his being."<sup>60</sup> More importantly, Barth builds his ontological approach from the material content of Christian dogmatics that is not surrendered to a philosophical category of being.<sup>61</sup> For Barth, there is no special ontology of being from which the being of God is construed. As Jüngel rightly comments, "revelation is the criterion of all ontological statements in theology."<sup>62</sup> Specifically, Barth perceives no separation between being and action, and between word and deed in the act of God's revelation. Barth's ontology is built upon the conviction that the revelation of God is the action of God, and the action of God is the being of God, in such a way that the simultaneity of being and action is established.<sup>63</sup> In this ontological rendering, the common distinction between being and action is not applicable and cannot limit or define the descriptive construal of God's being. On the contrary, God's revelation, understood as an event of God's

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<sup>60</sup> McCormack, "The Being of Holy Scripture Is in Becoming," in *Evangelicals & Scripture: Tradition, Authority, and Hermeneutics*, 65, n.13.

<sup>61</sup> Jüngel, *God's Being Is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 76.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

action and being, will be a determinative material substance through which the distinction between being and action are assessed and reconstructed.

This complex concept is commonly known as actualism, which according to George Hunsinger, is the *motif* that “governs Barth’s complex conception of being and time.”<sup>64</sup> Hunsinger also comments that for Barth “being is always an event and often an act” and is always understood as “an act whenever an agent capable of decision is concerned.”<sup>65</sup> The meaning of this motif in relation to the divine and human involves a critical construct in which “the possibility for the human creature to act faithfully in relation to the divine creator is thought to rest entirely in the divine act, and therefore continually befalls the human creature as a miracle to be sought ever anew.”<sup>66</sup> But, as Paul Nimmo rightly argues, “Barth’s actualistic ontology goes far beyond the dynamism of God as a Being in act.”<sup>67</sup> It is not simply a motif for understanding Barth’s theology but, more profoundly, a complex conception that the immanence of God is not different from God in the divine economy.<sup>68</sup> Barth posits that “God is who He is in His work.”<sup>69</sup> In the event of revelation, God reveals “not only His reality for us-certainly that-but at the same time His own, inner, proper reality behind which and above which there is no other.”<sup>70</sup>

This does not mean that in becoming God would become another being. What it means is that God’s becoming is the nature of God’s ontological being.<sup>71</sup> God is a living being rather than a static one. More specifically, because God’s being is in becoming, the being of God is not a separate entity from the action of God. The being of God is the action of God and the action of God is the being of God. As such

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<sup>64</sup> Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology*, 4.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Paul T. Nimmo, *Being in Action: The Theological Shape of Barth's Ethical Vision* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 7.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *CD II/1*, 260.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

<sup>71</sup> Jüngel, *God's Being Is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 121.

the Trinitarian reiteration of God's action defines Barth's ontology in which "God is God's act."<sup>72</sup> The being of God is not "the real face of God" behind God's economic action whose identity is hidden behind the action of God. On the contrary God's action in the world is a proper revelation of God's inner Trinitarian being.<sup>73</sup> As an ontological concept, Barth's theology employs descriptions "which hold together being and act, instead of tearing them apart like the idea of 'essence'."<sup>74</sup> Thomas Torrance rightly notes that God's becoming "does not mean that God ever becomes other than he eternally is..., but rather that he continues unceasingly to be what he always is and ever will be in the living movement of his eternal being.... His becoming is his Being in movement and his Being in movement is his Becoming."<sup>75</sup> As Jüngel rightly points out, God's being in becoming "is not a matter of the 'God who becomes'; God's being is not identified with God's becoming; rather, God's being is ontologically located."<sup>76</sup>

The doctrine of the Trinity, as the real material content of Barth's ontology, means that this ontology is a description of Trinitarian life. There is an analogy of relationship between God's being *ad intra* and God's work *ad extra*. More specifically, Barth's ontological understanding is built upon the Trinity as the *self-related* God. For Barth, the Trinity is *the relational event* of God's being as becoming. In this regard, the inner relational life of Trinity is not a predicate of the being of God; the Trinitarian relationship is the being of God. In becoming related to each other, God eternally exists with and in Trinitarian relatedness. The Trinitarian

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., xvi.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., xvii. In this way Barth's theology subverts the category of immanent Trinity and economic Trinity.

<sup>74</sup> CD II/1, 262. McCormack suggests that Trinity is a logical implication of the divine election, in the sense election precedes Trinity, though in a non spatio-temporal sense. This controversial proposal has been a topic of much dispute and is beyond the scope of this thesis. For the exposition of this thesis see Bruce L. McCormack, "Grace and Being: The Role of God's Gracious Election in Karl Barth's Theological Ontology," in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 183-200. For an excellent coverage of the debate around this issue see collected articles in Dempsey, *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*. See specially chapters by McCormack, Molnar and Hunsinger.

<sup>75</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 242.

<sup>76</sup> Jüngel, *God's Being Is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth*, xxv.



relationship shapes the ontological meaning of relationship. For Barth, God's relationship to the world finds its root in God's inner life as Trinity of relation. The meaning the formula, "the being of God is *in becoming*," is defined by an ontology of being that is relationally construed. Jüngel posits:

The modes of God's being which are differentiated from each other are related to each other in such a way that each mode of God's being *becomes* what it *is* only *with* the two other modes of being. The relational structuring in God's being expresses different 'relation of origin' and 'procession' in God's being. As the being of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God's being is thus a *being in becoming*.<sup>77</sup>

The relationality of God's being does not imply that the being of God is isolated from humanity. On the contrary because God is relational in God's being, God is truly being God in the act of God's decision to be God for humanity. It does not mean that God is incomplete without humanity, but as Barth posits,

[God] does not will to be God for Himself nor as God to be alone with Himself. He wills as God to be for us and with us who are not God. Inasmuch as He is Himself and affirms Himself, in distinction and opposition to everything that He is not. He places Himself in this relation to us. He does not will to be Himself in any other way than He is in this relationship.<sup>78</sup>

This brings to the fore an ontology of love in Barth's theological vision of reality. The Trinitarian relationship *ad intra* is reiterated in God's loving relationship to humanity *ad extra*. This does not mean that God's action is moved by humanity. Barth posits, "God is not the being moved in and by us which we know or think we know as our movement of nature and spirit."<sup>79</sup> On the contrary "God's being is not only moved being, but self-moved being."<sup>80</sup> According to Barth this implies that "the movement of nature and spirit, which occurs in His revelation and is effected by it, does not lead back to any self-movement of man."<sup>81</sup> But at the same time, God's relation to humanity as the reiteration of Trinitarian inner-relationship is constituted in God's being in becoming for humanity. There is an important dialectic in this

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>78</sup> CD II/1, 247.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 269.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 270.

regard. While God's being in Trinitarian self-relatedness is the ontological source of God's being for us, it is simultaneously constituted in the relation of God to humanity in the event of revelation.<sup>82</sup> As God's eternal act, there is no temporal or ontological priority in this regard, but only a dialectical relationship between God's work *ad intra* and *ad extra*. However as God's determination of God-self, it is God's determination for humanity that constitutes God's being in becoming of God's Trinitarian relationship.

The specific content of God's being in becoming is the act of love, originated in God's inner being and reiterated in God's love for humanity i.e. reconciliation. Revelation and reconciliation are profoundly integrated in Barth's understanding of God's being. Barth argues that, "Revelation in fact does not differ from the person of Jesus Christ nor from the reconciliation accomplished in him."<sup>83</sup> Barth explicates the nature of God's love in four interconnected descriptions. First, "God's loving is concerned with a seeking and creation of fellowship for its own sake."<sup>84</sup> There is giving and receiving in this relationship. But, Barth posits, "God does not give us something, but Himself; and giving us Himself, giving us His only Son, He gives us everything."<sup>85</sup> Second, God's love is not conditioned by reciprocity and worthiness of humanity.<sup>86</sup> In fact, the love of God creates the capacity for love on the side of humanity, reaches into the darkness and blindness without which there will be no fellowship between God and humanity. Third, "God's loving is an end in itself."<sup>87</sup> Barth posits that God's glory and humanity's salvation are the function of God's love. "Certainly in loving us God wills His own glory and our salvation. But He does not love us because He wills this. He wills it for the sake of His love." As such "without and before realising these purposes" God loves because "Even in realising

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<sup>82</sup> Jüngel, *God's Being Is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 21.

<sup>83</sup> *CD I/1*, 119.

<sup>84</sup> *CD II/1*, 276.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

them, He loves because He loves.”<sup>88</sup> Finally, “God’s loving is necessary, for it is the being, the essence and the nature of God. But for this very reason it is also free from every necessity in respect of its object.”<sup>89</sup> God does not need humanity to have an object of God’s love, as if God’s being in loving necessitates humanity as the object. The existence of humanity is grace and not natural to the being of God. It is the object of God’s love because of the decision in the love and grace of God’s being.

This fourfold aspect of God’s love is the content of God’s being in the Trinitarian relationship of God’s becoming. God’s being is being in act, specifically, being in act with a specific content. God’s being is being in the act of love. For Barth, the ontological statement that is foundational to all ontological understanding is a simple statement that “‘God is’ means ‘God loves’.”<sup>90</sup> Thus being in becoming is not a philosophical construct of understanding reality nor is it a way of thinking that unites being and action in a theological analysis. Barth’s actualism, understood in the Trinitarian sense, has a specific content. Being in action is being in a loving relationship, in the overflowing of love toward loved ones. This prepares us for the concrete realization of God’s love. The ontology of love is not an abstract concept for understanding reality. For Barth, the ontology of love is based on the concrete and specific reality of God’s love in the relationship between God and humanity. This concrete ontological event is the event of Jesus Christ. The next part of our analysis will explore this specific content of God’s love.

### **3. Christology and Ontology**

As we have argued, Barth’s Trinitarian understanding of epistemology delineates the belief that theological knowledge is always a miracle and an event in God’s communicative presence. We also point out that this event is not only God’s self-revelation but also God’s self-interpretation, especially in relation to divine objectivity. The theological foundation of this epistemology i.e., the analogy of faith, is the self-objectifying act of God in the event of revelation. A deeper analysis has shown that the act of revelation is rooted in the ontological relationship of Trinitarian

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 280.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 283.

life. It is the dynamic of God's inner life that is reiterated in God's act towards humanity. This *ad extra* movement of God has a specific content, which is love. And this love is not an abstract idea nor a human feeling but a specific historical event in the life of Jesus Christ. Hence, Christology is not only an integral part but also constitutive of Trinity in Barth's theological vision. Nevertheless, there are certain themes that can be explored more extensively from a Christological point of view. Barth's mature doctrine of reconciliation develops further in Barth's Christology what is important for his theological ontology, specifically his revision of Chalcedonian's substance ontology and its replacement with an actualistic ontology.

In this part of our analysis we will elaborate the ontological basis and implications of Barth's actualism in relation to Christology. The underlying question in relation to our argument is this: What is the implication of Barth's Christology to his ontology of interpretation? For this purpose, we will briefly summarize Barth's Christology and explore the implication of such ontology for Barth's ontology of interpretation. We will not attempt to provide a new or comprehensive analysis of Barth's Christology, because it is beyond the scope of the present argument and has been provided by quite a number of past and recent studies.<sup>91</sup> We will attempt to draw ontological implications of such construction for his hermeneutics. We will firstly clarify what we mean by Barth's Christology and then explore the implications for our argument.

### **3.1. An outline of Karl Barth's Christology**

What is the shape of Karl Barth's Christology? In the past, there was a tendency to understand Barth's Christology as situated between the poles of Antiochene-Alexandrian Christologies. Some propose that it is basically an Antiochene Christology, which means that in perceiving the Christological formulation of "one person, two natures" Barth emphasizes Jesus's humanity at the expense of undermining his deity.<sup>92</sup> Others propose that Barth's Christology is basically

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<sup>91</sup> For some recent attempts to construe Barth's Christology see our discussion in the footnotes of the following sections.

<sup>92</sup> Inter alia: John McIntyre, *The Shape of Christology* (London: SCM Press, 1966), 157, 60, 66-67. Fred H. Klooster, *The Significance of Barth's Theology: An Appraisal with Special Reference to Election and Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1961), 95-99. Warren F. Groff, "The

Alexandrian which means that Barth emphasizes Jesus' divinity in a way that somehow undermines his humanity.<sup>93</sup> Others argue that Barth's Christology is neither Antiochene nor Alexandrian but faithful to the basic thrust of Chalcedonian Christology.<sup>94</sup> Our contention is that to construe Barth's Christology in these terms is problematic because, from a strictly historical point of view, there is not only one way to interpret Chalcedonian Christology.<sup>95</sup> The formula is characterized by negation rather than affirmation and can be interpreted in ways that lean more to Alexandrian or Antiochene Christologies.<sup>96</sup> Furthermore the terms Antiochene and Alexandrian are not representative of a definite view of Christology but rather a tradition of interpretations that show variations in different theological traditions. But more importantly, Barth's mature work shows a critical development that significantly changes his Christological understanding so that even the term "Chalcedonian" can only be used in a qualified way to describe his Christology.<sup>97</sup> In a way we can say Barth's later Christology (*CD IV*) supersedes his earlier reflection (*CD I/2*, §15) of Chalcedonian Christology.<sup>98</sup> In this regard, there is a crucial difference between Christology found in *CD I/2* in comparison to *CD IV/1-3*,

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Unity of the Person of Christ in Contemporary Theology" (PhD Dissertation, Yale University, 1955), 235-43.

<sup>93</sup> Inter alia: Herbert Hartwell, *The Theology of Karl Barth: An Introduction* (London: Duckworth, 1964), 185-86. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus-God and Man*, trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (London: SCM Press, 1968), 33. Claude Welch, *In This Name the Doctrine of the Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (New York: Scribner, 1952), 163-64. For an elaborate discussion of this proposal, see the monograph by Charles T. Waldrop, *Karl Barth's Christology: Its Basic Alexandrian Character* (Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1984).

<sup>94</sup> An earlier discussion of this proposal, see the monograph by John Thompson, *Christ in Perspective: Christological Perspectives in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 1978). A recent succinct discussion can be found in George Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 131-47.

<sup>95</sup> McCormack, "Karl Barth's Historicised Christology: Just How "Chalcedonian"Is It?," in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 201.

<sup>96</sup> Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 34. See also Paul T. Nimmo, "Karl Barth and the Concursus Dei – a Chalcedonianism Too Far?," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9, no. 1 (2007): 64.

<sup>97</sup> McCormack, "Karl Barth's Historicised Christology: Just How "Chalcedonian"Is It?," in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 201.

<sup>98</sup> Paul Dafydd Jones, "Karl Barth on Gethsemane," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9, no. 2 (2007): 151.

particularly on the ontological assumption of the doctrine.<sup>99</sup> While in *CD I/2*, Barth's Christology can be argued as a faithful rendering of Chalcedonian Christology, in *CD IV/1-3* Barth revised the ontological assumptions of the formula in a way that more thoroughly follows his actualistic ontology. There are still continuities between the two,<sup>100</sup> but, as McCormack rightly observes, "the development is sufficiently significant on the level of the precision of his ontological commitments that it would be a mistake to simply draw now from *CD I/2* and now from the doctrine of reconciliation in *CD IV/1-3* in elaborating a unified, synthetic picture of [Christology]... without considerable qualification."<sup>101</sup> The reason for this change is Barth's critical correction of his whole theology through a new interpretation of the doctrine of election (*CD II/2*) that is construed in a thoroughly actualistic way, e.g., revising the essentialist presuppositions of the Chalcedonian formula.<sup>102</sup> We will consider this change and its implications for Barth's interpretative ontology in the next section. In this section we will note this change, outline what McCormack calls "Karl Barth's historicized Christology" and, more significantly for our purposes, draw implications for our proposal on Barth's ontology of interpretation.

In *CD I/2* §15.2, entitled "Very God and Very Man", Barth explores Chalcedonian Christology in a three part exposition of John 1:14, "the Word was made flesh." What is important to note for our purposes is the fact that Barth's ontology, at this point, is close to the essentialist ontology of ancient Platonic Christianity. In this view, God is rendered immutable and that the sense of God's "becoming" is isolated in the humanity of Christ. Christopher Stead notes that for ancient orthodox Christianity, which was strongly influenced by Platonism, the incarnation of Christ could not be seen as a change in the being of God, but only in

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<sup>99</sup> For a fuller treatment on the position we posit here see McCormack, "Karl Barth's Historicised Christology: Just How "Chalcedonian"Is It?," in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 201-33.

<sup>100</sup> E.g. Barth still explores his Christology as an expanded exposition of what it means for Jesus Christ to be "truly God, truly human".

<sup>101</sup> McCormack, "Karl Barth's Historicised Christology: Just How "Chalcedonian"Is It?," in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 202.

<sup>102</sup> McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909-1936*, 453-63. See also Bruce L. McCormack, "The Actuality of God: Karl Barth in Conversation with Open Theism," in *Engaging the Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 210.

relation to other, in this case the humanity of Jesus Christ.<sup>103</sup> In Platonism, God is changeless so that a perceived change in God was thought as a change in what is compared to God and not of God in God-self. As such God cannot act in time and space because that will mean that God undergoes a process of change. It was thought impossible for an immutable god to act in history and time. There is a process of perpetual change in time and space, and change means a movement to be greater or lesser. God, who is perfect, cannot be thought to become greater or lesser. As such, God could only act in history as God incarnate and not as God in God *in se*. In the context of incarnation, to preserve the immutability of God, God *in se* cannot act in but only as God incarnate. It is the human nature of Christ that undergoes change brought by Logos' action in history. In holding to the basic formula "two natures in one person" Barth does not critically evaluate this basic ontology that underlies the Chalcedonian formula.<sup>104</sup> The actualism of Barth's theology, at this point, only reached to the nature of Christ but he did not reflect on the person of Christ, i.e., the being of becoming of God in Jesus Christ is located in the human nature but not in the second mode of God's being. It was only later that he reflected on the person of Christ when, in *CD IV*, Barth replaced the language of nature with the language of history in his Christology. As a result, Barth asserts that "God Himself in person is the Subject of a real human being and acting."<sup>105</sup> But Barth does not explore what this statement means in relation to the becoming of the Son of God, i.e., the implication of becoming the human Jesus as the becoming of the Son of God. It is not clear at this point how Barth would explain that God is a being in becoming without undergoing any change in God's divine essence. In line with the metaphysics of Chalcedon, Barth claims that the ontological distance between the being of God and the being of the creature explains why the event that took place in the history of

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<sup>103</sup> See Christopher Stead, *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 202-16.

<sup>104</sup> McCormack, "Karl Barth's Historicised Christology: Just How "Chalcedonian" Is It?," in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 212. For the statement of the Symbol of Chalcedon see Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes*, vol. II (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1877), 62-65.

<sup>105</sup> *CD I/2*, 151.

Jesus Christ has no clear ontological significance to the being of God.<sup>106</sup> Barth's solution to the question of God's becoming is similar to the Chalcedonian formula in which the immutability of God is preserved by distinguishing the ontological difference between the eternal Logos and the human Jesus. God is immutable in God's being so that there is no real sense of the becoming God undergoes, because becoming is only an event in the human nature of Jesus. The locus of the change is in the human nature, and, as such, it does not determine the person of the Son of God. God assumes human nature that makes God experience "becoming," including human experiences of death and suffering, but only in the human nature. This becoming has no ontological determination to the being of God in the immanence of God's being. McCormack rightly notes, "Against his [Christological] claim that God is the Subject of a *real* human being and acting, [Barth] has virtually rendered this claim null and void through his distinction between a becoming of the human nature and the becoming of the Word."<sup>107</sup>

This ontological stance is coherent with Barth's Christological understanding in *CD I/2* where Barth accepts a "special Christology" and posits that "His Word will still be His Word apart from this becoming [incarnation], just as Father, Son and Holy Spirit would be nonetheless eternal God, if no world had been created."<sup>108</sup> The purpose of Barth at this point of his exposition is to delineate the freedom of God in that the incarnation is not an eternal necessity to the being of God, and to highlight the gratuitous nature of the incarnation. But at the same time this view implies that the Logos is complete in itself without the becoming of God that takes place in the event of incarnation.<sup>109</sup> Once again the becoming of God is only an event in the human nature of Jesus without any real becoming in the Subject, that is, in the being of God. In other words, in *CD I/2*, Barth accepts the reality of the absolute being of *logos asarkos* (logos without the flesh) in isolation from *logos incarnatus* (logos to

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<sup>106</sup> McCormack, "Karl Barth's Historicised Christology: Just How "Chalcedonian" Is It?," in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 212.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> *CD I/2* 135.

<sup>109</sup> McCormack, "Karl Barth's Historicised Christology: Just How "Chalcedonian" Is It?," in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 209.



be incarnated). To accept such a possibility i.e. the reality of the Logos in isolation from reconciliation, is to posit an abstract Christology in isolation from the concrete event of Jesus Christ in history. From the limit of revelation alone, as later Barth will argue in *CD IV*, there is no foundation to accept a possibility of such a metaphysical being (independent *logos asarkos*). This ontological inconsistency in Barth's early Christology is the result of preserving the Chalcedonian metaphysical assumption while at the same time holding on to the Trinitarian ontology of being in becoming in the theology of revelation.

These two ontological convictions undergo a critical evaluation in *CD IV/1-3*.<sup>110</sup> Barth questions whether there is such a thing as a special Christology in isolation from the work of Christ, the Reconciler. Barth posits, "In the New Testament there are many christological statements both direct and indirect. But where do we find a special Christology? - a Christ in Himself, abstracted from what He is amongst the men of Israel and His disciples and the world, from what He is on their behalf? Does He ever exist except in this relationship?"<sup>111</sup> Barth argues that there is no ontological difference between God in God-self and God in the history of Jesus Christ. Barth posits, "His being as this One is His history, and His history is this His being."<sup>112</sup> As such, there is no such thing as a *logos asarkos*, an absolute being, who exists independent of the event of Christ in history. The incarnation of Christ means that God eternally decides to be God in Jesus Christ and none other. Barth posits,

If it is true that God became man, then in this we have to recognise and respect His eternal will and purpose and resolve-His free and gracious will which He did not owe it either to Himself or to the world to have, by which He did not need to come to the decision to which He has in fact come, and behind which, in these circumstances, we cannot go, behind which we do not have to reckon with any Son of God in Himself, with any *λόγος ἄσαρκος*, with any other Word of God than that which was made flesh. According to

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<sup>110</sup> A critical ontological revision begins in *CD II/2*, on the doctrine of election, but in *CD IV/1* Barth begins again from the beginning his Christological discussion and revised some ontological presuppositions of his earlier exposition.

<sup>111</sup> *CD IV/1*, 124.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

the free and gracious will of God the eternal Son of God is Jesus Christ as He lived and died and rose again in time, and none other.<sup>113</sup>

If the identity of the Son of God is already Jesus Christ since eternity, there is no divine being which could be construed independently, with its own special ontological being, different from the Son of God incarnate. The becoming of God as the ontological problem of Chalcedonian Christology is not answered by isolating the becoming of God in the human nature of Christ but rather by replacing the ontological commitment of Chalcedonian Christology with a dogmatic rendering of actualism based upon God's concrete decision and act to be God in Jesus Christ. McCormack rightly argues, "The problem is no longer that of explaining the union of an abstract metaphysical subject that is complete in itself with a historically constituted human 'nature',... the problem is, rather, that of reflecting upon the unity of a Subject whose being is constituted both in time and in eternity by a twofold history."<sup>114</sup> While the theological principles of Chalcedon are preserved (truly God, truly human), it is done by "replacing the category of 'nature' (one person, two natures) with the category of 'history' (one person, two histories) and then integrating this 'history' into the concept of 'person'."<sup>115</sup> As such, the ontology of the divine nature is defined by the history of humiliation in "the Way of the Son of God into the Far Country" (*CD IV/1*, §59.1); while, the ontology of human nature is defined by the history of exaltation in "the Homecoming of the Son of Man" (*CD IV/2*, §64.2). But this is not two histories of two divine subjects, but, precisely in the humiliation of the Son of God and the exaltation of the Son of Man, it consists of a single history of one divine subject. This history is a single history because it is the history of Jesus Christ. McCormack is right to conclude that Barth "has replaced the language of 'natures' with the concept of 'history', and he has integrated the concept of 'history' into his concept of 'person'. The result is that Jesus Christ is still seen as

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 52

<sup>114</sup> McCormack, "Karl Barth's Historicised Christology: Just How "Chalcedonian" Is It?," in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 222.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

truly God, truly human, and is both in a single Subject. But he is seen to be all of this under quite different ontological conditions”.<sup>116</sup>

### 3.2. Ontological implications

We will now draw several implications of Barth’s Christological understanding for a theological ontology of the being of God. First, the history of God in Jesus Christ defines the meaning of God’s being in becoming in relation to God’s self and humanity. The being of God is not a preconceived absolute being that is alien to humanity and has no relationship with humanity. The becoming of God in Jesus Christ is not a paradox or inconsistency in the being of God, to be located in the human nature of Christ alone. Barth posits that in God “there is no paradox, no antimony, no division, no inconsistency, not even the possibility of it.”<sup>117</sup> As such, “Who God is and what it is to be divine is something we have to learn where God has revealed Himself and His nature, the essence of the divine.”<sup>118</sup> It is in the history of Jesus Christ where we learn of the being of God and its implications for the being of all reality. If in the history of Jesus, we learn about the obedience of the Son of God, it tells us that obedience is not alien to God’s being. It is not alien to the being of God to act in obedience and subordination. Barth affirms that “We have not only not to deny but actually to affirm and understand as essential to the being of God the offensive fact that there is in God Himself an above and a below, a *prius* and a *posterius*, a superiority and a subordination.”<sup>119</sup> The history of Jesus is both primary and axiomatic because it is the history of God. It is a history that cannot be supplemented or synthesized into a higher conceptual framework of universal history because God is the subject and the agent of this history, and in it, God defines all history. The history of Jesus is definitive for a theological understanding of the being of God and the being of creation.

Second, there is humanity in the being of God. This does not mean that God is a development of humanity, or that God is shaped by the spirit of human history in

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>117</sup> CD IV/1, 186.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 200-01.

general. What this means is that in the specific history of Jesus Christ, God participates in the life of human being. In the life of Jesus Christ there takes place the assumption of humanity into the life of God. While the assumption of humanity into the being of God is in the mode of being of the Son, not of the Father and the Spirit, yet, at the same time, the second mode of being, for Barth, is to be understood as the second mode of *the One* divine Subject.<sup>120</sup> That is to say that the event of incarnation is an event in the Trinitarian life of God's being. In reflecting Barth's Christology, Jüngel posits that "God has bound himself to this history from all eternity," and that this implies "God's own eternal being is moved by the man Jesus" and that, "The elect man Jesus is moved in his human history by the eternal being of God and is, from the beginning, with God in all the works and ways of God."<sup>121</sup> In Jesus Christ God chooses to be God for and with humanity, and in no other way, because in the being of God there is no God in God-self in isolation from God's love of humanity. McCormack posits, "God the Son participates in the human being and existence of Jesus of Nazareth in the sense that all that occurs in and through and to this human is taken up into the divine life and made to be God's own."<sup>122</sup> Jüngel rightly argues that "There is an ontological connection between the being of the human Jesus and all other human being, because God, in Jesus, transforms history into history for all humanity."<sup>123</sup>

Third, suffering and death are not alien to the divine life. It does not mean that these are something God must undergo, i.e., it is not a necessary implication of divine being that God cannot avoid. It is rather the grace of God to will the man Jesus Christ to be in the life of God. In Jesus Christ, Barth posits,

The Almighty exists and acts and speaks here in the form of One who is weak and impotent, the eternal as One who is temporal and perishing, the Most High in the deepest humility. The Holy One stands in the place and under the accusation of a sinner with other sinners. The glorious One is covered with shame. The One who lives forever has fallen a prey to death. The Creator is

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<sup>120</sup> CD IV/2, 43-44.

<sup>121</sup> Jüngel, *Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy*, 129-30.

<sup>122</sup> McCormack, "Karl Barth's Historicised Christology: Just How "Chalcedonian" Is It?," in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 224.

<sup>123</sup> Jüngel, *Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy*, 133.

subjected to and overcome by the onslaught of that which is not. In short, the Lord is a servant, a slave.<sup>124</sup>

For Barth, the historical event of Jesus' life is an event in God's inner life, thus in this context the event of the passion and the cross is the event in God's very own being. God does not cease to be God when God undergoes such an experience. On the contrary, as McCormack rightly notes, "God is never seen more clearly as the God that he truly is when he suffers death on a cross. Here is where his true being is disclosed."<sup>125</sup> God does not become this on account of an accidental-historical tragedy. God does not become this because human or social determinations necessitate the will of God. God becomes this because of the gracious and loving election to be God in this way, and none other.<sup>126</sup>

Finally, there is a participation of the human Jesus in the being of God.<sup>127</sup> In Jesus Christ, there is a sharing of the history of God through the obedience of the Son of God.<sup>128</sup> This participation is not a deification of Jesus' human nature but rather the conformity of humanity to the will of God. In this way humanity is defined. The history of the obedience of the Son of God is by implication the universal history of all humanity.<sup>129</sup> On the other hand, this participation does not eliminate the distinction between the being of God and human being. It defines Christ's act of self-humiliation as an act that is very dear to the inner life of God.<sup>130</sup> McCormack rightly comments that the exaltation of the human Jesus consists of an act of active conformity to the history of obedience and humiliation of God.<sup>131</sup> Thus, it shows the

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<sup>124</sup> CD IV/1, 176.

<sup>125</sup> McCormack, "Karl Barth's Historicised Christology: Just How "Chalcedonian" Is It?," in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 225.

<sup>126</sup> We will explore this theme in the next part of this chapter, in the discussion on election and Barth's interpretative ontology.

<sup>127</sup> McCormack, "Karl Barth's Historicised Christology: Just How "Chalcedonian" Is It?," in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 226.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Jüngel, *Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy*, 133.

<sup>130</sup> McCormack, "Karl Barth's Historicised Christology: Just How "Chalcedonian" Is It?," in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 226.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

meaning of true humanity. It is a confirming of human determination to the determination of God to be God for humanity.

The ontological implication of Barth's Christology is closely related to Barth's doctrine of election. It is the determination of God to elect the God-human Jesus Christ to be the reality of God's inner being that shapes Barth's Christological revision of Chalcedonian ontology. In the next part of our analysis we will explore Barth's doctrine of election and draw further ontological implications from it for Barth's ontology of interpretation.

#### **4. Election and ontology**

We will now analyse Barth's doctrine of election and draw out its implication for his ontology of interpretation. In the analysis we will first summarize Barth's doctrine of election *CD II/2* in relation to his understanding of the ontology of God's being in becoming and show how this doctrine develops in Barth's later reflections in the doctrine of reconciliation (*CD IV*). This analysis will explore further the ontology of God's being in becoming but now view it from the perspective of Barth's doctrine of election. Following our analysis, we will draw out some implications of Barth's doctrine of election for understanding his ontology of interpretation.

##### **4.1. Barth on Divine election**

Matthias Gockel rightly notes that there is an important development in Barth's doctrine of election, especially when we compare his thinking in *the Epistle to the Romans* with *CD II/2*.<sup>132</sup> In the period of *Romans* commentaries Barth interprets the doctrine of election as a historical dialectic between election and rejection in the human response to God's universal election (following Schleiermacher). In his later period Barth combines the historical and the eternal perspective of election by construing Jesus Christ as both *the elected* and *the rejected* human being in God's decision to be God in Jesus Christ as *the electing* God.

In *CD II/2*, Barth explores this doctrine in four important sections (§32-35) and elucidates its meaning and implications for his doctrines of God, church and

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<sup>132</sup> See Gockel, *Barth and Schleiermacher on the Doctrine of Election: A Systematic-Theological Comparison*, chapters 3-5.

humanity. For our purposes, we will limit our exploration in relation to Barth's ontology of God. This is where Barth's doctrine of election is at its most creative. For Barth, election is not primarily a soteriological doctrine. In fact Barth is very critical of Calvin's soteriological understanding of *decretum absolutum* where humans are predestined from eternity to salvation or condemnation.<sup>133</sup> Against this view, election is primarily a doctrine of God and only secondarily/derivatively is it a doctrine of salvation. In what follows we will summarize Barth's thinking on this doctrine.

The core of Barth's election can be summarized into two interconnected theses.<sup>134</sup> First, Jesus Christ is the elected Man for humanity; second, Jesus Christ is the electing God for humanity. The first thesis is Barth's revision of the older conception of election. In the older Reformed conception the decree of God is construed as something unfathomable and is regarded as a mystery of God's way with the world and humanity.<sup>135</sup> This is applied to the teaching that humanity is eternally destined and separated into elect and reprobate irrespective of (or in incompatibility with) their historical life. Barth makes a critical remark against such conception.

Our thesis is that God's eternal will is the election of Jesus Christ. At this point we part company with all previous interpretations of the doctrine of predestination. In these the Subject and object of predestination (the electing God and elected man) are determined ultimately by the fact that both quantities are treated as unknown. We may say that the electing God is a supreme being who disposes freely according to His own omnipotence, righteousness and mercy. We may say that to Him may be ascribed the lordship over all things, and above all the absolute right and absolute power to determine the destiny of man. But when we say that, then ultimately and fundamentally the electing God is an unknown quantity. On the other hand, we may say that elected man is the man who has come under the eternal

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<sup>133</sup> *CD* II/2, 136.

<sup>134</sup> In *CD* II/2, 145 Barth posits, "Starting from Jn. 1<sup>1f.</sup>, we have laid down and developed two statements concerning the election of Jesus Christ. The first is that Jesus Christ is the electing God. This statement answers the question of the Subject of the eternal election of grace. And the second is that Jesus Christ is elected man. This statement answers the question of the object of the eternal election of grace. Strictly speaking, the whole dogma of predestination is contained in these two statements. Everything else that we have to say about it must consist in the development and application of what is said in these two statements taken together."

<sup>135</sup> Aaron T. Smith, "God's Self-Specification: His Being Is His Electing," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 62, no. 1 (2009): 3.

good-pleasure of God, the man whom from all eternity God has foreordained to fellowship with Himself. But when we say that, then ultimately and fundamentally elected man is also an unknown quantity. At this point obscurity has undoubtedly enveloped the theories of even the most prominent representatives and exponents of the doctrine of predestination. Indeed, in the most consistently developed forms of the dogma we are told openly that on both sides we have to do, necessarily, with a great mystery. In the sharpest contrast to this view our thesis that the eternal will of God is the election of Jesus Christ means that we deny the existence of any such twofold mystery.<sup>136</sup>

Barth grounds election in Jesus Christ and strips off what he regards as the “obscurity” of the old formulation. For Barth the old doctrine of election does not have a clear answer to the question: who is the God who elects and who is the human being, the elect? In contrast, for Barth, these are the most crucial questions for a theology of election. The failure to answer these questions, according to Barth, is because the abstract conception of election is rooted in the anthropological or socio-historical starting point of the doctrine, i.e., why everybody is not saved. As such, Barth clears this problem and builds his doctrine from the concrete revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Barth focuses his exposition to answer the question (who is the God that elects and who is humanity that is elect) by positing Jesus as the electing God and the elected human, and in him all humanity is elected. As such, Barth makes a radical revision of the meaning of the reprobate. Jesus Christ is the only reprobate as seen from the fact of the cross. More specifically, in God’s election, Jesus is the only reprobate who undergoes God’s rejection, such that it is impossible for anyone to be reprobate in view of God’s rejection of Christ at the cross. Barth continues the Calvinist theme of double predestination but modifies and isolates its meaning onto a single individual, who is the elect and the reprobate at the same time - Jesus Christ.<sup>137</sup>

The election of Jesus Christ as the elected human reveals not only who God is but also God’s will for humanity. For Barth because God’s will is known only by God’s self-revelation, God is not different from God’s will. Barth posits, “The eternal will of God in the election of Jesus Christ is His will to give Himself for the

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<sup>136</sup> *CD II/2*, 146.

<sup>137</sup> *CD II/2*, 161.



sake of man as created by Him and fallen from Him. ...His self-giving: God gave-not only as an actual event but as something eternally foreordained... He hazarded Himself. He did not do this for nothing, but for man as created by Him and fallen away from Him.”<sup>138</sup> God elects to be with rejected humanity, and to share in humanity’s suffering and death. It does not mean there is a necessity of death and suffering in God’s life, but rather in choosing to be with humanity God chooses from eternity to partake in the suffering and death of humanity. God can suffer and die because God wills it. This takes place in the election of Jesus Christ in eternity and unfolds in the history of Jesus of Nazareth. In Him, God assumes the rejection of human being as God’s own rejection. God does not have to do this, but God wills it. In doing this “God declares His solidarity with [humanity], taking his place in respect of their necessary consequence, suffering in Himself what man ought to have suffered.”<sup>139</sup> The implication is that God’s eternal covenant of grace with humanity is a decision to be in solidarity with humanity. This, however, is not the end of the story because in the election of Jesus Christ God elects humanity. God elects humanity when God elects Jesus Christ as God-human in eternity. This brings us to the anthropological dimension of God’s election.

In the election of Jesus Christ God defines God’s eternal will for what it means to be part of God’s elect humanity. The purpose of God’s reconciliation is to bring humanity “home” i.e. the eternal purpose of God for humanity. Barth posits, “It was God who went into the far country, and it is man who returns home. Both took place in the one Jesus Christ.”<sup>140</sup> Jüngel rightly comments, “There is an ontological connection between the being of the human Jesus and all other human being, because God, in Jesus, transforms history into history for all humanity. It is precisely for this reason that the history of Jesus Christ is both God’s history and humanity’s history”.<sup>141</sup> The election of humanity is an election to partake in God’s eternal will of being with humanity. In the suffering and death of a concrete human it is shown that humanity takes part in the eternal resolve of the divine-human Jesus Christ. It is in

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>140</sup> *CD IV/ 2*. 21.

<sup>141</sup> Jüngel, *Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy*, 133.

Jesus Christ that God elects a humanity that is decided as God's eternal purpose. It is a humanity which finds its glory in humiliation. It is a humanity that will be redeemed from the sinful, arrogant, and slothful humanity. Jüngel rightly explains, "The history of the man Jesus on earth actualizes the being of the man Jesus, which was in the beginning with God."<sup>142</sup>

Barth's second thesis is equally important for understanding his ontology of interpretation i.e. Jesus Christ is the electing God. Barth believes that the first thesis must be understood as tied to the assertion, "Jesus Christ is the electing God."<sup>143</sup> The electing God in the Trinitarian life has a clear identity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Specifically, the identity of the Son was already Jesus Christ in this eternal election.<sup>144</sup> Jesus Christ replaces the idea of *decretum absolutum*, in which God is understood as a mysterious being. In this old doctrine, there is a speculation about the identity of the divine being who decides election in the depth of God's being. Contrary to this view, Barth posits, "We must not ask any other but [Jesus Christ]. In no depth of the Godhead shall we encounter any other but Him. There is no such thing as Godhead in itself. Godhead is always the Godhead of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit."<sup>145</sup> In the eternal decision of God the Son of God, the Logos already has a name, that is, Jesus Christ.

Why is Barth insisting on claiming that Jesus Christ is the electing God? What role does it play in his construal of Christian theology? To understand Barth's decision on this theological construct we need to perceive its theological significance against the background of the alternative view in the historical doctrine of election. The alternative to Barth's view is to see the electing Son of God in pre-incarnation form as *logos asarkos* (Logos without flesh), as God without identifying God's being by the history of Jesus Christ. If this is what Barth proposes, then there would be nothing radical in Barth's doctrine of election in regard to the being of God. The election of Jesus Christ would then only achieve a soteriological purpose, and it

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> CD II/2, 103.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 101-02.

<sup>145</sup> CD II/2, 100-01.

would have no consequence to the being of God. The Logos arbitrarily elects to be incarnated, to be the reconciler of the world. This Logos, then, is an unidentified Logos. It is a Logos that is only arbitrarily related to the reconciliation of the world. But this is not what Barth is arguing. In contrast, Barth posits, it is Jesus Christ, the God-human, who is the electing God. Already in the act of election it is the Son of God as the God-human who acts as the electing God. Since eternity the Son of God has a name. Since eternity the Logos is Jesus Christ. It is not Jesus Christ who is identified as the Logos, but Logos who is identified as Jesus Christ.

Election, for Barth, is not primarily soteriological but a question of who God is and what is it that is very dear to the eternal being of God. To claim that Jesus Christ is the electing God is to claim that election is about how the will of God determines God's being. Barth posits, "[election] is part of the doctrine of God because originally God's election of man is a predestination not merely of man but of Himself."<sup>146</sup> It is good news because in Jesus Christ God chooses God's being as a being in relationship with and for humanity, and a being in which the incarnation, the cross and the resurrection are at the heart of God's eternal essence.<sup>147</sup> The essence of Barth's doctrine of election is the doctrine of the decision of God's being because, as Jüngel notes, "the decision of the election of grace not only affects elect humanity but also at the same time affects God in a fundamental way."<sup>148</sup> McCormack rightly comments that for Barth,

Election is the event in God's life in which he assigns to Himself the being he will have for all eternity. It is an act of Self-determination by means of which God chooses in Jesus Christ love and mercy for the human race and judgment (reprobation) for Himself. ...Thus ultimately, the reason ontology is very much to the fore in Barth's thinking is that *the death of Jesus Christ in God-abandonment, precisely as human experience, is understood by Him to be an event in God's own life*. And yet Barth also wants to insist that when God gives himself over in this way to our contradiction of Him and the judgment which falls upon it, he does not give Himself away. He does not cease to be God in becoming incarnate and dying in this way. He takes this human

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>147</sup> Barth posits, "The doctrine of the divine election of grace is the sum of the Gospel. It is the content of the good news which is Jesus Christ." *CD II/2*, 10.

<sup>148</sup> Jüngel, *God's Being Is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 84.

experience into his own life and extinguishes its power over us. But He is not changed on an ontological level by this experience for the simple reason that his being, from eternity, is determined as a being-for this event.<sup>149</sup>

This ontological construal of God's being is not built on an essentialist approach in which the essence of the Son of God is complete regardless of the decision and the act of God in and for the world. McCormack notes that for Barth's actualistic approach, "'essence' is given in the act of electing and is, in fact, constituted by [God's] eternal acts and relation."<sup>150</sup> In Barth's ontology, God's decision is not differentiated from God's being.<sup>151</sup> The decision of God is not seen as a complement to God's being. The decision of God is the being of God itself. Although sounding strange, what it essentially means is that God is a being who is self-moved in God's freedom. Barth is at pains to show that God's decision and God's freedom are one and the same thing. The event of God's decision always means the event of God's freedom for, as Jüngel comments, "as event, God's being *is* his own decision."<sup>152</sup> Barth believes that "the fact that God's being is event, the event of God's act, necessarily ...means that it is His own conscious, willed and executed decision."<sup>153</sup> The event of God's decision is not an arbitrary event nor is it out of any necessity. On the contrary, God's decision is the event of God's freedom in God's grace. Put differently, the freedom of God's decision is the event of the grace of God. In Barth's ontological approach, even grace is not a necessity to God's being, a substance which necessitates the result of God's decision, but something that

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<sup>149</sup> McCormack, "Grace and Being: The Role of God's Gracious Election in Karl Barth's Theological Ontology," in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 189.

<sup>150</sup> McCormack notes that God's decision is constitutive of God's being should not be understood in Hegelian term. For Hegel, the Trinitarian act and decision for differentiating God-self, and as such of reconciling God-self to which is not God is out of necessity rather than freedom. Furthermore, Hegel conflates the coming to consciousness of human being in history with God's awareness since God is the Spirit who becomes in and through historical process. As such, for Hegel, God's immanence is a future reality as it is constituted through historical process. For Barth, election as constitutive of God's being is "a consequence of the primal decision in which God assigned to himself the being he would have throughout eternity... the being of God in eternity, as consequence of the primal decision of election, is a being which looks forward. It is a being in the mode of anticipation". The immanent Trinity as such is not the result of historical process but rather already complete in eternity. See *ibid.*, 190-91.

<sup>151</sup> Jüngel, *God's Being Is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 80-81.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>153</sup> *CD II/1*, 271.

is seen as the result of God's decision.<sup>154</sup> So, for Barth, grace is defined in the being of God by his decision to be God in Jesus Christ. Through this understanding, Barth's ontological paradigm is shaped by his Trinitarian ontology of being in action, being in freedom and being in grace.<sup>155</sup> In this way God's election means primarily God's free decision to be God in and as the man Jesus Christ. It is grounded in God's eternal triune life, in his freedom and self-determination to be God for human being and creation in Jesus Christ. It is in God's self-determination to be God in Jesus Christ that God reveals the true being of God, i.e., in the decision of humiliation, to suffer and die for humanity. In being God for humanity, God truly becomes what God is in God's inner being. The freedom of God is not a freedom to avoid and to exempt God's being from death and suffering. It is the eternal will of God to use God's freedom in self-determination as God for humanity. God is free in relation to God's being and human being in such a way that God can use his freedom to determine God's being as a being for humanity. God does not cease from being the free God by binding God's inner being to the history of humanity. In fact, God is revealed as the most free being in God's decision to be God for humanity.

#### **4.2. Election and interpretative ontology**

All these discussions on Barth's election are very stimulating as a dogmatic exploration. But what is their relevance for our question regarding Barth's interpretative ontology? If our starting point is that the being of God is the hermeneutical problem of theology, then we posit that these discussions are very relevant to three hermeneutical questions. The first is the relationship between God and the reality of the world in God's inner being; the second is the relationship between God and the Christian reader; the third is the relationship between God's freedom and God's work toward the world.

Before we enter into the explication of these themes, we will argue that this relationship, as based on Barth's doctrine of election, is covenantal in nature. Barth's ontology is not about the relationship between God and the world in general, but

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<sup>154</sup> Jüngel, *God's Being Is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 121-22.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

about a specific relationship, a concrete historical event which is Jesus Christ. McCormack rightfully argues that it is more properly called as “covenant ontology.”<sup>156</sup> The relationship of God with the world is a relationship that is based on God’s relationship to God’s self in the specific determination to be God in Jesus Christ. Jüngel rightly comments that for Barth election “as the beginning of all the ways and works of God,... is not only an *opus Dei ad extra* [external work of God] or, more precisely, an *opus Dei ad extra externum* [external work of God directed outwards]; it is at the same time an *opus Dei ad extra internum* [external work of God directed inwards].”<sup>157</sup> The being of God in relation to the world is decided in the inward relationship of God when God elects the concrete history of Jesus Christ as the inner being of God’s immanence.

The first is the relationship between God and the world which is established by the act of God’s self-determination (election). The world is not an independent reality which is left to be interpreted by any non-partisan observer. Election means God is not ontologically absent from the world, and that the world is not a mechanistic reality (in a Newtonian sense) with an open hermeneutical gap between what it is and its *telos*. Reality is not an ocean of meaninglessness. On the other hand, reality is not construed as a teleological reality in a naïve sense, shaped by transcendental reason and by human self-confidence in construing meaning and purpose. The doctrine of election confronts us in our understanding of the world and ourselves. The history of the world is not a lonesome history deserted from the being of God. In the election of Jesus Christ, the history of the world is decided as the history of God’s being. In this history the event of creation, reconciliation and redemption are eternally decided to overcome the meaninglessness of reality. God decides to heal the open wound of hermeneutical and existential meaninglessness. Reality is inherently meaningful because of the decision of God in Jesus Christ. The problem of meaninglessness is already faced and overcome by God in the eternal decision to be with God’s creation.

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<sup>156</sup> McCormack, "Grace and Being: The Role of God's Gracious Election in Karl Barth's Theological Ontology," in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 190.

<sup>157</sup> Jüngel, *God's Being Is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 83-84.

The second is the ontological relationship between God and the Christian reader. On the surface, this seems to be a rather tenuous reflection on election. But if election is closely connected with the Trinity, revelation and humanity, then it is necessary to ask the question for the implication on election for a true Christian response in relation to the ontology of truth. Barth's doctrine of election means that there is no privileged reader of Scripture. Only Jesus Christ is the true revelation of God, and as such the true expression of the true God. Only Jesus Christ is the true interpreter of the God's Word; He is in fact the Word of God. The election of all humanity in Jesus Christ means that the truth is for all humanity. In Jesus Christ, all humanity is unworthy of the truth and at the same time elected for the truth. But since Jesus Christ is the human who is elected by God to be true human, then it is theologically implied that participation in Jesus Christ is a prerequisite for a true reading of the Scripture. This is in harmony with Barth's understanding that "the being of the church is Jesus Christ."<sup>158</sup> But truth does not belong to the church as an institution, or to a certain group of people who claim certain adherence to Jesus Christ. The ontology of truth is in Jesus Christ, not as an abstract concept, but as a concrete event in His history. His history is an event in the eternal life of God such that God decides to be God for humanity in Jesus Christ. As a decided event, then, the event of the truth is not something that can be grasped or controlled. It is rather something to be anticipated in faith and prayer. For the present church it is an eschatological event. Dogmatically, a true reader of Scripture is always an eschatological being, always something in the future, in the being of Christ. It is a being in becoming in Jesus Christ. It is a being in becoming in accordance to the humiliation and exaltation of Jesus Christ. While no group is privileged in the reading of Scripture, Barth's doctrine of election means that for the church the true humanity, i.e., the true reader of Scripture, is ontologically located in Jesus Christ and ontologically determined in the humiliation and exaltation of Jesus Christ. For the church, a true reader of Scripture is always an eschatological being.

Third, the relationship between God and God's work toward the world is decided in election. In election the freedom of God in relation to the world is

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<sup>158</sup> *CD I/1*, 15.

decided. It is not an absolute freedom which is indeterminate, and abstract. God is not a prisoner to freedom and bound to be indeterminately free. God is “free also with regard to His freedom.”<sup>159</sup> God uses God’s freedom to will “fellowship with man for Himself” and at the same time “fellowship with Himself for man.”<sup>160</sup> God is not identical with freedom; God is greater than freedom and uses freedom to will a specific relationship i.e. God in relation to God’s self and God’s relation to the world. In the election God decides to dispose of the absolute freedom and choose to be God bound by God’s decision for humanity. Eberhard Busch rightly comments, “As freedom for fellowship, God’s freedom is essentially communicative, committed to solidarity, social freedom not in competition but rather in coexistence, freedom not at the cost of other but for their benefit, for them and with them.”<sup>161</sup> Barth’s doctrine of election as such shapes his vision of reality in which God is free to reveal God’s self. Revelation is not an indeterminate event. God bounds God-self into the fellowship with humanity. As such the being in becoming of God is being in becoming as defined by the election of God to be God for the world. This is the vision of reality in which the reading of Scripture takes place: a reality that is not deserted into confusion and misunderstanding. This does not mean that there will be no confusion or misunderstanding as the true being of humanity is eschatological. It is currently hidden in Jesus Christ as the true being of the church. In this sense the present condition of the church’s reading of Scripture is open to continuous correction. This is true not only because of her sin and limitations, but also in view of its being as eschatologically located in Jesus Christ.

## **5. Toward a theological ontology of hermeneutics**

In the final part of this chapter we will draw conclusions from our discussion on the ontology of God’s being and reflect on the hermeneutical implications of such ontological construct. This chapter begins with two interconnected questions. The first question concerns the relationship between Barth’s ontology and hermeneutics; the second concerns the relationship between doctrines and ontology of

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<sup>159</sup> *CD II/1*, 303.

<sup>160</sup> *CD II/2*, 162.

<sup>161</sup> Eberhard Busch, *The Great Passion: An Introduction to Karl Barth's Theology* trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 115.



interpretation. Our answer to this question is that we believe that Barth's hermeneutics is shaped by his ontological convictions, and his ontological convictions are determined by the formal shape and the material content of his doctrines. In this regard we have explored his doctrines of Trinity, Christology and Election for construing his theological ontology. In the last part of this chapter we will draw out the implications for a systematic construal of his theological hermeneutics by proposing an ontology of interpretation based on the dogmatic exploration we have pursued in this chapter. To achieve this purpose, we will summarize our argument and reflect upon the implications of our dogmatic exploration for constructing a theological ontology of hermeneutics.

### **5.1. Ontology and hermeneutics**

As we have argued, hermeneutics cannot escape ontology. A criticism of hermeneutics at a metacritical level shows that a construct of reality in which one interprets a text or in which interpretation and meaning take place, is a crucial part of hermeneutics. It is crucial that one's vision of reality shapes one's hermeneutics. In general hermeneutics, the question of how meaning happens or how understanding becomes an event shapes one's ontological questions. In this regard the reflection of meaning and how it is related to a text leads to the realization of the importance of language. Meaning is always mediated by language. But language belongs to an historical being who understands it within a plausibility structure of an historical being and epoch (with its streams of lived and living traditions). As being who acts historically and linguistically, human is an interpreted being. This leads to a hermeneutical belief that the being of the human is the ultimate problem of general hermeneutics.

It is our argument that, for Barth, the being of God is the ultimate problem of theology, and so is for a theological hermeneutics. The vision of reality where the church's reading of Scripture takes place, in Barth's theology, is the problem of God's being. The being of God is the hermeneutical problem not only because it is a presupposition of theology but, more importantly, because the being of God precedes and determines one's theological exploration of the Scripture. Before the church attempts to interpret Scripture, God is already reaching out to the church. In fact, in and after the act of reading, the reality of God is always communicative to the

church. The event of communicative divine presence is not only an economy of God's grace, but, more profoundly, as understood by Barth, it is an event that is decided in the immanence of God. God's way to the world is a reiteration of God's immanent being. God is already related and communicative in God's inner being. This is not an abstract principle based on a metaphysical reflection of God as an absolute being, but a concrete doctrine based on the act of the Trinitarian God in the particular history of Jesus Christ.

If this is correct, then we find in Barth's theology a rich resource for a dogmatic approach to construct an ontology of interpretation with and after the manner of his theology. The following points are our attempt to think along this line with and after Barth. They are not a strict exegesis of Barth's theology but contain a constructive proposal after the manner and content of his theology. In this regard we propose several lines of thought that are worthy of reflection. We propose that in thinking with and after Barth's dogmatics we can propose that: Trinity is being as interpreted being; Jesus Christ, the Word of God is the true language of a dogmatic approach to hermeneutics; Jesus Christ is the primal history of reality; and election is the ethics and politics of hermeneutics. In what follows we will elaborate each of these ontological concepts.

## **5.2. Trinity is being as interpreted being**

The first ontological conviction is that the Trinity is being as interpreted being.<sup>162</sup> "Trinity" as a term is already an interpretation. What is intended here is more on an ontological level in which the Trinity is the self-interpretation of God's being. The Trinity is the concrete reality of the self-relating and self-communicating God. In the life of the divine Trinity there exists God's interpretation of God's self. In the divine Trinity there is a becoming. This becoming is God's decision to reveal God's self in Jesus Christ. God's decision to reveal God's self is the ontological basis for knowing God. But revelation is not simply a revelation of something about God, but the

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<sup>162</sup> We do not intend to propose here that Trinity is being itself after the manner of Paul Tillich i.e. as an abstract existential concept, but rather God as interpreted being in light of the concrete historical event of Jesus Christ as God's revelation. Cf. Colin E. Gunton, *The Barth Lectures* ed. Paul Brazier (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 98. See also Andrew O'Neill, *Tillich: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 61.

revelation of God's being itself. God's being revealed is not different from God's being in God's self. God's relation in God's self is identical with the sending of the Son and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the world. This ontological self-identification between God in God *pro se* and *pro nobis* is the basis for speaking of the correspondence between God's being in God's self and God's being in history, between being and history.<sup>163</sup> God's revelation in history truly reveals the being of God, not just God in relation to the world, but also of God in relation to God's self. In Jesus Christ we can know the true being of God.

Trinity as interpreted being means that God's revelation is not just the first movement of God's revealing act, but it is also the affirmation that God is the revelation and revealedness.<sup>164</sup> It is the second and the third movement, i.e. in God's revelation, where there is a correlation between the self-differentiation of God in God's self and the event of divine communication to the church. In the becoming of God, we recognize that God's self-revelation is an event of God's self-interpretation. In this regard the relationship between God and the event of meaning is not a coordination of two agencies. God does not leave the event of communication once God speaks God's Word. God does not become mute once God speaks God's Word and leave it to human language to capture the meaning of revelation. It is, rather, a capturing of human language for and by the Word of God. This implies that, in itself, human language is incapable of communicating God's being. This, however, does not undermine the theological fact that human language can and does speak of God's being. But it can only do so by the grace of God; insofar as God's communicative presence continues to enable it. As Jüngel rightly notes, "The doctrine of the Trinity had to establish the fact that, as subject of his being, God is also the subject of his being known and becoming known."<sup>165</sup> In this sense, we are not speaking of a personification of revelation but rather expressing the Trinity as interpreted being. It is God who speaks in the event of revelation, as Barth rightly posits, "Revelation is

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<sup>163</sup> John Webster, "Translator's Introduction," in *God's Being Is in Becoming* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), xiii.

<sup>164</sup> *CD* I/1, 299.

<sup>165</sup> Jüngel, *God's Being Is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 55.

Dei loquentis persona.”<sup>166</sup> Meaning has a definite sense not as an objective reality of the words but as God’s communicative prevenient grace. It is not a function of anthropological deliberation but the reality of God’s communicative presence. But the definiteness of meaning does not cancel the fact that there is such a thing as a surplus of meaning. In this context this surplus is not a function of anthropological existence but a function of God-human dynamics in God’s relationship to humanity. The surplus of meaning is ontologically located in the creativity of God’s communicative presence in relation to human temporary existence. The surplus of meaning is a function of God’s communicative presence.

Thirdly, in the doctrine of Trinity, being as interpreted is an event of God’s becoming that shows that relationship and love are an essential part of divine reality. The being of God is relational being, and in this relationship the Trinitarian relationship is marked by love. This, however, is not an abstract concept of love, but a concrete relationship in the historical life of Jesus Christ taken up into the eternal being of God. In other words, relationship and love are essential to reality; it is not a philosophical abstraction that is born out of speculation on life and its meaning. It is a truth that comes to our understanding as a concrete realization of God’s reiteration of God’s being in the world. It is not an abstract philosophical principle but a reality decided in the inner being of God and fulfilled in the concrete event of Jesus Christ.

### **5.3. Jesus Christ as the being of language**

Jesus Christ as language means that the being of Christ and the event of meaning and understanding are inseparable in the church’s reading of Scripture. The ontology of meaning and understanding in dogmatics is an event that happens through the being of Christ.<sup>167</sup> All true interpretation takes place in Jesus Christ as the ontological being of language. But because Jesus Christ is truly divine and truly human, the event of understanding is simultaneously truly human in divine communicative presence, i.e., it is an event with and by human language as the medium of understanding. Human language does not cease from being a human language because of this; but it finds its ontological roots in the being of Christ. In this regard,

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<sup>166</sup> *CD I/1*, 304. Revelation is God speaking in person.

<sup>167</sup> Cf. Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 318.

the formation of theological concepts has Jesus Christ as its language-world. He is the common language within which the possibility of thinking and speaking about God in a realistic sense is made actual and concrete. It is not universally accessible as an event of nature but made universally available as the event of grace. The reality of knowledge in the human act of knowing God is bound with Jesus Christ as a language event. In this sense the being of God is not something untranslatable, eternally remaining in the mystical realm of the divine. It is expressible in Jesus Christ as the true language of God.

Second, this also means that the reality of Jesus is a truth that cannot be translated into a methodological prescription. The being of Christ is not a static truth within the reach of human conceptuality; it is a truth that cannot be held captive. In fact it is the truth that is free from human determination so that it can be the truth for human existence. Human use of language is bound with a particular world-view with its particular traditions, linguistic-world and linguistic-habits, because, as Hans-Georg Gadamer argues that language is the medium of hermeneutical experience.<sup>168</sup> While Gadamer argues that the event of language-use can free the human from the bondage of world-view as it emerges in experience of understanding, we posit that in theological hermeneutics Jesus Christ is the event in which such freedom comes into reality. The truth emerges in the event of the Word of God, not as an agentless event of mystical fusion of horizons, but as an instance of God's communicative presence.<sup>169</sup> It is true that the truth is not a deposit of ideas hidden away from any language-world that its reality is an event emerging in the existence of human use of language, and this movement of the truth is not a mystical and directionless event. Truth is indeed a free event, but it is a free event in the determination of God in Jesus Christ as the true being of language. It cannot be captured by human method but can only be hoped for in prayer and faith. It does not dispense with method as unimportant and meaningless, but a dogmatic approach to hermeneutics will regard such endeavour as a human response of faith and prayer to the ontological being of

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<sup>168</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 436.

<sup>169</sup> For a criticism that Gadamer's fusion of horizons entails a mystical sense of the event of understanding see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Discourse on Matter: Hermeneutics and the "Miracle" of Understanding," in *Hermeneutics at the Crossroads*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, James K. A. Smith, and Bruce Ellis Benson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 3-34.

language as Jesus Christ. Ultimately, Jesus Christ is the true expression of reality. And we mean this not metaphorically but in a realistic sense of the truth. A true method of theological hermeneutics has the characteristic of a critical reflection on human understanding that recovers the importance of faith and prayer in guiding human experience to know and to understand the true being of God in Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, this ontological conviction means that there is an analogical relationship between Jesus as the true being of language and human knowledge as linguistically mediated. In Jesus Christ, God embraces humanity and its linguistic capability as the bearer of God's revelation and truth. Christology offers hermeneutics a theological analogy of the relationship between human language and the Word of God in the knowledge of God. Specifically, for Barth, in and by itself human knowledge cannot comprehend God's revelation as the human nature of Jesus cannot comprehend the Son of God by its inherent human capability (*finitum non capax infiniti*). The basic form of the analogy follows the dogmatic conviction that it is God who becomes human without a divinization of the human nature. Human knowledge by and in itself has no capability to signify or to bring into reality the Word of God. On the contrary it is God's event of speaking that brings out and commandeers language in the event of God's speech-act.<sup>170</sup> This, however, does not negate the fact that there is such thing as human knowledge of God and that such knowledge is expressible through human language. In the event of revelation human knowledge exists and has God as its object of knowledge.<sup>171</sup> God is genuinely becoming an object of knowledge in the normal sense of a human object of knowledge, and the human being is genuinely becoming the subject of knowledge in which God is her genuine object. God can really be known in the realistic sense of knowing and expressed in the normal sense of human language. Here Barth's actualism plays an important role in defining the nature of knowledge and language. The becoming of God as an object and the becoming of the human as a subject always happens as an event. This implies that the human subject cannot make God available as an object of knowledge without God coming to speech-act in the event

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<sup>170</sup> *CD* I/1, 334-339, see specifically Barth's discussion of *vestigium trinitatis* as the problem of language in relation to theology.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

of revelation. Theological knowledge has the normal sense of general human knowledge as a knowledge, but it does not mean that this knowledge is a knowledge similar to other knowledge in the way the human is a subject and a thing is an object.<sup>172</sup> Barth argues that, in the event of revelation, God differentiates God-self from other objects of knowledge, and differentiates a human subject as a knowing subject of God-as-object from other subjects.<sup>173</sup> Nevertheless the nature of human knowledge of God is not a different kind of knowledge from other knowledge because it requires no special ability from human beings. In every way it is a human knowledge as other human knowledge and in every way employs human language as other human languages. The real difference lies in the act of the self-objectification of the being of God because, in Barth's words, "Certainly we have God as an object, but not in the same way as we have other objects."<sup>174</sup> However, in the process of revelation the human being acquires the ability, by the grace of God, to know God as an object of knowledge.<sup>175</sup> It is not something inherent in the human that is activated in the event of God's speaking, but rather a possibility brought by the event of the Word of God to the human.<sup>176</sup>

#### **5.4. Jesus Christ as (the primal) history**

In *CD I/2*, Barth rejects the concept of primal history because the historical epoch of Jesus Christ cannot be understood through a historical study as the meaning of all history.<sup>177</sup> This rejection is related to a concept of primal history that he previously accepted in *the Epistle to the Romans* where Barth invokes the primal history as the revelation of God in a construct of historical fact, specifically the historical reality of Jesus and biblical personalities, i.e., to perceive the meaning of all history from the history of biblical personalities.<sup>178</sup> This early conviction is clearly at odds with Barth's conviction that "revelation is not a predicate of history, but history is a

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>173</sup> *CD II/1*, 14.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>175</sup> *CD I/1*, 197.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> *CD I/2*, 57f.

<sup>178</sup> Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 140.

predicate of revelation.”<sup>179</sup> However, in his later exposition, Barth construes a primal history as the decision of God in eternity (not in history). God takes the humanity of Jesus Christ into the life of God in the second mode of the Son of God. This is a different and new understanding of the primal history. In his exposition of Jesus as the primal history, Barth does not speak about a particular historical epoch as the primal history but rather locates such history in eternity, in the eternal determination of God for history. Barth posits,

There is a history between God and the World. But this history has no independent signification. It takes place in the interests of the primal history which is played out between God and this one man and His people. It is the sphere in which this primal history is played out. It attains its goal as this primal history attains its goal. And the same is true both of man as such and also of the human race as a whole. The partner of God which cannot now be thought away is neither "man" as an idea, nor "humanity," nor indeed a large or small total of individual men. It is the one man Jesus and the people represented in Him. Only secondarily, and for His sake, is it "man," and "humanity" and the whole remaining cosmos. Even human nature and human history in general have no independent signification. They point to the primal history played out within them between God and the one man, and all other men as His people. The general (the world or man) exists for the sake of the particular. In the particular the general has its meaning and fulfilment.... The other towards which God moves in this wider sphere is, of course, the created world as a whole. It is, of course, "man" and "humanity." But everything which comes from God takes place according to this plan and under this sign. Everything is from this beginning and to this end. Everything is in this order and has this meaning. Everything happens according to this basic and determinative pattern, model and system. Everything which comes from God takes place "in Jesus Christ," i.e., in the establishment of the covenant which, in the union of His Son with Jesus of Nazareth, God has instituted and maintains and directs between Himself and His people, the people consisting of those who belong to Him, who have become His in this One. The primal history which underlies and is the goal of the whole history of His relationship *ad extra*, with the creation and man in general, is the history of this covenant. The primal history, and with it the covenant, are, then, the attitude and relation in which by virtue of the decision of His free love God wills to be and is God. And this relation cannot be separated from the Christian conception of God as such.<sup>180</sup>

This primal history precedes human history because it took place in eternity. But it is a concrete history, not an abstract history of a mysterious being because it is the

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<sup>179</sup> *CD I/2*, 58.

<sup>180</sup> *CD II/2*, 8-9.



being of Jesus Christ as a human being from Nazareth who is in the beginning with God that is construed as the primal history.<sup>181</sup> Thus the primal history is not a history that begins in time and space in such a way that encompasses all histories because of its power to inspire, but a reference to God's eternal resolve to be God for human being. The history of the world is the theatre for the unfolding of this primal history. This history precedes all human history in this sense, and it does not entail a philosophical abstraction of universal human history but rather a concrete decision of God's history as "the Way of the Son of God into the Far Country." This, however, provides an ontological basis for thinking about the nature of history. As such, "Everything is from this beginning and to this end. Everything is in this order and has this meaning. Everything happens according to this basic and determinative pattern, model and system. Everything which comes from God takes place 'in Jesus Christ'."<sup>182</sup> Jesus Christ, as the true being of history, means that the meaning of a particular historical epoch cannot be understood apart from the eternal determination of God to be God for humanity.

This also means that, in this primal history, God has decided the history of humankind to face the threat of evil and death. Jüngel rightly comments that "The prevenience of the divine being in the primal history of the eternal covenant in its very prevenience already has as its goal direct confrontation with lost humanity, and in this confrontation an encounter with death."<sup>183</sup> In this sense death and suffering have been overcome in the being of God. Jesus Christ as history does not play down the reality of evil, in fact, in God's primal decision God took seriously the fact the human race faces the reality of evil. God confronts evil in eternity. But it is the human being who is overcome by evil that God took seriously, and not the evil itself. In Jesus Christ, there is a reality of evil but only as a defeated reality.<sup>184</sup> The meaning

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<sup>181</sup> Jüngel, *God's Being Is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 91-92.

<sup>182</sup> *CD II/2*, 8.

<sup>183</sup> Jüngel, *God's Being Is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 94.

<sup>184</sup> See Barth's treatment on the problem of Nothingness in §50 *CD III/3*.

of the fact of suffering, death and evil is decided in God's being in becoming Jesus Christ as the primal history in eternity.

The ontological reality of Jesus Christ provides a basis for an ontology of interpretation in relation to human history, including (but not exclusively), the fact of suffering, death and evil in human reality as revealed in Scripture. These themes are a problematic subject in the study of hermeneutics.<sup>185</sup> To say that in the primal history of Jesus God has faced the reality of evil is not intended to ease the problem in anyway. But if this is the real ontological location of the being of history then it provides an ontological starting point for responding to such themes. The history of Jesus Christ, as God's primal history, reflects the determination of God to take the side of humanity against evil and to take human folly and sin as part of God's outward movement toward humanity and creation. As the primal history, Jesus Christ is already the saviour of the world. In this history there lies the hermeneutical key to the meaning of history, and also to the history of God's covenant of reconciliation and redemption of the world.

#### **5.5. Election as the foundation of being**

Our final ontological reflection on the building blocks of an ontology of interpretation is based on Barth's doctrine of election. In this doctrine we learn the meaning of freedom as the freedom of God. Freedom is not an abstract idea to which God and humans must conform if they want to be a free being. Freedom is a quality of God's action and must be understood in the light of God's being in the act of eternal election. In this doctrine God's election is not different from God's being, as Jüngel rightly comments that "God's being-in-act was understood to mean that God is his decision."<sup>186</sup> Election is the foundation of being, specifically, the foundation of what it means to be a free being. It is from the freedom of God that the church has to learn what it means to be free in her actions. God's election is not an absolute decree of an indeterminate agent, but an act of love to bind God's self with universal

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<sup>185</sup> See e.g. Paul Ricœur, "Evil: A Challenge to Philosophy and Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53, no. 4 (1985): 635-48; Paul Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 351-55.

<sup>186</sup> Jüngel, *God's Being Is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 83.

humanity. It is not a free-floating free-will that chooses arbitrarily. It is directed inwardly toward God's relationship to God's self as the God of love and relationship (as well as God of obedience and humiliation); it is also directed outwardly toward God's relationship to the world in creation, reconciliation and redemption. In all these, the freedom of God is defined by a specific historical event, that is, the event of Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ we see the true meaning of freedom and as such the true being of a free agent. Jesus Christ is the true face of a free God.

This foundation has a great ramification for an ontology of interpretation. A genuine interpretation of any text is a free action without the boundary of an imposing power. The struggle against powers in the act of genuine reading is aimed at, as Paul Ricoeur argues, destroying the idols and freeing the human self from its illusion of freedom.<sup>187</sup> Ricoeur posits, "Hermeneutics seems to me to be animated by this double motivation: *willingness to suspect, willingness to listen*; vow of rigor, vow of obedience," such that fundamental to hermeneutics is the task "to destroy the idols, to listen to the symbols."<sup>188</sup> The imposing powers of idols are human determinations of power, self and sensuality hidden behind an inauthentic reading of a reader and in the rhetoric of the truth of the text. Hermeneutics is aimed at clearing the horizon for an authentic expression of truth, self and meaning in the symbolism of the text.<sup>189</sup> Such an endeavour is important and rightly proper in a genuine interaction between a reader and a text. But what is the true form and the material content of true and authentic freedom? The locus of such freedom is not in human self-determination, be it religious or otherwise. It is also not in the sense of a continuous process of seeking authentic freedom by stripping off the idols of human imagination. We posit that such freedom must find its ontological root not in any human determination for freedom but in the real act of God's freedom. The locus of human freedom is not found in the search for an authentic-self, but in the realization of God's self-determination for freedom in human determination of freedom; in the realization of God's freedom for humanity as human freedom for God. It is

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<sup>187</sup> Cf. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 347.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 348.

ontologically located in God, specifically in God's freedom from humanity so that God can be God for humanity. To construe the freedom of hermeneutics in this way is to act on the basis of faith and hope. It is a freedom based on the grace of God and not on the basis of an ascesis of subjectivism. Ultimately it meets us as the gospel. It is the good news that a true and authentic freedom in reading of a text is made possible in the freedom of God for humanity.

The being of God as interpreted being, as language, as history and as freedom is the ontological description of the vision of reality within which the drama of the world is staged, and within which the church's reading of Scripture takes place. This ontological conviction leaves us with the question of what it entails for such a theological vision of how we must understand text, author and reader in relation to our theological construction of meaning, language and history. How must we understand this in relation to meaning as human meaning, language as human language and history as human history? How is the theological character of this ontology related to the secularity of the world? In short, what is the theology of interpretation from a dogmatic point of view? This will be the subject of the next chapter.

## Chapter V: Barth's Theological Interpretation of Scripture: A *Sachlich* Hermeneutics

In this chapter we will present a theology of interpretation based on Barth's doctrine of Scripture. The argument of this chapter is built upon the ontology of interpretation as has been argued and elucidated in the previous chapter. We have argued that reality within which the church's reading taking place is a reality elected by the Trinitarian God as God for humanity in Jesus Christ. This chapter will take on the human dimension of such ontological thinking and elucidate its implication in relation to history, language, author, text, and understanding. These are themes that are perennial in modern study of hermeneutics. However, as a dogmatic approach to such questions, we will not expand our argument to its detailed discussion in modern hermeneutics but only within the limit of Barth's theology. Since the concrete reality of Barth's ontology is described in the history of Jesus Christ, and that such conviction is central to Barth's understanding for theological exegesis, we will elaborate our argument from this point of view. In Barth's hermeneutical term, Jesus Christ is the *Sache* of Scripture. This simple conviction however is elaborated in a complex discussion of Barth's theology of the Word of God. It is with this point of view we will engage in the discussion of theological hermeneutics. In other words, this chapter is an elaboration of what it means to claim that Jesus Christ, the Word of God, is the *Sache* of Karl Barth's theological interpretation of Scripture.

According to Paul Ricœur, the central task of hermeneutics is "to discern the 'matter' of the text."<sup>1</sup> It is in this "discourse on the matter," that differing hermeneutics propose various approaches to the text.<sup>2</sup> In view of this, we posit that in his theology of Scripture, Barth strikes at the core of the problem by proposing a *sachlich* hermeneutics, i.e., a hermeneutics based on the matter of the text. Barth posits, "The universal rule of interpretation is that a text can be read and understood

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<sup>1</sup> Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, 111.

<sup>2</sup> Vanhoozer, "Discourse on Matter: Hermeneutics and the "Miracle" of Understanding," in *Hermeneutics at the Crossroads*, 3.

and expounded only with reference to and in the light of its theme.”<sup>3</sup> In a perceptive comment, Gadamer remarks, “in his great work *Church Dogmatics*, Karl Barth contributes to the hermeneutical problem explicitly nowhere and indirectly everywhere.”<sup>4</sup> While this is generally correct, it is not entirely accurate, because there are places where Barth *directly* discusses, in *Church Dogmatics*, the so-called hermeneutical problem. Nevertheless, Gadamer is correct in pointing out the presence of indirect hermeneutical reflections in a great number of places in *Church Dogmatics*. The core of Barth’s proposal is strikingly simple – a text is to be read in the light of its subject matter.<sup>5</sup> What does Barth offer to the study of hermeneutics in this proposal? Because some aspects of this question have been explored in a previous chapter, our focus in this one will be narrower: what does it mean for the church to read the Scripture as a (human) text if it has its ontological origin in God? What sort of text are we dealing with when we read Scripture? And more importantly, how and in what ways does doctrinal understanding form and inform the church’s interpretation of Scripture?

Barth’s basic proposal is *to discern the subject matter* of a text; however, the critical questions are: what is one’s answer to the question of the content, the meaning, and the distinctiveness of the subject matter itself? How can one arrive at the subject matter of the text? More importantly, how can one be sure that it is the subject matter of the text itself that one is arriving at, or that one is not mistake in understanding the subject matter? One of the ways to perceive the differing options of hermeneutics is to look at the answers to these basic questions in which hermeneutics provides differing answers and options.

This chapter explores Barth’s theological hermeneutics, in his *Church Dogmatics*, and delineates the different angles Barth deals with such questions. We will argue that Barth’s theological hermeneutics is a *sachlich* hermeneutics based on a doctrinal understanding of Scripture. Moreover, Barth’s discussion on other

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<sup>3</sup> *CD I/2*, 493.

<sup>4</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 250.

<sup>5</sup> Barth believes that this approach that he learnt from his interaction with the Bible can be applied to various writing, religious or non-religious, should it fall unto him the task of reading such texts. Cf. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 12. Also see *CD I/2*, 465.

doctrines often highlights and reflects the same question in various ways and from different angles. We propose that Barth's hermeneutics is not unique because it is *sachlicher*, but because of the kind of *Sachkritik* he posits and the role of doctrines in his hermeneutics. The ontological convictions of his dogmatics form and inform his argument about the matter of the text. While our reading is based on Barth's exposition in *CD I/2 §19* on "The Word of God for the Church" and *CD I/1 §4-5* on Barth's doctrine of the Word of God, the ontological understanding will be informed by Barth's later theological ontology as has been argued in chapter three. In this regard the threefold form of the Word of God (written, proclaimed and revealed) and threefold form of God's speaking (speech, action and mystery) will be explored and reinterpreted in the light of Barth's later theological ontology.<sup>6</sup> In Barth's theology of the Word, in the later period, the analogy between Trinity and threefold Word of God becomes less and less tight as compared to the earlier.<sup>7</sup> However the material (subject matter) relationship between the one Word of God (Jesus Christ) and the forms of the Word is maintained throughout his exposition from *CD I* to *CD IV*.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The development of Barth's doctrine of the threefold form of the Word of God took a period of thirteen years, from a lecture in Göttingen (Summer 1924), two lectures in Münster (1926-1927), and the expansion of the material in the lectures given in Bonn and Basel which was later on published as *CD I/1* and *CD I/2*. McCormack, "The Being of Holy Scripture Is in Becoming," in *Evangelicals & Scripture: Tradition, Authority, and Hermeneutics*, 57. Part of our effort in this study is to coordinate the salient feature of the doctrine of threefold form of the Word with Barth's discussion of the nature of the one Word as speech, action and mystery.

<sup>7</sup> In *CD IV/3*, 114, Barth notes, "By a lengthy detour we are thus brought back to the theme of the Prolegomena to the *Church Dogmatics*, to the doctrine of the threefold form of the Word of God as revealed, written and proclaimed. In this context, we cannot establish, develop and present it again as is done in detail in *CD I/1* and *I/2*. In explication of the present question it is enough that, recalling our earlier conclusions, we should simply maintain that alongside the first and primary Word of God, and in relation to it, there are *at least* two other true words which are distinct yet inter-related in the above-mentioned sequence." (Emphasis added). The two true words are Scripture and church proclamation, but in this context Barth introduces, in addition to the two, "lesser lights" that can be accepted on the ground of material criteria of the One Word of God, Jesus Christ. This openness however revises the Trinitarian analogy of the earlier account of the Word of God.

<sup>8</sup> McCormack comments that, "Each time, no matter how much material expansion took place from one version to the next, the concept of a threefold form of the Word provided the organizing principle, thus testifying to the high degree of continuity in the material vision that informed Barth's doctrine of the Word of God and his doctrine of Holy Scripture as one aspect of that more comprehensive doctrine of the Word." McCormack, "The Being of Holy Scripture Is in Becoming," in *Evangelicals & Scripture: Tradition, Authority, and Hermeneutics*, 57-58. In *CD IV*, Barth is open to other forms of the Word, but Barth keeps the material relationship between the Word of God and the forms of the one Word. *CD IV/3.1*, 110-118. Thus while Telford Work rightly argues that Barth's strict analogy of Trinity and the threefold form of the Word of God becomes rather loose in the later part of the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth maintains the material relationship between the Word and the forms which is the original purpose of the Trinitarian analogy from the beginning. For his criticism of Barth's Trinitarian

We will argue that Barth's *sachlicher* approach, as a hermeneutical principle, is not unique because many scholars recognize the importance of the subject matter. We contend that it is a matter of common sense that a reading of a text is an attempt to grasp its subject matter. Rather, his contribution lies in the theological description of the nature, the identity, and the actuality of the Scripture's subject matter. Thus our reading proposes a double threefoldness of Scripture's subject matter: the threefoldness of God's speaking (preached, written and revealed) and the threefoldness of God's speech (speech, act and mystery). The first aspect is explored from the perspective of actual reality of God's speaking, and the second is explored as the internal dynamic of God's speech. The threefold Word of God is well known, and has been much explored regarding Barth's doctrine in relation to scriptural interpretation. We will argue that the other threefold, i.e. speech, act and mystery, provides the inner dynamics that is important for understanding Barth's hermeneutics. It provides a dynamic concept of the event of the Word of God in the life of the church. Attending to these themes generates a perspective that the hermeneutics of the subject matter is primarily a communication, a divine address, rather than an inquiry into the multi-layered textual realities. However, the divine address does not mean that the humanity of the biblical text is ignored. It is, rather, theologically grounded in the divine communicative ordering of the created world. By grounding Barth's hermeneutics in the doctrines, we avoid any inclination to think that Barth's *sachlich* hermeneutics is primarily a methodological tool for exploring Scripture. It is, rather, a disciplined thinking of what it means for the church to read the Bible as Scripture, i.e., as a text, Scripture realisation is animated by God's communicative presence.

Our argument will begin with Barth's central statement of *sachlich* hermeneutics. Then we will explore Barth's concept of Scripture as the witness of revelation, and relate this theme to the role of history and historical study in the church's interpretation and proclamation of Scripture. Our contention is that the meaning of Scripture, history and the church's proclamation is hermeneutically

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account of Scripture see Telford Work, *Living and Active: Scripture in the Economy of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 67-100.



conditioned by the subject matter they are witnessing to. Based on this contention, we will present the identity of the subject matter in the threefoldness of God's speaking, and explore what it means to read Scripture as an actual realization of the Word of God. We will, therefore, explore the threefoldness of God's speech in Barth's discussion of the nature of the Word of God as speech, action and mystery. We will conclude this chapter with the meaning and purpose of Barth's *sachlich* hermeneutics, and what this implies for the church's practice of the theological interpretation of Scripture.

### **1. Barth on human understanding**

What does "understanding" mean in Barth's hermeneutics? The question of human understanding stands at the pinnacle of modern hermeneutics. Barth does not provide an extensive answer to this question which shows that his interest does not lie in hermeneutical insights but rather in a theological response to the so called hermeneutical problem. Barth's answer is that human understanding is only a real understanding when one grasps the subject matter of a discourse (in reading or in listening). Theological interpretation affirms that there is a strong relationship between human understanding and the linguistic and the historical aspects of the text. However, Barth insists it must not stop there because understanding is not simply grasping the words and their syntax, i.e., their lexical and semantic interactions; or, an understanding of the authors of the Bible, or the people in the Bible, i.e., their religious ideas, practices, lives and traditions. The language and history in the Bible are important, and it is impossible for a theological understanding to encircle these fundamental elements of the biblical text. Barth argues that a true understanding of the Bible must move through and beyond the words and the people to the subject matter of the Scripture. Barth provides the essence of his *sachlicher* understanding when he posits:

We do not speak for the sake of speaking, but for the sake of the indication which is to be made by our speaking. We speak for the sake of what we denote or intend by our speaking. To listen to a human word spoken to us does not mean only that we have cognition of the word as such. The understanding of it cannot consist merely in discovering on what presuppositions, in what situation, in what linguistic sense and with what intention, in what actual context, and in this sense with what meaning the

other has said this or that. ... We can speak meaningfully of hearing a human utterance only when it is clear to us in its function of indicating something that is described or intended by the word, and also when this function has become an event confronting us, when therefore by means of the human word we ourselves in some degree perceive the thing described or intended. It is only then that anyone has told me anything and I have heard it from him. We may call other things speaking and hearing, but in the strict sense they are only unsuccessful attempts at speaking and hearing. If a human word spoken to me does not show me anything, or if I myself cannot perceive what the word shows me, we have an unsuccessful attempt of this kind. Understanding of a human word presupposes that the attempt to speak and hear has succeeded. Then I know what is being said. On the basis and in the light of the word I understand what is said to me.... Of course, concretely this understanding can consist only in my returning from the matter to the word and its presuppositions, to the speaking subject in its concrete form. But it is only in the light of what is said to me and heard by me, and not of myself, that I try to inquire of the word and the speaking subject. The result of my inquiry in this form will be my interpretation of this human word. My exposition cannot possibly consist in an interpretation of the speaker. Did he say something to me only to display himself? I should be guilty of a shameless violence against him, if the only result of my encounter with him were that I now knew him or knew him better than before. What lack of love! Did he not say anything to me at all? Did he not therefore desire that I should see him not in abstracto but in his specific and concrete relationship to the thing described or intended in his word, that I should see him from the standpoint and in the light of this thing?<sup>9</sup>

According to this passage, understanding is a “listening” to someone who says *something about something*. It is an activity of receptive assent to someone who communicates something to her readers/audiences. According to Barth, the subject matter is what a true listener/reader should be attentive to when one reads a text or listens to someone. For this purpose, the matter must be differentiated from the words or the psychological deliberation of the speaker. When one is confronted with the subject matter, then there is a real understanding. When this is not the case, then there is a misunderstanding. Understanding of the subject matter is not understanding of word and its speaker, for that is just a preparation for understanding. Surely, Barth adds, one must return to the words and to the speaker. But if one only grasps the words and the speaker, then it is not understanding. A true understanding takes place when through and beyond the words and the speaker, one grasps the subject matter,

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<sup>9</sup> CD I/2, 464-65.

or more precisely, is grasped by it. Even when one penetrates to the psychological state of an author, it is not a true understanding if the subject matter slips through the interpretation. An understanding of a text, even when all the grammatical, lexical and semantic elements of the words are considered, is not a true understanding if the subject matter of the text is missed. A real understanding is an understanding of the subject matter that is communicated through the words and by the author. One cannot bypass the words and the speaker to understand the subject matter; one cannot stop with the words and the speaker either, as one must move through and beyond the words and the speaker to be confronted with the subject matter. In this regard, understanding is an act of love, i.e., a love and care to the speaker and the words she uttered in communicating the subject matter. In other words, to understand a text one has to participate, to be involved in the conversation about subject matter. To understand is not to stand outside and observe the speaker and the language as an impartial inquirer but to let the speaker address one through and by the text. The reader becomes a contemporary of the author in the conversation about the subject matter.

There are many ways we can approach this proposal. We can read it biographically in the light of Barth's disputes with his contemporary theologians. We also can read it as an opinion of the psychology of understanding. We may also read it as a proposal on the philosophy of understanding. Nevertheless, in Barth's own terms, he claims that this is a hermeneutic that he learns from a theological engagement with Scripture.<sup>10</sup> Barth posits,

What is the source of the hermeneutic teaching which we have just sketched? Well, the fact that in spite of its inherent clarity it still does not enjoy general recognition is in itself an indication that it does not arise out of any general considerations on the nature of human language, etc., and therefore out of a general anthropology. Why is it that, as a rule, general considerations on the nature of human language do not lead to the propositions indicated? My reply would be: because the hermeneutic principles are not dictated by Holy

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<sup>10</sup> This approach to hermeneutics reverses the order of general hermeneutics where it is from general hermeneutics that one has to learn to read the Bible. In this view, reading the Bible is a specific instance of general phenomena of human understanding. The weakness of this view is that in moving from general to special hermeneutics, it has uncritically carried with it the anthropological presuppositions of general hermeneutics. Cf. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics*, 230-33.

Scripture, as they are in our case. If we ask ourselves, and as readers of Holy Scripture we have to ask ourselves, what is meant by hearing and understanding and expounding when we presuppose that that which is described or intended by the word of man is the revelation of God, the answer we have given forces itself upon us.<sup>11</sup>

The theological rationale of Barth's approach goes beyond a lesson from experience. Barth proposes a general hermeneutical conviction of human understanding that is based on a specific theological conviction of the Scripture. Barth posits, "It is from the word of man in the Bible that we must learn what has to be learned concerning the word of man in general."<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, we could ask Barth whether his conviction is *necessarily* theologically grounded. To read a text in the light of its subject matter, i.e., "what someone says to someone about something," is not something unique to Barth's hermeneutics or a theological hermeneutics.<sup>13</sup> Bultmann also proposes that an interpreter must aim at expounding the text's subject matter. Bultmann argues that the subject matter must be seen as greater than the authors and the words of Scripture. In his criticism of Barth's *Epistle to the Romans*, Bultmann suggests that an interpreter must allow the subject matter of the text to evaluate Paul and his religious ideas, precisely because the subject matter itself is greater than Paul or the words Paul wrote.<sup>14</sup> Wilhelm Herrmann, Barth's teacher, also focuses his theology on the subject matter. In Barth's evaluation, one of the important lessons he learnt from Herrmann is the "thundering summons to the subject matter itself, to the true theme," that everything else circles around in the Bible, dogmas and proclamation.<sup>15</sup>

From the field of general hermeneutics, modern approaches, as expounded by Ricoeur and Gadamer, also aim at engaging with the subject matter of a text. For Gadamer, understanding is a participation in the subject matter the text discloses, that is, engaging in a dialogue with the text, on the subject matter. Gadamer posits, "This

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<sup>11</sup> *CD I/2*, 465-66.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 466.

<sup>13</sup> Vanhoozer, "Discourse on Matter: Hermeneutics and the "Miracle" of Understanding," in *Hermeneutics at the Crossroads*, 19.

<sup>14</sup> Barth and Bultmann, *Karl Barth-Rudolf Bultmann Letters, 1922-1966*, 120.

<sup>15</sup> Barth, *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings, 1920-1928*, 271.

is the essence, the soul of my hermeneutics: To understand someone else is to see the justice, the truth, of their position. And this is what transforms us.”<sup>16</sup> In this regard, understanding involves the event in which the subject matter makes itself known to the reader. The subject matter reveals the justice and the truth of its position in the fusion of the horizons between the text and the reader. As such, “understanding is to be thought of less a subjective act than a participating in an event of tradition, a process of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated.”<sup>17</sup> In this regard the interpreter is not simply active or passive but caught up in the event of understanding by which the subject matter reveals itself.

Ricoeur argues that hermeneutics is not a matter of discovering authorial intention but grasping the ‘world’ projected by the text.<sup>18</sup> Understanding is not a general comprehension of what is being said, but more specifically, understanding of “that about which something is said.”<sup>19</sup> Although the subject matter is not the favourite word of Ricoeur (he prefers ‘the world’ of the text), there is something about grasping the subject matter as clearly offered in his proposal. For Ricoeur, to retrieve the truth about the subject matter one has to begin by suspecting the ideological biases of the words and authors of a text. And yet to be truly listening to the subject matter, one cannot stop here. One also has to suspect one’s biases toward the text and the disillusion of a self-objectivity, i.e., a self-deceptive inclination to regard oneself as a free reader and a narcissistic inclination to read an echo of one’s own voice into the text. A failure to avoid these dangers means a failure to listen to an “other” in and through the text. A disciplined listening must be carried out rigorously if one wants to engage with the subject matter of the text and not engage with one’s self-created mirror into the text.

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<sup>16</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History Applied Hermeneutics* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 152. Gadamer proposes that what one engages in the text is not limited to the understanding of the author because the text discloses something beyond the authorial intention.

<sup>17</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 290.

<sup>18</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 87-88.

<sup>19</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, 167.

Thus, if Barth and others share a point of view that interpretation is about understanding the subject matter, “what someone says to someone about something,”<sup>20</sup> in what way is Barth’s *sachlich* approach unique from differing hermeneutics? Despite the apparent similarities, we propose that Barth is distinct in what he proposes about the nature and the identity of the subject matter. When we compare Barth’s understanding with Gadamer and Ricoeur, there is significant difference in regard to the nature of understanding. For them, an understanding of the subject matter is a miracle of human language. It is an event that presupposes that the truth has its own life in the dynamic process of human understanding. The subject matter has an ontological reality in the becoming of the human existence. There is a ‘mystical’ origin in their proposal about the nature of understanding.<sup>21</sup> The account does not offer a clear identity by whom and how the miracle takes place. It is assumed as an existential event, and will always happen as a mystery of human linguistic event. In this regard, there is a kind of ontological faith in the inner capacity of language to reveal meaning and truth. For Barth, on the other hand, understanding is a function of the inner dynamic of the Word of God. It is Barth’s theology of the Word that defines and provides content for his *Sachkritik*, i.e., how he understands the nature and the identity of the subject matter. The event of understanding is a miracle indeed, but it is a miracle with a theological identity, which is, the divine presence. As such the event is defined by the actualism of the Word of God through the text, the reader and the human author. The actuality of the text, author and reader is not in this case a miracle of human existence, but a pneumatological miracle. It is a pneumatological miracle as explored in the doctrine of inspiration. In the next section we will explore the nature and identity of the subject matter through a reading of Barth’s doctrine of Scripture and the Word of God. Then we will explore its implication for the actualism of the text, reader and author through a reading of his exposition of the sense in which Scripture is and becomes the Word of God.

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<sup>20</sup> Vanhoozer, "Discourse on Matter: Hermeneutics and the "Miracle" of Understanding," in *Hermeneutics at the Crossroads*, 19.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

## 2. Scripture as witness and history

To understand the content of Barth's *sachlich* hermeneutics we have to explore two interconnected concepts in his doctrine of Scripture. One is Scripture as the *witness* of revelation, and the other is *revelation* itself. Related to Barth's concept of witness is the relationship between the biblical witnesses and history. On this point, Barth's ontology of interpretation (chapter 4) defines the meaning and the purpose of history in relation to Scripture as the witness of revelation. In this part, we will begin with a discussion on the concept of witness, and then elaborate the relationship between witness and history. Specifically, we will analyse how this proposal provides a theological response to the modern understanding of history in biblical interpretation. The aim of the discussion is to clarify Barth's understanding of *sachlich* hermeneutics in relation to an important preliminary concept: Scripture as witness and the role of history in Scripture.

### 2.1. Scripture as witness

Barth's *sachlicher* hermeneutics is argued and elucidated through his theological understanding of the Bible as the witness of the Word of God. In general terms, a 'witness' is not the same as the thing that it witnesses to. The term points to the all-importance of the subject matter because a witness points *beyond* itself to the thing it witnesses to. In the case of the Bible as witness to the Word of God, witness is not only *distinct* from the thing that it witnesses about, but it also finds its *raison d'être* from the thing it witnesses.<sup>22</sup> Yet, for Barth, the distinction does not cancel the *unity* between the witness and the matter of the Scripture, i.e., between Scripture and the Word of God. Barth proposes a dialectics of *distinction* and *unity* in relation to the biblical witness and the Word of God. Thus, for the church, "the Bible is not

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<sup>22</sup> CD I/2, 463. Geoffrey Bromiley criticises Barth's distinction between the Word and the text of Scripture. He argues that while Barth rightly highlights the authorizing role of God (as Subject and Object of revelation) and directs our attention to its leading theme, Jesus Christ, Barth nevertheless unintentionally undermines the role of Scripture as a form of the Word of God by also differentiating between Word as an object of the witness and Scripture as the witness to the object. See G. W. Bromiley, "The Authority of Scripture in Karl Barth," in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon: Essays on Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1986), 275-94. As we argue later on this criticism can only stand if we perceive Barth's doctrine of Scripture from an essentialist point of view.

distinguished from revelation.”<sup>23</sup> And yet, while the Bible is not the Word of God, as it is distinct from the Word of God, but it is also one with the Word of God.<sup>24</sup> It is the means of grace God has chosen to speak to the church. In other words, while Scripture as witness is not identical with the subject matter, it sets the matter before the readers,<sup>25</sup> i.e., the witness is God’s elected text to communicate the subject matter. The term witness denotes these double meanings, which is, the distinction and the unity of the Bible with the Word of God as “the basis, object and content” of Scripture.

Why is such a distinction important to Barth? First, Barth’s construction of a theology of Scripture is not a quest for a theory of textuality, but an elaboration of the church doctrine of Scripture, and in light of this, an exploration of what it means for Scripture to have a creaturely character. This is particularly clear when we see that the concrete implication of his hermeneutics is not so much a method but rather an ethics of reading, i.e., how church should respond to the fact that God has revealed and continues to reveal God-self to the human race. Barth posits, “The Word of God is God Himself in Holy Scripture. For God once spoke as *Lord* to Moses and the prophets, to the Evangelists and apostles. And now through their written word He speaks as the same *Lord* to His Church.”<sup>26</sup> The object of the church’s obedience is the lordship of God and not the supposed religious ideas of the text. Thus, only in this respect “Scripture is holy and the Word of God, because by the Holy Spirit it became and will become to the Church a witness to divine revelation.”<sup>27</sup> Scripture demands the obedience of the church on account, not of its moral and historical worth, but the event of God’s lordship in and through the text. Jesus Christ is the Lord of the church, and it is this conviction that guides the church’s attitude and response in her reading of Scripture. Second, the distinction between the witness and the matter avoids a divinization of the text. Scripture, as a

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 463.

<sup>24</sup> Thus while it is true that Scripture is not the Word of God (distinction) it is also true that Scripture is the Word of God (unity). We will argue this point later as the being in becoming of the Scripture in the event of the Word.

<sup>25</sup> *CD I/2*, 463.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 457, emphasis added.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.



text, remains a witness rather than the matter itself. It is God whom the church must obey and not the text in isolation from God's communicative action. The text remains a human text, and is determined by its location in history. It is not a supra-historical text, but rather a historical text in the divine communicative and salvific action. Thus it is authentically and characteristically a human text. Third, the distinction highlights the humanity of the witness and the way in which a creaturely subject participates in the divine communication without being divinised in the process.<sup>28</sup> Because of the distinction, the human side of the witness (author and text) is not eclipsed by the unity of the text with the Word of God. In fact, as Barth argues, the humanity of the witness finds its true humanity in its participation in the divine communicative act precisely because it is characteristically human in its witness to the Word of God. In sum, the distinction preserves on one side the true object of church's obedience and, on the other, the historical and human character of the biblical texts.

Second, why is the unity important for Barth? First, an overemphasis on the distinction between the Scripture and the matter may result in an ambiguity of the textual location of God's speaking. In this case an overemphasis of its humanity implies that the relationship between the text and the Word of God is arbitrary, i.e., the text's historical meaning is unrelated to its theological meaning. If the text and the Word of God are utterly distinct, then there is no continuity between what is in the text (its historical and textual meaning) and the event of the Word of God, so that, it does not really matter what is in the text. An interpretation of Scripture, in this case, becomes completely arbitrary. Indeed, one can be theologically justified in ignoring the textual locality of the Word of God in Scripture and to claim that "God may speak to us through Russian Communism, a flute concerto, a blossoming shrub, or a dead dog,"<sup>29</sup> to the extent that Scripture has no privileged place in the divine ordering of revelation. Without unity, there is no real difference between hermeneutics based on the doctrine of Scripture and a subjectivist reading of biblical

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch*, 23.

<sup>29</sup> *CD I/1*, 55. Not that Barth refused the possibility, if God wants to. But this is merely a possibility, as such, in the freedom of God which is defined by an actuality of God speaking in and through the Bible.

text. Second, unity preserves the integrity of the text in its humanity (historically and textually) from its conception, its development, and to its elucidation by and in the church. It does not adopt Scripture at a certain stage in its history, either by political decision or by ecclesiastical authority. If the text only begins to be the Word of God at a certain stage of church history or at certain moment of the church's activity, with or without regard to its natural history, then its humanity is only ornamental. The creaturely history and textuality of Scripture is crucial for understanding the subject matter of the text. It is true that its meaning is bound to the event of the Word of God and to the divine communicative freedom in the church's reading, but this does not deny the fact that God does not act in an arbitrary way.

In this regard, it is crucial to bring Barth's later ontology to renovate the sense of utter discontinuity in Barth's theological unity in *distinction* between Scripture and the Word of God.<sup>30</sup> The election of Christ to be God for humanity in the divine eternal decision defines eternally the freedom of God in the event of church. In other words, Trinity and election already define eternally the path of the freedom in God's communicative action to the church. The way of God's ontological being determines the economy of God's communicative action. God's elected being is the history of the Son of God in the far country; the way of God's humanity in Jesus Christ is the way of both true God and true humanity. In other words, the mode of God's freedom is Christological. The freedom of God is defined in the history of Jesus Christ. In this history, the unity of the witness (the humanity of Scripture) and the subject matter (the Word of God) is maintained through an ontological ordering of God who gives God-self to humanity. In this ordering God is faithful to the human witness of the Word of God. God's freedom is expressed through God's faithfulness

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<sup>30</sup> Klass Runia misconstrues Barth's emphasis on distinction as a discontinuity in his theology of revelation that necessitates the Holy Spirit having to make the Bible become revelation again and again, and places the church in a difficult situation as to where and when the Bible becomes the Word of God. He goes on to posit, "In our opinion, one of the greatest weaknesses in Barth's early works is that he has place for the reality only and not for the continuity." See Klass Runia, *Karl Barth's Doctrine of Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 128. There is some justification in this criticism if we see Barth's theology of Scripture without employing being in becoming and the doctrine of election. However this criticism lose its power when Barth's doctrine of Scripture is rightly construed in his later theological ontology.

to the text of Scripture that is realized ever anew to the church through the work of Holy Spirit.<sup>31</sup>

The theological relationship between the text and the subject matter in Scripture is defined by the distinction-in-unity of Scripture to the Word of God. The subject matter is witnessed by a collection of human texts. Its humanity, i.e., its language and history, is important to the status and function of the text as the witness of revelation. As a theological text, the Bible must be read historically if one takes seriously its theological character as a human witness of revelation. But history is not a privileged field of the church. As the term indicates, it is a public sphere, mixing church events and the events of the world. What is, then, the relationship between the Word of God and the event of history? This is a significant theological question that requires more space than what is possible here. In what follows we will only sketch an outline of Barth's answer to this question, i.e., in what sense the Bible as a witness to revelation must shape the church's understanding of history, specifically, in relation to history as a field of critical study.<sup>32</sup> We will propose in what ways Barth's theology of history is different from modern historiography and how it can contribute to construe a theological view of history in relation to Scripture. The main concept is history as a witnessing history.

## **2.2. A witnessing history**

At a basic level, Barth's theology proposes that the unity of Scripture and the Word of God does not cancel the historical meaning of the Scripture, i.e., its meaning is not a supernatural or anti-historical meaning. Barth is clear that as a human document the Bible consists of human discourse "uttered by specific men at specific times in a

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<sup>31</sup> In this regard, the faithfulness of God to Scripture is not because God bound God-self to the text of Scripture but because God has decided to be God in Jesus Christ. In this decision, God has history, i.e., history of Jesus Christ that defines the communicative presence of God in the word of Scripture. As such Scripture is bound to the faithfulness of God to human being in God's election. We posit, Barth's theology is more robust than the suggestion of Mark D Thomson who in his criticism of Barth suggests that God decides to bind Himself to the Scripture and thus in this sense commissions the prophets and the apostles to write on His behalf. Mark D. Thompson, "Witness to the Word: On Barth's Doctrine of Scripture," in *Engaging with Barth: Contemporary Evangelical Critiques*, ed. David Gibson and Daniel Strange (New York: T&T Clark, 2008), 168-97.

<sup>32</sup> In a sense, the whole *Church Dogmatics* is Barth's answer to such a question. Our exploration thus is rather limited in ways in which the relationship between history and Barth's doctrine of the Word of God enlightens a constructive proposal of theological hermeneutics.

specific situation, in a specific language and with a specific intention.”<sup>33</sup> At this point Barth’s proposal is not problematic, but if we explore further the relationship between the historical locality of Scripture and God’s revelation, there is something about Barth’s answer that will not comfortably sit with modern historiography. Barth’s contention is that Scripture’s historicity is *a function* of its theological identity as a witness to revelation. Scripture is not only a document *of* history, certainly not in the modern sense of the term, but rather *a witnessing history*. Thus if we were to ask Barth, which one defines which (history or revelation), Barth’s answer is that its historical character must be understood in the light of its subject matter (revelation) and not the other way round.<sup>34</sup> It is its function as a witness that defines its nature as a historical document. Scripture is not a human document for the sake of historiography (a writing of a history), but a historical document for the sake of witnessing revelation.<sup>35</sup> Although it remains a historical document, it cannot be subsumed under a modern presupposition of history. In this regard, Barth proposes a bold theological revision of what is history. Barth posits,

If the word "historical" is a modern word, the thing itself was not really invented in modern times. And if the more exact definition of what is "historical" in this sense is liable to change and has actually changed at times, it is still quite clear that when and wherever the Bible has been really read and expounded, in this sense it has been read "historically" and not unhistorically, i.e., its concrete humanity has not been ignored. To the extent that it has been ignored, it has not been read at all. We have, therefore, not only no cause to retract from this demand, but every cause to accept it strictly on theological grounds.<sup>36</sup>

Barth proposes that the historicity of Scripture needs to be approached strictly from a theological point of view. Barth is critical of a privileged definition of history by any era because of its temporary character as an intellectual construct. It is, as such,

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<sup>33</sup> *CD I/2.*, 464.

<sup>34</sup> This concept is something of a lasting one in Barth’s theology. Even since his day in Göttingen, when Gogarten suggests to him that he must define history before talking about theology of confessions and the Bible, Barth has had a different opinion. Barth posits, “For me it was quite the other way round: first of all I wanted to study the Heidelberg Catechism and the Epistle to the Ephesians. Only then did I want to try to understand what ‘history’ is”. Busch, *Karl Barth, His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, 135.

<sup>35</sup> Barth engages in an attempt to redefine the meaning of history in this regard, an idea that we will treat in the later part of this chapter.

<sup>36</sup> *CD I/2.*, 464.

always a subject of continuous revisions and reformulations. On the other hand, even though it is true that the historical character of Scripture is not there simply for the sake of historical interests, does not Barth's proposal reduce the role of history in his theology of Scripture? Is it justifiable that Barth characterizes his contemporary historical study as that which "consists only in an exposition of the biblical humans in their historical reality"<sup>37</sup> and disregards the subject matter? Can he ignore the decisive role of historical situatedness that shaped biblical men and their theological ideas? While it is true that biblical humans are witnesses that point toward someone beyond themselves, are not historical circumstances also decisive in forming the discourse on the subject matter? To answer these questions, we have to explore two themes: Barth's theological understanding of history as an academic discipline and his view of history as a theological locus of revelation.

First is how Barth understands history as an academic discipline. Although there are many levels where Barth's proposal does not fit easily within modern historiography, we propose that the crux of the problem is his interpretation of *the meaning* of history in contrast to modern consensus.<sup>38</sup> Francis Watson notes that "in contemporary usage, 'history' is construed as a single, neutral, homogeneous space, itself without origin, telos, limit or meaning, which constitutes the field within which particular trains of events occur in a manner that is neither predictable in advance nor entirely devoid of a coherence and rationality which the historian may retrospectively identify."<sup>39</sup> In this context, to speak of history as having ultimate meaning is easily judged as intellectual hubris. It is seen as a universalization of a historical particularity. In contrast, history is generally understood as a series of contingent events bound to the particularity of its causality. The modern mind shows little conviction beyond the immanent causality of time-space continuum, a causality generally interpreted through a principle of analogy.<sup>40</sup> History is bound to perspective, interpretation and rational construction. Truth is not a sphere of

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 466.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Benjamin Myers, "Karl Barth as Historian: Historical Method in the Göttingen Lectures on Calvin, Zwingli and Schleiermacher," *Zeitschrift für Dialektische Theologie* 23, no. 1 (2007): 96-109.

<sup>39</sup> Francis Watson, "The Quest for the Real Jesus," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 164.

<sup>40</sup> Murray Rae, *History and Hermeneutics* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 17.

historical analysis. When this insight is applied to Scripture, it prescribes a separation between history and theology. Barth is troubled by the theological implication of this sort of historiography, especially when it is uncritically applied by the church to its biblical interpretation. Theology becomes unrelated to historical events. Its truth can be established on other grounds than the historical witness of Scripture. Barth posits, "The philosophy of religion of the Enlightenment from Lessing by way of Kant and Herder to Fichte and Hegel, with its intolerable distinction between the eternal content and the historical 'vehicle,' can only be described as the nadir of the modern misunderstanding of the Bible."<sup>41</sup> In this philosophy, the truth of the Bible is only illustrative of the universal truth, which can be established independently of Scripture, e.g., rational, moral or aesthetical grounds. One form of the (mis)understandings is a construct of theology as merely ethical, i.e., moral principles that can be established, critically, and independently of the Scripture.<sup>42</sup> In this principle, historical exploration serves theology for an illustration of ethical lessons rather than theological explorations.<sup>43</sup> The question is driven by an inquiry on moralities that can be learned from the past. Historical study is still seen as an important counterpart of theology, and might be regarded more suitable for the culture of modernity than dogmatics, but its truth is separated from its contingency as a historical event. The price to be paid is that the truth of Christianity must be redefined as a non-doctrinal form of religious lessons. Jesus and Christianity are explained as part of the immanent realities, fully within the grasp of the methodological tool of historical study. Christianity, as a historical phenomenon, is exhausted by historical analysis. The distressing effect is that theology is deemed to be more suitable when explored by other means of analysis. The essence of the matter is that God is not knowable as an object of historical inquiry, and consequently, the Christ of the Gospels is external to the grasp of historical method. If theology is about Christ and his salvation, then it is not possible to establish such claims on the basis of history. Theology has little to do with the Jesus of history, i.e.,

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<sup>41</sup> *CD I/1*, 329.

<sup>42</sup> Barth agrees that dogmatics is inherently ethical, as we will argue in the next chapter, but he is troubled by the sense that it is merely ethics without doctrine.

<sup>43</sup> Eg. See Ernst Troeltsch, *Religion in History: Ernst Troeltsch* trans. James Luther Adams and Walter F. Bense (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 11-32. Cf. B. Buunk, "Karl Barth and the "Jewish Question" - Elements of a Controversy," *Etudes Theologiques Et Religieuses* 80, no. 3 (2005): 16.

the historical figure behind the text of the Gospel.<sup>44</sup> In short, the study of history, in the modern sense of the word, has little to do with the faith of Scripture. Theology and history are two different species with different aims, purposes and characters. The deeper problem of this disjunction is the presupposition that governs its historical explanation.<sup>45</sup> It presupposes that God's existence is redundant for explaining historical events. In this view, history is defined as an immanent human event independent of divine agency. Historical continuity and plausibility can be fully explained by human agency and natural explanations. Any external agency will be regarded as suspicious. Analogy supplies the reasons for development or story in the historical narrative within an atheistic or deistic space-time continuum. There is little room left for God and revelation. History is not part of God's creation or a stage for God's redemptive act.

Barth senses this project as theologically anaemic, which is catastrophic for the church's theological interpretation of Scripture. While it is true that historical study cannot prove the reality of God, it does not mean that theology and history explore two different time-space continuums. It is the same history that theology and history explore. The difference is the interpretation of history and the presupposition about the role of the theological explanation of history. Behind modern historiography there is a myth of objectivity and a bias against theological convictions. It sidesteps theological interpretation as 'dogmatic', i.e., ideologically biased. Barth proposes that a theological recovery of historical study needs to work under a revised paradigm of reality in which the divine agency is not excluded. More to the point, the reality of God is decisive to what is historically immanent.<sup>46</sup> Barth elucidates this point in *CD I/2*, §14 "The Time of Revelation," where Barth provides three criticisms of modern historiography. First, modern historiography fails to "see that in answering this question [the relationship between history and revelation] we

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<sup>44</sup> Inter alia: Martin Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ* trans. Carl E. Braaten, *Seminar Editions* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), 46-51; Bultmann, "Liberal Theology and the Latest Theological Movement," in *Faith and Understanding*, 28-52.

<sup>45</sup> Rae, *History and Hermeneutics*, 4-21.

<sup>46</sup> Donald Wood rightly argues that "in place of the sovereignty of modern reading subject, whose presumptions regarding this hermeneutical self-sufficiency he regards as neo-Pelagianism, Barth speaks of God's prevailing authority in Scripture... a claim that evokes the self-forgetful attentiveness of faith." Wood, *Barth's Theology of Interpretation*, 99. See also Hans Madueme, "Theological Interpretation after Barth," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 3, no. 1 (2009): 99.

cannot start with the general phenomenon of time, or, as it is preferably called, history.”<sup>47</sup> The reason for this is because we cannot assume that we know revelation “on the basis of comparative observation, and then go on to ask whether and how far the phenomenon of revelation discloses itself, perhaps, to the said comparative observation at a specific point.”<sup>48</sup> Revelation cannot be deduced from a general observation of human events. Revelation comes to history with the sign of exteriority. History, on the other hand, cannot explain something that is exterior to what it constitutes. Barth argues that revelation cannot be inquired from a thought system that has no room for revelation, but he does not retreat from seeking to understand how revelation and history relate to each other. Barth posits, “There has been failure to see that the event of Jesus Christ as God's revelation can be found only when sought as such, i.e., when we are seeking what we have already found.”<sup>49</sup> In other words, should history open itself to revelation it can only be construed as a theological history, and not a system of historical revelation. Thus, Barth argues, thirdly, “there has been a failure to see that if revelation is revelation, we cannot speak of it as though it can be discovered, dug up, worked out as the deeper ground and content of human history.”<sup>50</sup> The historical exploration of Scripture will not necessarily confirm the presence of God in the biblical history. The reason for this is because, “*Revelation is not a predicate of history, but history is a predicate of revelation.*”<sup>51</sup> Thus, revelation is not disclosed by history independent of divine action. Barth agrees with modern historiography that historical study cannot grasp the divine. Nevertheless, Barth argues that revelation has the capacity to enter history and has concretely entered history in which God as a subject within history is made known. God is the creator of the space-time continuum, and able and willing to reveal God's self in history. More importantly God has decided to do so. The truth is not, for Barth, a possibility of revelation, but the actuality of God's revelation in

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<sup>47</sup> *CD I/2*, 56.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*



history. Revelation not only can have history as its predicate, but God has chosen to have history predicated to revelation.

In an important sense history, as a theological construct, will not be so different from a modern understanding of history. There will be a clear continuity and analogy of historical events. But, in another crucial sense, there is also a discontinuity. It is not in a crude sense that a theological history is open toward miracles and divine stories (or mythical narratives). The point is a theological history, as witnessed by Scripture, confesses that God's revelation alters the fabric of history. The marks of this alteration have their locus in general history, but faith that perceives the marks of this alteration is not a natural knowledge, universally available independent of God's action. As Murray A. Rae rightly comments that "the alterations to the fabric of history wrought by the incarnation are not unveiled as revelation except as the Spirit gives eyes to see and ears to hear."<sup>52</sup> The continuity does not undermine the need of faith and the work of the Holy Spirit to open the eyes and the ears of faith. A theological history does not claim a perspective from nowhere (or from everywhere, as an omniscience perspective), but a faith perspective that is not only open but crucially guided by the theological presupposition of reality, i.e., a theological ontology. In the New Testament, especially in the Gospels and the Book of Acts, the resurrection alters the fabric of reality and shapes the course of history according to the plan of God by the work of the Holy Spirit. The decisiveness of the resurrection provides an analogy for understanding the presence of God in Scripture's theological construct of history. This historical presupposition, as a guide to the historical study of Scripture, proposes a different historical approach to biblical interpretation.

There are further implications of this theological approach to the historical study of Scripture. Barth argues, first that, the historical-critical study needs to know its limits, and place upon itself a self-critical consciousness about its methodological boundaries. The Word of God is a subject matter that is beyond the historians' methodological capacity. The theological subject matter of the Bible is a subject of God's free communicative action. The historical-critical approach can be a worthy

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<sup>52</sup> Rae, *History and Hermeneutics*, 29.

ally of the church once it is maintained self-critically in relation to its theological limitations. Barth posits,

The so-called historico-critical method-of handling Holy Scripture ceases to be theologically possible or worth considering, the moment it conceives it as its task to work out from the testimonies of Holy Scripture (which does ascribe to revelation throughout the character of miracle), and to present as the real intention, a reality which lacks this character, which has to be regarded as reality otherwise than on the basis of God's free, special and direct act.<sup>53</sup>

In this regard, historical critical study needs to admit that there are certain narratives in the Bible that tell events beyond the scope of positive affirmation or negation of its historical method. Among these are the stories of creation, resurrection, miracles and divine speech. Barth, in many places, uses the terms legend and saga to describe the proper way modern history may describe these stories.<sup>54</sup> Even in this regard Barth argues that the negation of the story is just a matter of probability and as such must not be decided conclusively for the reason that, theologically speaking, historical criticism must be aware of its methodological limitations.

Second, Barth's historiography provides a revision of what is a historical event from a theological perspective. Observing the modern practice of biblical scholars Francis Watson notes that, all historians, including Christians who personally believe in Christian doctrines, "will be subject to the constraints of [the] methodologically atheistic worldview- unless they are prepared to rethink what 'history' is, on the basis of theology."<sup>55</sup> We posit that to think of history on the basis of theology, with and after the manner of Barth, is to understand the histories in

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<sup>53</sup> *CD I/2*, 64.

<sup>54</sup> *CD I/1*, 327; *I/2*, 51, 509. Barth asserts "Saga or legend can only denote the more or less intrusive part of the story-teller or story-tellers in the story told. There is no story in which we do not have to reckon with this aspect, and therefore with elements of saga or legend according to the general concept of "historical" truth. This applies also to the stories told in the Bible. Otherwise they would have to be without temporal form. Yet this fundamental uncertainty in general historicity, and therefore the positive judgment that here and there saga or legend is actually present, does not have to be an attack on the substance of the biblical testimony. For (1) this judgment can in any case concern and contest only the general historicity of a biblical record, (2) even in the clearest instance it is by nature only a judgment of probability, and (3) even saga or legend is in any case meant to be history and can thus be heard as a communication of history irrespective of the "historical" judgment. So long as this is so, the question of the particular historicity of the story at issue is at least not answered negatively." *CD I/1*, 327.

<sup>55</sup> Watson, "The Quest for the Real Jesus," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus*, 164.

Scripture as a function of its witness of revelation. It is a witness in its humanity. History is to be taken seriously because the church must take seriously the humanity of Scripture. Barth posits, “When we do take the humanity of the Bible quite seriously, we must also take quite definitely the fact that as a human word it does say something specific, that as a human word it points away from itself, that as a word it points towards a fact, an object.”<sup>56</sup> While the relationship between history and Scripture remains a complex matter, the fact that Scripture witnesses the Word of God is not disreputable by the lack of historical proofs. Its historical narrative is a function of its humanity that is necessitated by its temporal form. In this regard the doctrine of the Word of God defines the relationship between the witnessing history and the subject matter of Scripture. The *Sache* of the Scripture is the Word of God, and its history is the human form of witnessing to the identity and the content of the Word of God. This point brings us to the heart of the matter: What is the *Sache* of Scripture? What is the Word of God? It is to this exploration that we will assign the next section.

### **3. The *Sache* of the Scripture: the threefoldness of God’s speaking**

What is the *Sache* of the Scripture? Barth’s answer to this question is both simple and complex.<sup>57</sup> It is simple because it is the divine presence in the communicative act, that is, the Word of God. In its basic form it means “God was with us, with us His enemies, with us who were visited and smitten by His wrath. God was with us in all the reality and fullness with which He does what He does.”<sup>58</sup> This is the simplest form of the *Sache* of Scripture. Yet, it is complex because the divine economy is determined by the ontological decision of God, shaped by Barth’s understanding of divine actualism and construed in a real dialectic of divine-human faith encounter.

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<sup>56</sup> *CD I/2*, 464.

<sup>57</sup> Burnett gives two reasons for the difficulty of defining the word *Sache*: linguistically and theologically. From a linguistic point of view it is difficult to find a translation for the adjective *sachlicher* and the noun *Sache* in English. But more importantly, the theological meaning of the *Sache* which point to God, makes it difficult to delineate it since God as the object of the Scripture is at the same time the subject who speaks. See Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principals of the Römerbrief Period*, 75. Our answer to this question will focus on the theological meaning of *Sache* in Barth’s theology and elucidate it by an exposition of the doctrine of the Word of God.

<sup>58</sup> *CD I/1*, 105.

Barth posits, “Revelation is itself the divine decision...”<sup>59</sup> and, “All revelation, then, must be thought of as revealing, i.e., as conditioned by the act of revelation.”<sup>60</sup> What sort of description has to be made so that we take seriously the real subject matter of the Scripture, which is, God in communicative presence? Our elaboration of this question offers a threefoldness of God’s speaking (revealed, written and proclaimed) as Barth’s response to such inquiry. It is by connecting the threefold dimensions of the Word of God that the meaning of the *Sache* of Scripture can be understood in relation to human speech in general (proclamation) and to human text in particular (Scripture). There will be some repetition of the theme here on the relationship between history and the Word of God, but in this context the theme will be seen from a different angle, i.e., from the point of view of human language in general and the text of Scripture in particular. On the other hand, this section picks up one question that is still unanswered in the previous section: what is the precise relationship between the humanity of the Scripture and the Word of God? In other words, how can this humanity (history, language, text) be theologically accounted as an event of the Word of God, and in what ways and by what capacities can the witnessing of the humanity of Scripture become a witnessing of the Word of God?

### **3.1. The Word of God in human discourse**

In *CD* I/1 §4 on “The Word of God in its Threefold Form,” Barth explains that the one Word of God has three different forms in the life of the church. It is not three Words of God but one in threefold form. In the exposition of the proclaimed Word Barth provides important insights on the relationship between human words and the Word of God. According to Barth, church proclamation by and in itself is a human occasion, but it *becomes* an event of the Word of God by the work of Holy Spirit in the life of the church.<sup>61</sup> He points out that the presence of the Word of God (the subject matter of proclamation) is comparable to the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. In this regard, Christ is truly present in a way that does not undermine the

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>61</sup> The emphasis here is on the event rather than on the becoming of the Word of God although the becoming of the Word of God is equally important.

human sign of the sacrament. The sign of wine and bread is not simply a designation, but *a seal* of the event.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, the proclaimed Word is a seal of the Word of God that becomes reality following four theological principles: commission, theme, judgement and event.<sup>63</sup> According to Barth,

Where Church proclamation takes place according to this will of God, where it rests on the divine *commission*, where God Himself gives Himself to it as its *theme*, where it is true according to His *judgment*, where, in short, it is service of God, there on the one hand its character as an *event* that can be seen and heard on earth is not set aside.<sup>64</sup>

In this context, the true content of church proclamation is not determined by human theological reflection. Human reflection is not set aside. Proclamation is, by definition, a human reflection of the Word of God, but what is decisive is the act of God in self-giving and providing the true content of the Word of God proclaimed. Colin E Gunton rightly comments, “Central to this is that there is no proclamation without, or apart from relying on, a prior reality: proclamation is only there if there is something prior - and that is God.”<sup>65</sup> Because of God’s presence, the Word of God is *the object* of church proclamation. It is the act of God, not a human determination, which makes it possible in the first place, and realises it in the life of the church.

On the other hand, human words do not have power to capture the Word of God. So how is this possible? Barth argues that what happens in proclamation is the Word of God captures human words.<sup>66</sup> The act of capturing human words by the Word of God makes possible, and realizes, that the church proclamation has the Word of God as its object. Thus the Word of God is generated neither by a homiletic strategy nor by human collective religiosity. The church can never ascertain its reality, but only seek it on the basis of God’s promise. Thus the Word of God preached is a “human talk about God on the basis of the self-objectification of God which is not just there, which cannot be predicted, which does not fit into any plan,

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<sup>62</sup> *CD I/1*, 88.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>64</sup> Emphasis added, *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>65</sup> Gunton, *The Barth Lectures* 72.

<sup>66</sup> *CD I/1*, 92.

which is real only in the freedom of His grace, and in virtue of which He wills at specific times to be the object of this talk, and is so according to His good-pleasure.”<sup>67</sup> Since proclamation is human talk about *God*, the fact that it has God as its object, which is, the becoming of the Word of God in proclamation, is a miracle. It remains a human discourse on every level, but it really does proclaim God, as God’s act makes it so. In the church’s proclamation, there is a subject matter that reveals itself. What makes it profound is that it is not just a human attempt to communicate the Word of God, as it really is a communication of the Word of God.

How does Barth’s theology understand the role of human discourse in communicating the subject matter? Specifically, if it depends on the will and work of God, does human discourse matter? Or is it just an empty vehicle? To answer these questions, we will begin with Barth’s use of Christological analogy. Barth posits, “The willing and doing of proclaiming man, however, is not in any sense set aside in real proclamation. 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.”<sup>68</sup> Proclamation is a discourse among other human discourses, and could be understood merely from this point of view.<sup>69</sup> It can be seen as religious education, social propaganda or even, in extreme misinterpretation, a community’s collective delusion. This is certainly a misunderstanding of the church’s proclamation, but in Barth’s view, for this misunderstanding to be possible and indeed happen in the life of the church, it shows that proclamation is genuinely a human discourse. Human words are not an empty vessel. People can refuse the Word of God in the proclamation of the church, but when people refuse it, it is not simply human proclamation that is rejected but the Word of God in the life of the church. However, as Barth explains further, “as Christ is not just true man, so it is not just the willing and doing of

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> *CD I/1*, 94.

<sup>69</sup> See on this issue various important papers in Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995). In his paper, Brevard S. Childs, pp 14-17, laments the attitude of the biblical guild to restrict their work from expounding the subject matter itself. It is along the line of Childs’ proposal that we argue for a more theologically rigorous reading of the Scripture, including exploring its historical facticity.

proclaiming man. It is also and indeed it is primarily and decisively the divine willing and doing.”<sup>70</sup>

How can we understand the becoming of the Word of God in church proclamation? Does it mean that it depends on the subjectivity of the church as a collective being? Or does proclamation become the Word of God without a *necessary* dependence on human words? As we argued in chapter four, Barth’s ontology cannot be understood in essentialist terms. In Barth’s actualism, human words become ‘necessary’ to the Word of God, but the term ‘necessary’ must be defined strictly from Barth’s theological ontology. It is ‘necessary’ not because the existence of the Word of God depends on human words, but because God chose to be the God of the human world. It is a divine actualism shaped by the doctrine of election, i.e., God does not want to be a god without human beings. Barth, however, does not see the relationship of word and Word in terms of a mutual cooperation of the human and the divine. The subject matter itself is decisively a divine willing, but it is communicated in and by human discourse, and decisively so, because God’s eternal decision to be with and for human beings in God’s relationship to the world.

Although Barth’s earlier treatment of the human dimension of the Word of God may be interpreted as suggesting the human word as not necessary, Barth’s later ontology clearly suggests human words are necessary for God’s speaking to the church. However, the necessity of human discourse is a necessity decided by God’s election of God-self to be the God of humanity. God’s election necessitates human discourse to be the form in which the Word of God addresses the church in proclamation. The mark of this relationship is one in which the lordship of God is acknowledged. The freedom of humanity in response to God’s decision is not denied but finds its real freedom and actuality in the obedience to God. One might question Barth’s notion of freedom at this point, but we will pursue this theme in the next chapter. At this point we will only note that Barth has a particular understanding of true humanity in relationship to the divine decision, one that is not defined by a concept of arbitrary freedom but defined by a Christological obedience that chooses to fulfil human vocation by giving up freedom. Human free obedience to God’s

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<sup>70</sup> *CD I/1*, 94.

command is articulated as a reiteration of the Christological decision of giving up God's freedom to be God for humanity.<sup>71</sup> In this context church proclamation is the Word of God that is realized by the faithfulness of God to divine communicative ordering to speak to the church in and through human discourse.

The theology of divine self-election, as God for humanity, provides the ontological basis for the reality of the Word in the word. The human word is not adopted into the divine realm, nor is it an empty vessel of the Word of God. It becomes the Word of God in the event of proclamation, but it is so not because of a phenomenological relationship between Word and words, as if language, in and by itself, is a necessary condition for God to speak through human words. It is so because it actualizes God's eternal decision in relation to humanity. God's election to be the God for humanity necessitates the human discourse as the form of the Word of God in the church. We must add that this ontological decision is at the same time a moral decision, i.e., to be the God of love, and in this regard to be the God of reconciling and communicative presence in the life of the church.

### **3.2. The Word of God in human writing**

In exploring the subject matter of Scripture we begin with Barth's basic conviction that the same *Sache* is in Scripture as in proclamation. It is not two Words but one; the one Word of God in threefold form. The difference lies in its respective relationship to the Word of God: *the expectation* of the future revelation (proclamation) and *the recollection* of the past revelation (Scripture).<sup>72</sup> In calling Scripture a 'recollection', Barth relates the Word of God to specific historical antecedents.<sup>73</sup> The event of the Word of God stands in continuity with past history. The way human writing witnesses to the Word of God follows the same theological principle as in proclamation. It is based on the actuality of God in human writing and reading of Scripture. This, however, requires a further clarification in relation to the

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<sup>71</sup> A more precise way to say this is that God elects as his freedom takes the form of a freedom for humanity. This does not mean that there is a different freedom exist in God that is changed by this decision, but the decision itself defines from beginning the act and the nature of God's freedom.

<sup>72</sup> *CD I/1*, 99.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.



continuity of the content of the writing in the witness of the author of Scripture and in the reading of the church. How does Barth account for this relationship?

As in the case of proclamation, we will also begin here with Barth's use of the analogy of the incarnation. In Scripture the Word of God takes a created form as a collection of texts. There is, however, a crucial difference between the Word of God in Scripture and Christ's incarnation. In Scripture, there is no unity of person between God and its human authors. As such, the human authors, in contrast to Christ, are not glorified to assume the divine nature. "It cannot independently reveal, but only attest, the revelation which did and does take place in the humanity of Jesus Christ. ...Scripture... stands in that indirect identity of human existence with God Himself, which is conditioned neither by the nature of God nor that of man, but brought about by the decision and act of God."<sup>74</sup> Ultimately, "The Bible is God's Word to the extent that God causes it to be His Word, to the extent that He speaks through it."<sup>75</sup> This sentence can be misunderstood. It might be seen as a deficit of real human participation in the Word, but what Barth wants to emphasize is the actuality of Scripture as an *event* of the Word of God in the life of the church. In this event, human participation is not set aside, but embraced in the fullest and uplifted by God, without becoming part of the divine being. This actualism of Scripture, we contend, will be better construed through Barth's later theological ontology.

What is the precise relationship between Trinitarian ontology and the actualism of the Scripture? How can this be understood ontologically in relation to Scripture as a text (as a human artefact of cognitive-aesthetic determination) and the understanding of readers (who are distanced from the text by complex processes of historicity and differing cultural plausibility)? In response to this question we will not pursue a comprehensive answer. What is offered here is a theological reflection based on Barth's theological ontology. As we have previously argued, Barth's Trinitarian ontology of God's being offers an ontological construal for reality. For

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<sup>74</sup> *CD I/2*, 500.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

Barth, as McCormack comments, “everything that is has its being in becoming.”<sup>76</sup> Barth’s ontology is not a concept of being applied to God’s nature. It is the doctrine of the Trinity that provides the material and formal criteria of Barth’s actualism, and we will apply this ontology to an actualistic construal of Scripture, particularly in relation to the authors and the text of Scripture.

First, Barth’s actualism does not have the same import for everything. This is particularly important when we compare Barth’s actualism of God and human beings. While everything has its being in becoming, the being in becoming of God does not have the same meaning as that of the human.<sup>77</sup> Barth posits, “What is real in God must constantly become real precisely because it is real in God (not after the manner of created being). But this becoming (because it is this becoming) rules out every need of this being for completion. Indeed, this becoming simply confirms the perfection of this being.”<sup>78</sup> In other words, God’s being in becoming is absolute; God’s self-determination decides for God his being for eternity.<sup>79</sup> On the other hand, human being is a relative being; human being is not a self-determining subject.<sup>80</sup>

At this point we must bring in Barth’s later ontology. In this perspective, the ontology of human being is grounded in God’s eternal decision as the elect of God’s covenant partner.<sup>81</sup> The election of the human to live in a covenantal relationship with God is crucial for understanding the being in becoming of human being. As McCormack comments, God’s eternal decision “encompasses and surrounds human self-determination, limiting it and giving it its true character.”<sup>82</sup> Human freedom is a gift from God, and has its proper theological meaning as God’s covenant partner. On

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<sup>76</sup> McCormack, “The Being of Holy Scripture Is in Becoming,” in *Evangelicals & Scripture: Tradition, Authority, and Hermeneutics*, 64. Our analysis in this part of argument owes much to the article of McCormack on the ontology of Scripture.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> *CD I/1*, 427.

<sup>79</sup> McCormack, “The Being of Holy Scripture Is in Becoming,” in *Evangelicals & Scripture: Tradition, Authority, and Hermeneutics*, 65.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> *CD II/2*, 166.

<sup>82</sup> McCormack, “The Being of Holy Scripture Is in Becoming,” in *Evangelicals & Scripture: Tradition, Authority, and Hermeneutics*, 65.

the other hand, the human can ‘choose’ otherwise, i.e., human freedom can be an expression of a covenant breaker, though this is against its reality as freedom in grace. To live as a covenant breaker is impossible in regard to the true being of humanity, but it is possible in regard to the nature of the covenant as a relationship of two parties (an impossible possibility). Nevertheless, whichever determination is decided, either as covenant breaker or covenant partner, a human being will never cease to be what he/she is in relation to God’s eternal covenant. The human being has her being in becoming, and her true being is the being in becoming of a covenant partner of God.

In this context there are two ways in which we may differentiate the ontological reality of God and the human being, and in turn clarify the human being in becoming as the author and reader of Scripture.<sup>83</sup> First, God is Creator, while the human being is creature. This means God is a self-determined being from eternity, while the human being receives their being by God’s eternal election.<sup>84</sup> There is “an infinite qualitative difference” that separates God’s being and the human’s being. Second, the presence of sin in human life is a ‘reality’ that continues to threaten human existence to become something that is contrary to the existence of elect humanity.<sup>85</sup> As McCormack comments, “what the human subject is essentially is a relation; or, more concretely, it is the divine act of relating to him or her in election. In that the fallen sinner seeks to use his freedom to become something other than what he is essentially, a dissonance is introduced into his being-in-becoming.”<sup>86</sup> In short, the being in becoming of the human is different from God because of the nature of created-being and the theological condition as a fallen being. The limitation of human being as created being makes its being relative to God’s absolute being, and the fallenness of human nature defines its condition as a covenant breaker, and in this regard, as a creature who is in need of God’s grace.

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

Second, what is the relationship of the ontological being of the human to the being of Scripture as a text? We must note that Barth never talks about the being in becoming of the text in an abstract way, i.e., text as a text. This is a very important theological viewpoint that avoids a phenomenology of a text strictly as text. This phenomenology will mystify the event of understanding. If a text has an independent life in isolation to human's or God's determination, then the text becomes the source of its own mystery. In contrast to this, the being of becoming of a text is seen in its relationship to the being in becoming of God and human being. When Barth discusses the text, it is the concrete reality of Scripture in the church he is expounding. The Bible as a phenomenological artefact is a text or a compilation of texts, but what is important to recognise is the difference between the being of the Bible as *inanimate object* and human being as *person*.<sup>87</sup> Scripture, as a text, does not have a will in itself independent of its interaction to a person. The being in becoming of Scripture is animated by the act of divine communication or a reading of human person in faith of God's communicative action. McCormack rightly argues,

The Bible is not a person, as God and human being are persons... [Scripture] stands between two radically unequal but nevertheless competing wills: the will of God (which determines its true being as Word of God) and the will of the fallen human interpreter (which seeks to hear in and through the texts of which it is composed everything but the Word of God)... This inequality has the following consequences. First, what the Bible *is*, is defined by the will of God as expressed in his act of giving it to the church. And this means that where and when the Bible *becomes* the Word of God, it is only becoming what it already is. But, second, where and when the Bible does *not* become the Word of God, there God has chosen provisionally, for the time being, not to bear witness to himself in and through its witness to this particular reader or this particular set of readers of it.<sup>88</sup>

In this context there are two conditions in which the being in becoming of the Scripture as the Word of God takes place.<sup>89</sup> One is in the being in becoming of God in giving Scripture to the church, and the other is in the being in becoming of Scripture in relation to the faith and obedience of interpreter.<sup>90</sup> In these aspects, we

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

are dealing with God in his relationship to the author and the reader of the Scripture. If this analysis is correct, then the being in becoming of Scripture can never be understood as a human text in itself. A theological understanding of Scripture as the Word of God, which is in the form of a text, can only be analysed in relation to the will and the act of God for and in the church.<sup>91</sup> As a theological document it is not in and by itself the subject matter. It presents the subject matter as the function of the communicative will of God to and for the church.

This has a crucial implication for the practice of exegesis in the church's reading of the Bible. The Bible cannot be abstracted from its relation to the divine will. That is to say, it is theologically deficient to treat the Bible as a document in itself, either as a historical document or piece of literature that limits the exegetical approach through methodological norms that refuse to acknowledge Scripture's theological being. The being of Scripture as a text is a being in becoming in relation to the being in becoming of the authors and the readers of Scripture. The authors of Scripture can be witnesses to the Word of God only in their becoming witnesses of the Word by the act of God's grace. The readers of Scripture can become the true readers who understand and grasp the word of God in the becoming of their being as the church by God's grace. To construe the matter in this formula is less recognisable to the historical doctrines. What Barth argues in this regard is discussed under a more familiar term as the doctrine of inspiration and divine illumination. More to the point, this brings to light that what is crucial for understanding Scripture is the illumination of the Holy Spirit. The being in becoming of the author, text and readers for Barth is precisely the divine inspiration of Scripture.

### **3.3. Divine Inspiration**

The concrete reality of the textual actuality of Scripture finds its material description in Barth's doctrine of inspiration. In *CD I/2*, Barth elucidates the doctrine of inspiration by exploring two important passages of the New Testament (2 Tim 3:14-17 and 2 Pet 1:19-21). Barth has a unique view of inspiration in which he does not differentiate the relationship of the text and its subject matter, from the inspiration of

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

the first witnesses (prophets and apostles) and the illumination of the subsequent readers (church). For Barth, there is a difference between Scripture as the canon and the church as the community of the canon,<sup>92</sup> but the way in which the Holy Spirit actualizes the text, to witness to the subject matter or to be understood by the church, is not differentiated. The decisive point is the act of the Holy Spirit in the actualization of the human's determination for the Word of God and, in particular, in the appointment of the prophets and apostles for special roles in the writing of Scripture; both are explained through the actuality of the Word of God.

While Barth argues that Scripture stands in a different order from proclamation, he insists that the event of divine illumination does not require a necessary difference between the act of divine illumination in the writing and reading of Scripture.<sup>93</sup> The work of the Holy Spirit is to reveal the subject matter both in the composition of and in each new reading of Scripture. The concrete form of the illumination is the gift of *faith* to the church in the event of the Word of God. Barth posits,

We have to recognise that faith as an irruption into this reality and possibility means the removing of a barrier in which we can only see and again and again see a miracle. And it is a miracle which we cannot explain apart from faith, or rather apart from the Word of God in which faith believes. Therefore

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<sup>92</sup> Barth posits "When we regard the prophets and apostles as witnesses of divine revelation, in this their function as witnesses we ascribe to them, ...a very definite separation from us and all other men, a singular and unique position and significance... But this setting apart and singling out are ascribed to them by the Church because it belongs to them, and because they have shown and proved themselves to be singled out and set apart, as we have seen already in our discussion of the concept of the Canon. It lies in the nature of this separation and differentiation that it has a limit. Scripture is Holy Scripture as the witness of divine revelation, in the passive and active function of the men who speak in it, in the event of this function, i.e., in such a way that the revelation of God is manifest in its witness demanding and receiving obedience as the Word of God. But only in this way." *CDI/2*, 495.

<sup>93</sup> In Nicholas Wolterstorff's estimation, the sense of 'becomes' could not be offered as speech, but rather an act of a grabbing of the reader into the content of the testimony, thus it entails that the relation between the Bible and God's communicative act is only arbitrary, and the diastasis creates uncertainty of Scripture as an objective authority. This is because Barth has confused inspiration and illumination, and misunderstood illumination as communication while in actuality it is but only causation. In the end, Spirit's work is disconnected with the actual words and the meaning of the text. As such in Barth's theology "God speaks in Jesus Christ, and only there; then on multiple occasions, God activates, ratifies, and fulfils in us what God says in Jesus Christ." Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 73. This criticism, however, loses its power when we understand Barth's ontology of becoming from the point of view of divine election, in which God's communicative action to the church constitutes not only an event but also a history that begins in eternity.

the reality and possibility of it cannot be maintained or defended at all apart from faith and the Word.<sup>94</sup>

According to Barth, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit is to lead the human authors to “the special attitude of obedience in those who are elected and called to this obviously special service.”<sup>95</sup> However, the Spirit-breathed thinking and writing of the human author “did not mean any abolition of their freedom, their self-determination.”<sup>96</sup> The human authors obeyed God in their freedom, which is the fullest sense of human freedom.<sup>97</sup> Barth maintains the tension between faith and freedom in regard to the church as the readers of Scripture. To believe in Scripture is *to accept* its content in the fullest sense of human freedom, not because of any external force of institution or person, but because it has *proven* itself to be the Word of God in the event of faith. However, the event of faith means that, instead of the human grasping of the Word, it is the human being that is being grasped by the Word in the divine illumination.<sup>98</sup>

What is then the theological meaning of the *text* of Scripture? We have argued that, for Barth, the freedom of the human in the inspiration of Scripture is conditioned by the freedom of God. The freedom of God precludes, in Barth’s theology, the notion of the objective locus of divine inspiration in the text. But does not this entail a subjectivity of textual meaning? Does it not entail that the locus of meaning of the text is to be found only in the subjectivity of the author or the reader of the text? On the contrary, for Barth, there is such a thing as the objective locus of divine inspiration. The objectification of the divine inspiration is located in the act of divine self-revelation (an actualistic objectification). It does not entail the notion of revealed-ness of the text as human writings or the notion of subjective meaningfulness in human perception. It excludes any notion of revealed-ness, i.e., textual revealed-ness or historical revealed-ness. If the notions of revealed-ness were

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<sup>94</sup> *CD* I/2, 506

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 505.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 506.

accepted, the interpretation of Scripture could be limited as an exercise in textual explication or historical investigation. It would not necessarily need the work of Holy Spirit, or the work of the Holy Spirit would be limited to the illumination of biblical ideas for contemporary application. On the contrary, for Barth, exegesis (as the principal work of theology) is a spiritual exercise of understanding the subject matter of Scripture i.e. the Word of God. It is a spiritual exercise (it does not exclude contemporary application of the biblical message) because it purports to let the text speak as the Word of God without disregarding the importance of the textual and historical investigations. The inspiration of the Holy Spirit does not diminish the full participation of human authors and readers, but defines, fulfils and empowers them. The doctrine of inspiration means that the textual and historical investigations of Scripture are seen as a spiritual exercise in view of human participation in the divine inspiration.

What is the precise relationship between the text and divine inspiration? The basic conviction of Barth's doctrine of inspiration is that Scripture *is* the Word of God and as such *has* priority over all other writings. Barth defines very strictly the meaning of the words "is" and "has" in this formula. The double attestation of 'is' and 'has' must be defined through Barth's actualistic ontology. Scripture is the Word of God by divine decision and action. Thus, it is not the Word of God in an *objective* sense, i.e., in the inspired-ness of the text of Scripture. Scripture 'is' the Word of God means concretely Scripture 'was' and 'will be' the Word of God in the life of the church by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.<sup>99</sup> In the same way, God's freedom in actuality qualifies the 'has' as the 'had' and the 'will have' in relation to the priority of Scripture over all other writings. Scripture has priority over all other writings because Scripture had been and will be the Word of God in the life of the church. This explication, nevertheless, does not cancel its priority, as it clarifies that the formula refers to the actual presence of God in the divine inspiration.<sup>100</sup>

This means Scripture as a human text has a capacity for error, particularly if it is seen from a modern point of view. Barth, however, differentiates between errors

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<sup>99</sup> *CD I/2*, 502.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 503.



and capacity for errors of the Bible.<sup>101</sup> The first is an objective judgment based on human evaluation; the second is a theological evaluation based on the doctrine of inspiration that the humanity of the authors is not circumvented. Barth refuses that the inspiration means that apostles and prophets must be inerrant in every word of the scriptural text.<sup>102</sup> On the contrary, in a very bold statement Barth argues, “[prophets and apostles] can be at fault in any word, and have been at fault in every word, and yet according to the same scriptural witness, being justified and sanctified by grace alone, they have still spoken the Word of God in their fallible and erring human word.”<sup>103</sup> Barth maintains the humanity of the authors of the Scripture is a real humanity, i.e., humanity in particular historical, cultural and linguistic contexts; and it is within these contexts that they speak as the witnesses of revelation. Barth posits,

The prophets and apostles as such, even in their office, even in their function as witnesses, even in the act of writing down their witness, were real, historical men as we are, and therefore sinful in their action, and capable and actually guilty of error in their spoken and written word.... Their existence as witnesses, as it is a visible event in Holy Scripture, is therefore the existence of real men (and therefore not at all crowded out by the existence of God or hampered by any kind of magic in the fulfilment of their existence), men who

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<sup>101</sup> Barth’s position in this regard raises serious criticism from evangelical readers. It seems for some that Barth does not take seriously the question of biblical inerrancy, that Barth seems to uphold that the Bible is at the same time right and errs. See, for example, Colin Brown, *Karl Barth and the Christian Message* (Chicago: Inter-varsity Press, 1967), 61-62. However, this criticism does not consider Barth’s position from the point of view of Scripture as both the word of human and the Word of God, and how to account in this regard the witness of the apostles and prophets in relation to God’s revelation. For an excellent response to evangelical criticism, see McCormack, “The Being of Holy Scripture Is in Becoming,” in *Evangelicals & Scripture: Tradition, Authority, and Hermeneutics*, 56-57.

<sup>102</sup> *CD I/2*, 529. Barth posits, “Not for all ages and countries, but certainly for our own, it is part of the stumbling-block that like all ancient literature the Old and New Testaments know nothing of the distinction of fact and value which is so important to us, between history, on the one hand, and saga and legend on the other... But the vulnerability of the Bible, i.e., its capacity for error, also extends to its religious or theological content. The significance of a fact which was known to the early antiquity weighs on us more heavily to-day than formerly: that in their attestation of divine revelation (from the standpoint of the history of religion) the biblical authors shared the outlook and spoke the language of their own day-and, therefore, whether we like it or not, they did not speak a special language of revelation radically different from that of their time... For within certain limits and therefore relatively they are all vulnerable and therefore capable of error even in respect of religion and theology. In view of the actual constitution of the Old and New Testaments this is something which we cannot possibly deny if we are not to take away their humanity, if we are not to be guilty of Docetism. How can they be witnesses, if this is not the case? But if it is, even from this angle we come up against the stumbling-block which cannot be avoided or can be avoided only in faith.” *CD I/2*, 509-10.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 529.

as such, in the full use of their freedom and within the limits posited by it, have to speak to us the Word of God.<sup>104</sup>

This does not mean that an interpreter has to differentiate between the form and the content of Scripture, between the word of man and the Word of God in the Bible, i.e., between errors and truth in the text. Barth posits, “The miracle of God takes place in this text formed of human words.”<sup>105</sup> The inspiration of the Scripture means, “If God speaks to man, He really speaks the language of this concrete human word of man.”<sup>106</sup> The task of exegesis is to stay close to the text, that is, “to let the text speak to us as it stands, to let it say all that it has to say in its vocabulary and context, to allow the prophets and apostles to say again here and now to us what they said there and then.”<sup>107</sup> On the other hand, the event of the Word of God is the decision of God. No one can force this event to happen. Barth posits, “We are absolved from differentiating the Word of God in the Bible from other contents, infallible portions and expressions from the erroneous ones, the infallible from the fallible, and from imagining that by means of such discoveries we can create for ourselves encounters with the genuine Word of God in the Bible.”<sup>108</sup> Because the Word of God is not within the power of human action and determination, the church must expect and pray for the event of the Word of God to happen. What the church must do is to be “seeking, asking and praying” for the Word of God to happen. “The door of the Bible text can be opened only from within...the existence of the biblical text summons us to persistence in waiting and knocking.”<sup>109</sup>

### 3.4. Conclusion

We have defined the identity of the *Sache*. The subject matter of Scripture is the Word of God. In this regard we explored Barth’s theology by an inquiry into the concrete reality of the Word of God in the life of the church, and, in this context, what the theological relationship is between the Word of God and human discourse

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<sup>104</sup> *CD I/2*, 529.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 532.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 533.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 531.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 533.

in general, and the Word of God and biblical text in particular. The result of this analysis is a description of the event of the Word of God in the church, examined through Barth's actualistic approach to the divine communicative presence. Church proclamation has the Word of God as its content, and the text of Scripture speaks of the Word of God in the divine ordering of God's speaking. This divine decision has its ontological origin in divine election, but is also an ever new divine action in the life of the church. It must be understood as grace, and invoked by the church in faith and prayer. The specific doctrinal locus of this description is Barth's theology of inspiration. It is the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church that makes concrete the divine ordering of God's speaking.

In the next section we will explore the dynamic of the Word of God as it comes to address the church. The Word of God comes to the church as power, like a double edged sword, it is like fire, wind, light etc. The coming of the Word of God is explored by Barth in *CD I/1* §5 on the nature of the Word of God. For our purposes we will explore this chapter through a different angle. We will look at it as a description of the inner dynamic of the *Sache* of Scripture. The *Sache* of Scripture is described here through three interconnected themes: speech, action and mystery.

#### **4. The inner dynamic of the *Sache* : the threefoldness of God's speech**

In the previous section we have argued that the Word of God is the *Sache* of the Scripture, and we elaborated this theme in relation to the presence of the Word of God in human proclamation (proclamation) and writing (Scripture). In both cases Barth emphasizes the actualism of the Word of God in which it is active, alive and binds the church to the revelation of God. This brings us to the question of the third form of the Word of God which is not another predicate of the Word of God as in the previous two but the Word of God in itself, that is, the nature of the *event* of the Word of God as it comes to the church. There are various phrases and words Barth uses to express the event itself: "revelation", "God's Word", "*Deus Dixit*", "Jesus Christ", "God with us", "it is finished", "the occurrence of revelation", and "the becoming of the Word of God". However they basically express the same complex idea, the concrete event of the Word of God in the life of the church. The event is based on the decision of God in freedom in which the act of God brings into reality what is testified to in Scripture and proclaimed in the church. "Revelation is itself the

divine decision which is taken in the Bible and proclamation, which makes use of them, which thus confirms, ratifies and fulfils them. It is itself the Word of God which the Bible and proclamation are as they become it.”<sup>110</sup>

In *CD I/1* §5, Barth provide a detailed discussion on the nature of the Word of God.<sup>111</sup> Specifically, the nature of the Word of God is explored under the themes of *speech*, *act* and *mystery*. The word *nature* does not carry an essentialist denotation. Over against the essentialist approach, Barth proposes the question: “what is the nature of the Word of God?” which he carefully qualifies theologically.<sup>112</sup> An exploration of its nature is not analysis of the biblical language from a philosophical, rhetorical or hermeneutical point of view. For Barth, the nature of the Word of God must be epistemologically construed on the basis of God’s act of making it present to the church.<sup>113</sup> Accordingly there is no philosophical category where the nature of divine action can be properly described. Barth suggests that theology must investigate the question, avoiding abstract exploration, *indirectly* from the concrete event of the Word of God, i.e., proclamation and Scripture. Barth argues, “We can certainly say what God’s Word is, but we must say it indirectly. We must remember the forms in which it is real for us and learn from these forms how it is. This *How* is the attainable human reflection of the unattainable divine *What*. Our concern here must be with this reflection.”<sup>114</sup> Only in this context, Barth claims, can we describe the *nature* of the Word of God.

The description will help us to understand further the meaning of Barth’s *sachlicher* approach. It is here that the *Sache* itself is described as the Word of God in a threefold inner dynamic. While we must keep the description of its nature in the concrete life of the church, we can take this description as a further elaboration of the *Sache* of Scripture. This will provide further conceptual content for construing Barth’s *sachlich* hermeneutics, i.e., by describing the *Sache* as inner dynamic of

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<sup>110</sup> *CD I/1*, 118. Semantically Barth defines “Revelation, *revelatio*, ἀποκάλυψις” in a simple way as “the unveiling of what is veiled”, see *CD I/1*, 119.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

speech, act and mystery. In what follows we will reflect on what this means for Barth's *sachlich* approach.

#### 4.1. The Word of God is a speech

In what sense is the Word of God a speech? It means, quite simply, "God speaks," addressing the church, that it says something about something to the church. The event of the Word of God is the event in which God's speech comes to the church. Barth, however, elucidates the concept of speech in further detail. "It implies first of all the spiritual nature of the Word of God as distinct from naturalness, corporeality, or any physical event."<sup>115</sup> However the spirituality of the speech of God does not exclude physical reality; it is a spiritual event in physical reality. As the reality of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist is a spiritual-physical event, the event of the Word of God is a physical event in its spirituality.<sup>116</sup> The spiritual nature of the speech means the Word of God is an address of one reason to another reason; a person to another person. On this basis this spiritual speech is *a rational event*; it is not irrational or mystical.<sup>117</sup> But its physical dimension means the Word of God relates to the human activity of hearing, understanding and obeying, as set within the framework of faith. It does not deny human rhetoric. The truth of the Word of God has the power of rhetoric, but the nature of its rhetoric is the spiritual power of truth. Thus, in contrast to the tendency of human rhetoric to hide its true intention, the Word of God is marked by its clarity and simplicity, expressing the truth in spiritual and natural realms.<sup>118</sup>

Second, the speech of God is not a possibility of communal interaction, but a fulfilled reality in the life of the church. It is not a perceived truth among many truths but as the One and only truth which is experienced as *the speaking subject* and *the spoken object*.<sup>119</sup> In other words, the speech of God is not different from Jesus Christ, the Revealer and the Revelation of God. In this regard, the Word of God is not

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>118</sup> *CD I/1*, 136.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 137.

merely an expression of God's being; God's being and the Word are identical.<sup>120</sup> His being does not stand behind the Word and the act of God; the Word of God is the being of God in speech and act. On the other hand, the being of God is not, as such, directly present to the church, but only through Scripture and proclamation, but it is really the being of God that is present, and not a representation of God.<sup>121</sup> The presence of Jesus Christ is personal, and it means that, as speech, the Word of God is not only a speech of logical-propositional utterance but a theological-ethical challenge from a speaking Subject.

Third, as a speech, the Word of God is *purposive*. It comes to speech to address the church. It is directed to the human reality of the church; it does not come to speech for the sake of speaking in isolation from the life of the church.<sup>122</sup> Barth argues that the Word of God comes to speech not on account of addressing itself, but on account of addressing the church. This does not mean the Word of God in God's inner Trinitarian relation depends on the church's existence.<sup>123</sup> God's speech is not driven by any necessity outside of God; it comes to speech only on account of God's freedom.<sup>124</sup> It is a divine decision, but while it is directed to the human being, it is not conditioned by human circumstances.<sup>125</sup> It is marked by the utter *otherness* of the Speaking Subject. "Encounter with the Word of God is genuine, irrevocable encounter, i.e., encounter that can never be dissolved in union. The Word of God

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 138. Cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg et al., *Revelation as History* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 7-10. Pannenberg argues that Barth tries to save the concept of revelation from Kantian Metaphysics by proposing revelation as God's self-revelation, in which God is the subject and the medium of revelation (an insight of Hegel). But, he argues that this Hegelian insight, is endangered by Barth's proposal that there is a veiling as well as an unveiling in revelation. He posits that "if, however, revelation is truly revelation so that its special form belongs totally to itself, then this form cannot, at the same time, be a veiling." Pannenberg argues further that the problem in Barth's proposal lies in the sense that revelation is termed as a direct self-revelation, in response Pannenberg proposes that Hegel's insight should be modified as an indirect self-revelation, i.e., the self-revelation of God not of his being but of his actions in history, thus indirectly reveals, without at the same time veiling, God's Being. However, Pannenberg's proposal will not account for God's active presence in the church but rather will leave the revelation as a universal history that is open for inquiry in a trans-contextual reasoning. In this regard, Pannenberg is more Hegelian than Barth.

<sup>121</sup> *CD I/1*, 138.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> *CD I/1*, 140.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 141.

always tells us something fresh that we had never heard before from anyone. The rock of a Thou which never becomes an I is thrown in our path here.”<sup>126</sup> Not only is it purposive, it also has a quality of *seriousness*. It is not a concept to be adored and praised for its subtleties and geniuses. On the contrary, it aims at the deepest existence of the human being. It strikes at the sinfulness of human beings; it smites their self-sufficiency. It points to the hopelessness of the human being as created being before the creator, but it is a judgement for the sake of the Gospel. It comes as a message of comfort and peace. It is a comforting address of the Reconciling God in which God renews God’s original relationship to the human being.<sup>127</sup> As purposive speech, it is serious speech; it smites and comforts.<sup>128</sup> In this dialectical sense, the Word of God is speech with a very definite objective and with a very specific calling.

The Word of God as speech is marked by the spirituality of speaking subject in purposiveness. The *Sache* of Scripture is the spiritual presence of Jesus Christ that addresses the church with the Gospel of reconciliation. It comes as a surprise because the *Sache* of the text is not a general proposition to be considered, but a purposive address. It is a message that specifically speaks to this particular community, at this particular life-setting. To understand the Word of God in this specific way, we posit, will imply a radical re-ordering of the ways in which the church must read Scripture.

#### **4.2. The Word of God is an action**

The Word of God as speech is a challenge and a comfort. To be effective, it must be understood also as an *action*. Barth argues that the Word of God is an action which transcends the dichotomy between speech and action.<sup>129</sup> The primary character of this action is creativity. First of all, the action of God creates reality (history); it generates reality in its ultimate sense.<sup>130</sup> Only by the act of the Word of God does there exist true reality. It does not mean a replacement of present reality, but it at

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> For a more recent theological exposition of the idea along this line see chapter 5 on “God’s Mighty Speech Act: The Doctrine of Scripture Today”, and chapter 6 on “From Speech Acts to Scripture Acts: The Covenant of Discourse and the Discourse of the Covenant” in Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics*, 127-203.

<sup>130</sup> *CD* I/1, 144.

least involves an alteration of the fabric of human existence.<sup>131</sup> Barth posits that God's "self-expression is as such an alteration, and indeed an absolute alteration of the world, whose *passio* in history is as such *action*."<sup>132</sup>

Barth provides three implications for his proposal that the Word of God is an action. First, as the act of God, the Word of God has the character of "contingent contemporaneity."<sup>133</sup> This phrase needs to be unpacked. Barth argues that there are three different times in which we may speak of God's action: the time of Jesus Christ, the time of witnesses (Scripture) and the time of the church. The difference is not merely chronological. They are times "distinguished by different attitudes of God to men."<sup>134</sup> Thus, in the first, Jesus is the time of unity between revelation and God; in the second, is the time of apostles and prophets, who are given unique offices to deliver the Word of God; and the third, is the mediated time, in which through the Scripture the church listens to God's revelation.<sup>135</sup> Barth argues that the threefold time of revelation overcomes Lessing's dictum of incompatibility between the accidental truths of history and the necessary truths of reason.<sup>136</sup> Barth believes that because the church locates the revelation in God (not in history) and frames the method as by God (not by discerning history's inner truth), the church should not be worried by Lessing's ugly wide ditch between accidental and necessary truths.<sup>137</sup> The 'accidental' truth becomes superfluous because God acts again and again in the life of the church as God has acted in Jesus and through the prophets and apostles. In this regard, the Word of God as an action means that in the event of the Word of God, the church has contingent contemporaneity with Jesus (the first action) and prophets and apostles (the second action). "The problem of the Word of God is always, then, a wholly specific, once-for-all and distinctive problem, and regarding this problem one can only say that it is solved by the Word of God itself as the Word of God spoken

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.



by the mouth of God is contemporaneous *illic et tunc* and also (i.e., as spoken *illic et tunc*) *hic et nunc*.”<sup>138</sup>

The threefold times of God’s action have an important hermeneutical ramification.<sup>139</sup> God does not leave the church in solitude as an interpreter of history. Biblical interpretation is not a quest to relive a dead past or an attempt to resurrect the spirit of past history. This interpretative theory would end up, in Barth’s estimation, as an act of self-understanding which dissolves the distinction between God’s revelation and human inner-experience.<sup>140</sup> It also fails to answer Lessing’s challenge.<sup>141</sup> However, the problem of the accidental truths of history, as Lessing argues, is solved by Barth’s theology of the Word of God as an act. The church, as an interpreter of Scripture, does not need to resurrect dead history because God continues to act for the church here and now, as there and then.<sup>142</sup> The *Sache* of Scripture is not past history for the church. It is by the act of God a contemporary speech that addresses the church as it addresses people of past history.

Second, the Word of God as an action implies power.<sup>143</sup> As God’s action, the Word of God is the power of the Lord. It is a ruling power. It claims God’s lordship over the church. The Word of God does not only come as a collection of knowledge, not even as knowledge of the power, but as a real power that is encountered. Barth argues that as power it has dialectical qualities, i.e., power that protects and punishes, pacifies and disturbs.<sup>144</sup> The concrete identity of this power is the Holy Spirit whose presence is the power of God’s action, i.e., “the power that lives in and by the Word.”<sup>145</sup> As God’s power, the Word of God is effective. It brings change and a real

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>141</sup> "the accidental truths of history can never be proof of the necessary truths of reason" quoted in *CD* I/1, 146.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

transformation in human reality.<sup>146</sup> Thus the promise, the claim and the judgment of the Word of God is not an empty rhetoric which depends on the church's faith to generate its effectiveness, but in and by itself, confronting, transposing, commandeering and bringing forth a fresh reality.<sup>147</sup> Faith that receives the promise and believes in the judgement is a recognition and confirmation that the act of God takes place.<sup>148</sup> The effectiveness of the Word does not depend on human response. The Word of God is effective; it does not fail to be effective because it is the power of God. Through the effectiveness of the Word of God in the church, it impacts the whole sphere of creation through the church.<sup>149</sup> In the church, as she confesses the power of the Word, people encounter God's revelation and the true power that rules the whole creation.<sup>150</sup>

Third, the act of God is decision.<sup>151</sup> The actualism of the Word of God is not a bare event. In general, an event is caused by external factor(s), but the event of the Word of God is not caused by external factors; rather, it is effective by the decision of God. Barth argues that the Word of God is a decision first, then reality second. It means the event of the Word of God as a history is subsequent to God's decision.<sup>152</sup> The Word of God is firstly a divine act in eternal decision, then secondly, in the light of this, as a history of human event. Thus, the event of the Word of God is the realization of the decision of God.<sup>153</sup> The decision of God is a decision to place one in a particular situation, in which one is judged or justified, but one can only know one's position on the basis of the encounter. Barth maintains the tension between the possibility of belief or unbelief as an expression of human free-will and the decisiveness of the divine choice in virtue of which alone one's faith is decided.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

Nevertheless, it is the action of God as power that creates the reality of faith through which the church experiences the reality of the Word.

These three characteristics: contingency, power and decision, provide further elaboration of the inner dynamic of the *Sache*. As God's action, Barth's description of the Word of God echoes various biblical references to the Word of God, prophecies, and biblical promises, both in Old and New Testaments. The dynamic of God's speech as the *Sache* of Scripture is not a matter of language and meaning. It is not words and actions as a philosophical construct that understands linguistic function as effective action, e.g., in speech-act theory. While the theory contributes insightful reflections for how humans do things through words, the action of the Word of God is beyond the description of speech-act philosophy. It is an action with power and decision. It is an effective action because God's act is threefold: in Jesus, in the prophets and apostles, and in the church through Scripture and proclamation. It is the power of God in action that changes reality. It is the realization of God's decision in eternity in human history. The event of the Word of God, as an action, entails the church reading of Scripture is a spiritual action. It is a reading that should be regarded more as a prayer, encompassing far richer human faculties than any cognitive apparatus. It surely involves critical reflection but, even more importantly, spiritual discipline of discernment, meditation and wisdom.

### **4.3. The Word of God is a mystery**

The final term qualifies the nature of the Word of God as speech and act. The speech and action of God is ultimately a divine mystery. This concept is a critique against any self-confidence in the church's interpretation of Scripture.<sup>155</sup> The term '*mystery*' is defined in a specific way. It is not used merely to highlight the notion of something beyond human conceptuality.<sup>156</sup> Barth's use has a dialectical feature. He defines mystery as "the concealment of God in which He meets us precisely when He unveils Himself to us, because He will not and cannot unveil Himself except by veiling Himself."<sup>157</sup> It is a mystery because the Word of God is revelation in

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<sup>155</sup> See *Ibid.*, 162-63.

<sup>156</sup> *CD I/1*, 165.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

hiddenness. No human being can differentiate the Word of God from what is not in the event of Scripture and proclamation except by the work of God. For the church, the distinction of the Word of God from everything else remains a matter of the mystery of God. "It distinguishes itself by giving itself to us in this way and this alone; not in such a way that we can arrive at a triumphant distinction, but in such a way that there is reserved for it the right to distinguish itself."<sup>158</sup> Barth elaborates further on the meaning of the Word of God as mystery by employing three themes: secularity, onesidedness and spirituality.

First, "The speech of God is and remains the mystery of God supremely in its secularity."<sup>159</sup> Barth notes that the Word of God always has a secular form, and the form in which it addresses the church can be understood by this term, i.e., the early church is a sociological group, the New Testament proclamation is a human address, Jesus was a Jewish rabbi, and the ideas of biblical theology have affinities with ancient philosophies.<sup>160</sup> Thus it is not recognisable either directly or indirectly from the form it takes,<sup>161</sup> but while the form conceals the Word of God, it is at the same time only revealed in its form.<sup>162</sup> The form of God's Word, then, is in fact the form of the cosmos which stands in contradiction to God. It has as little ability to reveal God to us as we have to see God in it."<sup>163</sup> Thus revelation is God's miraculous act, where God reveals Himself, through deficient mediums, which conceals revelation and reveals in concealment.<sup>164</sup> God's revelation implies a tearing down of creaturely veil. On the other hand, because it is secular, it can address the human world in its secularity. Without its mystery in secularity it would fail to address humanity in its

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> In this context Barth shows his agreement with Luther's idea on the mask of God which essentially means the indirectness of God self-communication. Luther provides two reasons for God's indirect communication, namely, the creatureliness of human being, and the sinfulness of the creature. *CD I/1*, 167.

secularity.<sup>165</sup> Barth posits, “If God did not speak to us in secular form, He would not speak to us at all. To evade the secularity of His Word is to evade Christ.”<sup>166</sup> Furthermore, secularity is not the barrier that God must overcome to reveal God-self. It is the elected path of God’s communication.<sup>167</sup>

The hermeneutical implication is clear. Interpretation of Scripture is not a penetrative analysis to pierce through the veil of God’s mystery.<sup>168</sup> It remains a matter of God’s grace and mercy, as Barth argues, that “in its very secularity it is... in every respect a Word of grace.”<sup>169</sup> In the prayerful act of spiritual discerning, exegesis must faithfully explore Scripture in all its secularity. The church’s exegesis cannot sidestep the secularity of Scripture to discern its spiritual message but must come again and again in the prayerful act of reading by exploring the text as a text with all of its secular characteristics because God’s revelation is a revelation in secularity.

Second, “the speech of God is and remains the mystery of God in its oneness.”<sup>170</sup> This oneness means that by the divine decision, the Word of God is either veiled or unveiled. It is not partly veiled or partly unveiled. The Word of God is either veiled or unveiled in the reading of Scripture and church proclamation. It depends solely on the act of God. In its secularity, without any difference in itself, and without any difference in the way one responds, the veiling

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid. Barth makes a serious clarification in relating the immanence of God and the humanity of God’s revelation by way of the freedom of God. In his response to critique of the catholic theologian, Erich Przywara (who was accusing Barth of identifying God’s immanence as God’s revelation), and Gorgarten (who suggests a dissolvent of God’s immanence and God’s revelation to human beings), Barth insists that in the humanity of Christ the immanence of God and the economy of God’s revelation is connected only by the freedom of God. The two are differentiated as the starting point and the ending point, but not in any way dissolved into one speculation of God’s being (*Speculatio Maiestatis*), as Przywara suspects Barth had done, and as Gorgarten suggested to Barth to be done. In this matter Barth believes he has avoided the trap to fall into the theology “from below up-ward” or the theology “from above down-ward”. This is achieved by his emphasis on God’s free grace in the mystery of His decision.

<sup>170</sup> CD I/1, 174.

of the Word of God can change into unveiling, and the unveiling into veiling.<sup>171</sup> Barth argues that there is no way to achieve either isolation or distinction of the form from the content of the Word of God in Scripture and proclamation. One cannot isolate its secular form from the content nor can one find a solution to solve the dialectic of the form and content.<sup>172</sup> Barth argues that the proper Christian response to the mystery of the Word of God is faith that seeks God in trust and humility.

Invariably, then, faith is acknowledgment of our limit and acknowledgment of the mystery of God's Word, acknowledgment of the fact that our hearing is bound to God Himself, who now leads us through form to content and now from content back to form, and either way to Himself, not giving Himself in either case into our hands but keeping us in His hands.<sup>173</sup>

Faith means to go back, again and again, to Scripture, and always begin again from the beginning, and to find revelation in none other than God alone through a reading of the Scripture and its proclamation.<sup>174</sup>

Third, the Word of God is mystery in its relation to human spirituality.<sup>175</sup> The event of the Word of God is a mystery in relation to its effects in an individual life.<sup>176</sup> The spirituality that is brought by the Word of God is not a result of human determination in isolation from God's mysterious work to communicate and implement the truth of Scripture. "The Lord of speech is also the Lord of our hearing. The Lord who gives the Word is also the Lord who gives faith. The Lord of our hearing, the Lord who gives faith, the Lord by whose act the openness and readiness of man for the Word are true and actual, not another God but the one God in this way, is the Holy Spirit."<sup>177</sup> The mystery of the spirituality cannot be generated by any spiritual method. It does not exclude method but it cannot be guaranteed by any method. The mystery cannot be found in any corresponding human experience or in

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>174</sup> *CD I/1*, 179.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

the mystery of the human spirit but “in all circumstances only through the Holy Spirit, in all its indirectness only directly from God.”<sup>178</sup>

The Word of God is a mystery in its secularity, onesidedness and human spirituality. The *Sache* of Scripture in the church’s interpretation is in the form that cannot be separated from the content. Different interpretations of Scripture are inevitable, but it is not primarily on account of the different ways interpreters approach the text, though this also has important roles. The primary reason is that the Word of God is a mystery, and it comes in the form that conceals its mystery, and reveals its mystery in concealment. The church understands the mystery of the Word of God as the determination of divine election rather than as the result of a method of interpretation. The mystery is recognized through faith, which is the spiritual realization of the Word of God in the life of the church. Even in this regard, the Word of God is also a mystery of human spirituality. It does not come into realisation as human spiritual potential, but as the gift of grace that can only be explained as the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit.

##### **5. Conclusion: Barth’s *Sachlich* Hermeneutics**

The general argument of this chapter is that Barth’s hermeneutics is a *sachlich* hermeneutics. We then qualified the term by suggesting that it is useful only if we give careful attention to Barth’s theology, which provides the content for the term rather than borrowing from philosophical concepts to find affinities of approach with modern hermeneutics. We found, in this way, that Barth’s hermeneutics is truly distinct. The uniqueness is not so much on a methodological level, but rather on defining the meaning of Scripture and its interpretation: what is Scripture, where does it come from, what is its purpose, what does it say, and what does it mean for the church to read the Bible as Scripture? In answering these questions, Barth’s reflections are consistently shaped by church doctrines. In addition, it shows a strong opposition against philosophical insights and a strong conviction that doctrines can provide a perfectly adequate answer to hermeneutical questions.

In this regard, we proposed Barth’s theological hermeneutics as the implication of his doctrine of Scripture, interpreted in the light of his doctrine of the

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

Word of God and understood from a theological ontology of the doctrine of election. These two interconnected theological loci, we proposed, are the material content and the formal criteria for a constructive reading of Barth's *sachlich* hermeneutics. The complex relation between Scripture and the Word of God provides the material insights and the formal criteria for theological reflections on the relationship between the text of Scripture and its *Sache* (subject matter). We employed for this purpose Barth's concept of witness to elucidate ways in which text and *Sache* related to each other. We analysed the problem through various angles, that is, through the relationship of the Word of God to history (biblical history), to church proclamation (human discourse and language in general), and finally to the text of Scripture. In all of these, we proposed the importance of Barth's ontology, particularly his actualistic ontology, to highlight the eventfulness of the *Sache* of Scripture. But more importantly than a conceptual approach to ontology is the role of the doctrine of election in Trinitarian relationship for rendering the decision, the purpose and the act of God in making the church's reading of Scripture meaningful. The result of our analysis shows that for Barth the *Sache* of Scripture is not concepts, ideas, or stories; not even a theology. It has a strong relationship to all of these, but ultimately the *Sache* of Scripture is the communicative presence of God in addressing the church through the Scripture. This communicative presence has its ontological root in divine immanence and is decided in God's election to be God in Jesus Christ, i.e., God of and for humanity that elects and embraces our humanity in the act of reconciliation. In this context, the act of giving out God's self in communicative presence to the church is the basis of church reading of Scripture. This act we proposed takes place in human history and language, in the full humanity of her created being.

The relationship between the Word of God and the humanity of Scripture is highlighted in our discussion of history, language and text. Employing the term witness as the main concept to the discussion, we maintained the history, the language and the text of Scripture as theologically construed. The ontological root of this theological reflection is the incarnation of Christ. But the crux of the problem is the concrete realisation of God's election of humanity in the life of the church. In this regard we defined the humanity of God in relation to theological understanding of Scripture's history, language and text. History in this context is a witnessing history. It is a history that has its continuity and discontinuity with secular history, but one that is ultimately defined by the resurrection of Christ. Barth's approach proposes a metacriticism against modern presuppositions of historiography. In its place, Barth's



theology offers an approach that acknowledges the presence and the act of God in history. A similar case is offered in relation to human language. The impossibility of human language to grasp the Word of God is maintained, but at the same time the concrete act of God in grasping the language in church proclamation is offered as a paradigm of the way in which language and the subject matter can be understood theologically. Finally, we offer an understanding of text in the concrete fashion. Text is not an abstract entity that has a life in itself. In contrast, the text of Scripture is determined by the being in becoming of God and of the human readers. In this regard, we propose that the theological locus of this actualism is Barth's reflection on divine inspiration of Scripture. The concrete reality of inspiration is not text in itself (inspiredness), but the author and the reader of Scripture in which the Holy Spirit illumines and breathes meaning into the human author and reader. The text has its being in becoming, and as Barth famously argues, the Bible becomes the Word of God, in the divine actualism of being in becoming.

Our discussion of the threefoldness of God's speech was an attempt to give justice to the various dimensions of the Word of God in the context of the humanity of Scripture. The Word of God is divine utterance, comes with power and is encountered by biblical witnesses as the mystery of revelation. In these three terms (speech, act and mystery) there are various biblical echoes that are combined in the threefoldness of God's speech. The inner dynamic of the *Sache* as it addresses the church comes as speech, action and mystery. The description provides a very rich idea of the inner dynamic of the subject matter of Scripture as it becomes event in the life of the church. The subject matter is encountered as the One who speaks. It is not a self-reflection of a human reader, but as something utterly Other. It calls, repents, encourages and transforms the readers. As such, it is not simply a speech, but an act. It has power. How this speech works in such a powerful way, and why it is not experienced as such for many readers, are a mystery of divine decision. Ultimately, Barth's theology does not speak of it as a *Sache* of a text, but as the speaking presence of God in Scripture. In the final analysis, the subject matter of Scripture is the communicative presence of God in and through the text in and for the church.

What is the concrete form of Barth's hermeneutics for the contemporary reading of Scripture? What is the 'methodological' implication of such hermeneutics? We have indicated in this chapter the importance of faith in response

to the divine illumination of Scripture. Because the event of the Word of God is grace, from beginning to end, we propose, that it has little to do with a method of interpretation. It does not mean that it has no concrete implication for the theological task of reading the Scripture, i.e., theological exegesis. Our thesis is that, for Barth, the concrete form of the church's response to the task of reading the Scripture does not come in the form of a manual or guideline for biblical interpretation. Given the specific emphasis on divine decision, speech and action in the event of the Word of God, it is not difficult to see why a reflection on the method of interpretation will have no significant role in Barth's hermeneutics. What is the concrete application of Barth's hermeneutics for contemporary reading of Scripture? We propose that this will not come in the form of method but rather in the form of ethics. The concrete form of Barth's theology of interpretation is the ethics of interpretation in faith as an anticipation and response to the event of the *Sache* of Scripture. The constructive exploration of the shape and content of an ethics of interpretation of Scripture is the subject of the next chapter.

## Chapter VI: Toward an Ethics of Interpretation

This chapter argues that instead of a method of interpretation, the concrete form of Barth's theology of interpretation is an ethics of reading. In the previous chapters we have argued that Barth's hermeneutics is an attempt to give justice to the church's faith in God, specifically, the communicative presence of God in the church reading of the Bible. In this chapter, we will show that such a faith is quite accommodating in regard to a method of interpretation. More importantly, it is integral to the faith, as a particular form of ethics for the task of interpreting the Bible as Scripture. The ethical dimension of Barth's hermeneutics is not a practical implication of a theory, nor is it an appendix to a primary exploration of Barth's 'theory' of interpretation, rather it is a dogmatic exposition of the theological ethics for performing the church's task of reading the Bible as Scripture.

Barth's ethics of reading does not consist of principles and laws but a morality that is shaped by his theological ontology of reality and the theological description of the Word of God. Theological ontology provides an understanding of the moral sphere in which the church's interpretation takes place. It is not an academic setting in which method will take the central role to fit the culture of intellectual exercise or to maintain the epistemological integrity of the institution. It is not defined by the social locus of the church as religious institution. But as we have argued in chapter three, it is defined by the election of God to be God in Jesus Christ, and as such, church self-understanding has placed itself, primarily, as the creature of the Word of God. In this regard, as we have argued in chapter four, the church's interpretation of Scripture is shaped by a self-understanding that it is God who speaks in and through the text. God is at the same time the Object and the speaking Subject of the Bible. The result of our argument in the previous two chapters is an ethics of interpretation that is determined by the moral ontology of the reality in which the church's interpretation takes place and the theological identity of the subject matter of Scripture. Our reading of *CD I/2*, particularly §19 which forms the main bulk of the chapter, is shaped by the conclusions we have reached in the previous two chapters. As such what appears to be Barth's longest reflection on the theory of biblical interpretation (§19.2, "Scripture as the Word of God") will be read as an ethics of interpretation. The result of this methodological decision is that this

reflection is not understood as a method of reading that guarantees the church's interpretation of Scripture. It is rather a morality of interpretation that is born out of certain dogmatic convictions of the being in becoming of Scripture as the Word of God.

This chapter begins with an observation on the moral claim in the historical and literary method of biblical interpretation, i.e., the ethical convictions in the reasoning of critical studies. Our purpose is not to provide or to explore a common ground of ethics of interpretation in scholarship but to highlight how the moral claim is integrated to a method of biblical interpretation. We argue that at a deeper level, different methods of interpretation are closely connected to different ethics of interpretation. Having established the significance of the ethics of hermeneutics, we will argue that Barth's understanding of the process of interpretation is best understood as an ethic rather than a method, and this ethic forms the way in which the church must read the Bible as Scripture in Barth's theology. The chapter will provide an outline of Barth's moral theology, and how his ethical reflection shapes and informs the particular ways he understands the church's reading of the Bible. The rest of the chapter will elaborate the form and the content of Barth's ethics of interpretation under three themes: freedom, obedience and responsibility, and how these themes inform and form the basic structure of biblical interpretation.

### **1. Moral Claim in Interpretation**

Our first argument will consist of a claim that the morality of interpretation plays an important role in the method of interpretation. The critical reflection on the relationship between ethics and biblical interpretation is a considerably recent development in the study of ethics. While, in one sense, ethical reflection is an ever present challenge in performing biblical interpretation, as a systematic study, it is still in the stage of exploration. The ethics of biblical interpretation is usually differentiated from the ethics of the Old Testament or of the New Testament, or with more specific biblical ethics such as the ethics of Paul, Jesus, or Luke etc., which discuss the ethical content of particular text(s). In one of the explorations, the ethics of interpretation is defined as "a second order methodological reflection on the ethos

and morals of biblical studies.”<sup>1</sup> It is a view that underlies the ethical questions that pertain to the decision of method and its application to a text.<sup>2</sup> A choice of a method is not only an instance of an epistemological decision but also a deliberation of ethical conviction. In its concrete form it asks how one can ethically interpret a biblical text in relation to one’s socio-political-religious context and the historical-literary content of a text. Since one of the characteristics of a biblical text is its inherently ethical intent and content, there is a circle of dialogue in the act of interpretation. One’s ethical presupposition shapes one’s reading of a text, and the ethics of the text will in turn affect one’s understanding of the text. The critical questions that are generally proposed in such a context are as follows: how can one be ethically responsible when one performs a biblical interpretation? And how can one be ethically responsible when one interprets a text and disseminates it, through writing, teaching and preaching, to a community of readers?<sup>3</sup> An ethics of interpretation of the biblical texts involves an act of reading and also an act of responding to the content of the Bible.

From a historical point of view, the morality of interpretation was an important concern in the development of modern biblical criticism. The initial motivation of historical critics was not primarily to question the content of Christian faith but “the will-to-truth,”<sup>4</sup> which includes a corrective contention when one found good reasons to doubt the truth of the church’s doctrines.<sup>5</sup> If the ‘truth’ of historical findings contradicts some of the church doctrines, then one should not conceal the discovery for the sake of the doctrines. Van A. Harvey argues that historical criticism was initially motivated by “a new morality of critical judgment that has seized the imagination of the scholar,” and this new ideal means honesty and integrity in one’s academic conclusions, even if it could raise a serious problem for traditional

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<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 195.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation*, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale and Michael Tanner (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 33.

<sup>5</sup> Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief* (London: SCM Press, 1967), 4.

Christian doctrines.<sup>6</sup> He argues further that the moral ideals can be summarized in four basic principles. First, it means historians must be autonomous from the constraints of Christian dogmas.<sup>7</sup> This ideal demands that ‘the will-to-truth’ must overcome ‘the will-to-believe’, or as R.G. Collingwood notes, “so far from relying on an authority other than himself, to whose statements his thought must conform, the historian is his own authority.”<sup>8</sup> Second, historians are responsible for providing a sound judgement of historical claims, even if it contradicts orthodox doctrines. This includes a willingness to consider alternatives and give weight to various proposals before proposing the most convincing conclusion.<sup>9</sup> One must not retract a hypothesis only because it is problematic for the church’s authority; one must be willing, as an expression of an intellectual honesty, to follow wherever the argument leads. Third, ‘the will-to-truth’ must be combined with ‘the will-to-communicate’.<sup>10</sup> This requires a willingness to submit one’s historical claims to the scrutiny of competent others who can provide critical evaluation and expert opinion. In this regard, the historian must justify his position and allow others to assent to the truth through a free conversation without any fear of repercussions. It must be based on a free conscience rather than an enforced opinion. Fourth, historians must use their contemporary common-sense view, informed by a modern scientific world-view, to provide a contemporary plausibility of a historical reconstruction.<sup>11</sup> This demands one to be honest that the biblical world may contain some outdated interpretations and that these interpretations may constrain the narratives of biblical stories. In this regard, one has a moral obligation to point out places where the modern worldview may correct the biblical worldview and evaluate the facticity of biblical narratives without worrying about its doctrinal ramifications.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>8</sup> R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), 236.

<sup>9</sup> Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 50.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 68.

Our purpose here is not to provide a thorough response to these moral claims. However, it is important to highlight how the moral dimension is part of an epistemological conviction regarding the historical-critical method and how it shapes its methodological structure and its rhetorical claims. It does what it does not only on the ground of epistemology but also on a moral conviction that it involves an earnest pursuit of the truth.<sup>12</sup> It shows that an ethics of interpretation lies at the deeper level of its methodological practice, for once the method is formulated, it regards the methodology as an embodiment of its ethical norms. And yet it often overlooks how the method is a contextual formulation, from a particular time and place, which must be constantly evaluated as only relatively plausible, epistemologically and morally, in an ever changing intellectual milieu.

The main problem with this old historical approach is the presupposition that the meaning of a text is restricted to the historical circumstances of its genesis, and to read it in a wider perspective through the lenses of church tradition and doctrine, constitutes a misreading and an abuse of the text.<sup>13</sup> However, it is the nature of a text to have the capacity to transcend its historicity.<sup>14</sup> While its genesis in relation to the author and the first readers can provide a continuity of its interpretation, it is not necessarily restrictive to its trans-cultural meaning. To stake a moral judgement for an interpretation that employs doctrine and tradition for hermeneutics, we posit, constitutes a misunderstanding of a text and its hermeneutical dimensions. Additionally, and more importantly, it constitutes a misunderstanding of doctrine and

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<sup>12</sup> In different form, literary theories also pose a moral challenge for biblical interpretation. While in the historical method, the historical record is the object of suspicion, in the literary theories, it is the text as a locus of meaning that becomes suspect. In this case the moral claim of the Bible is regarded as ideologically distorted by the meaning that the readers bring into the text. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 23-24. Cf. Stanley E. Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1980), 1-18.

<sup>13</sup> Watson, *Text, Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective*, 4.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 357; Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, 91. Whether such capacity is inherent to the text or is the result of three dimensional fusion of horizons between text, reader and author, is another question. Anthony Thiselton rightly argues that "once the text comes to occupy a place in tradition and to be read in times or places different from those in which it was spoken or written, further dimensions of action and their effects begin to emerge." Anthony C. Thiselton, "Reader-Response Hermeneutics: Action Model, and the Parables of Jesus," in *The Responsibility of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 107.

a misrepresentation of the meaning of authority in the church. Furthermore, a critical reflection of its moral rhetoric, show that it involves a lack of understanding of a wider ethical dimension in biblical interpretation. Regarding its claim to the truth, it constitutes a moral pretence of scientific objectivity and is based on the presupposition that an inquiry into the truth of Scripture is the responsibility of *an isolated individual subject*. It privileges the methodological inquiry of an autonomous-self, and endows it with an exclusive right for determining what a text means. It assumes what can be proven historically of an event in the past is the present significance of a text. In contrast, by nature the Bible is a communal text, and its existence is inseparable from the communally lived praxis of the church, which requires attention to this reality for a constructed account of its theology of interpretation.<sup>15</sup> The privileged place of an inquiring-self undermines the fact that the Bible is part of a living tradition of a community, and a reading of the Bible requires a consideration of its relation to the symbolic imagination of the community that uses and reads the text on a regular basis.<sup>16</sup> The Bible is not only a collection of texts but is a living embodiment of the ethical praxis of the pastoral and missional life of the church. Reading the Bible is not only a matter of finding cognitive ‘truth’ but, more importantly, a matter of living out its theological claims and ethical commands. Looking at the problem from this perspective, a purely academic approach may entail, what Karl P. Donfried calls, ‘alien hermeneutics’ of the Bible, an enterprise characterized by “epistemological monism that assumes that historical knowledge is omniscient and that it determines theological truth.”<sup>17</sup> Ironically, in its response to the ‘dogmatic’ pressure of Christian doctrine, it has its own dogmatism.<sup>18</sup> It privileges a form of historicism at the cost of church’s doctrines, and disregards the historical wisdom, collected by centuries of interpretation, of the tradition of the church.

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<sup>15</sup> Stephen R. Holmes, "Kings, Professors, and Ploughboys: On the Accessibility of Scripture," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 13, no. 4 (2011): 409.

<sup>16</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship," 15.

<sup>17</sup> Karl P. Donfried, "Alien Hermeneutics and the Misappropriation of Scripture," in *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 19-20.

<sup>18</sup> James I. H. McDonald, *Biblical Interpretation and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 169.



Furthermore, as E. Schüssler-Fiorenza argues, there is a posture of hidden dishonesty and academic pride in the moral claim.<sup>19</sup> She posits, “The pretension of biblical studies to a ‘scientific’ mode of inquiry that denies their hermeneutical and theoretical character and masks their historical-social location prohibits a critical reflection on their rhetorical theological practices in their sociopolitical contexts.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, by claiming one’s historical findings as a pure result of moral deliberation there is a lack of self-awareness of one’s rhetoric and geo-political roots that informs one’s hermeneutics. This point of criticism is closely related to the communal existence of the Bible. The morality of its interpretation disregards the fact that every interpretation requires an ethics of responsibility that provides justice “not only for the choice of theoretical interpretative models but also for ethical consequences of the biblical text and its meaning.”<sup>21</sup> The task of biblical interpretation requires not only one’s honesty in finding the truth, but also one’s engagement with the fact that some biblical texts have been the loci of problematic moral and religious deliberations. The rhetoric of truth and objectivity eclipses the task of providing an ethical response to the fact that texts have been used for social propaganda to exploit its content for justifying war, slavery, discrimination and other moral problems.

These critical evaluations show how moral questions of biblical interpretation move beyond the question of the truth of its content to *the justice* of an interpretative performance. However, the question of justice is not easy to answer. There are many ways one can construe the meaning of justice in biblical interpretation. In general, the proposals are usually determined by the locus of meaning in one’s theory of interpretation. If one argues, for example, that the meaning of a text is principally authorial, then one must give justice to the authorial communication, i.e., the illocutionary act in which an author says something about something in the text. Nicholas Wolterstorff argues that to do justice to the text, one has to respect the

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<sup>19</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship," 14.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

author(s) by engaging the author(s) “justly, charitably, honourably.”<sup>22</sup> On the other hand if one posits that the meaning is to be found in the text, in view of its interaction with the readers (e.g. Gadamer, Ricoeur), then one must give due justice to the text or the interaction between text and its reader(s). One must give justice to the otherness of the text and refrain oneself from an easy interpretation of the anticipated meaning of pre-exegesis. In this context there is an ethical obligation of the reader(s) to acknowledge and respect “the other” who is encountered, the other who may surprise the reader in the encounter between text and reader.<sup>23</sup> Truth is not a collection of propositional concepts but an ever new encounter between the text and its readers in the event of interpretation in which the historicity and the traditioning process of one’s understanding relate dialectically, and thereby contribute to the fusion of horizons in biblical interpretation. Finally, if the locus of meaning is mainly in the reader or a community of readers (e.g. Stanley Fish<sup>24</sup>), an interpretation must give justice to the fact that the reader(s) bring the meaning into the text, and the claim of the text, becomes very relative to the moral presupposition of the reader(s). The reader(s) must admit that her rhetoric of truth finds its origin not from the text but from her moral deliberation. In so far as the text makes a moral claim, it must be acknowledged that it is the reader(s) who uses the text for such a claim.

Regarding theories, each claims a valid methodology of interpretation, and yet they arrive at different, or sometimes conflicting, conclusions. We propose that the reasons for this are not merely the methodological differences, but because each hermeneutical method has its own ethics of interpretation and its moral validation.<sup>25</sup> More specifically, every interpretation has an interpretative morality that is valid within the approach, i.e., it does not need a validation by the morality of other approaches. In this context, the academic culture of post-modernity prescribes an

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<sup>22</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Resuscitating the Author," in *Hermeneutics at the Crossroads*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, James K. A. Smith, and Bruce Ellis Benson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 49. Cf. E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 1-23.

<sup>23</sup> Ben Faber, "Ethical Hermeneutics and the Theater," in *Hermeneutics at the Crossroads*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, James K. A. Smith, and Bruce Ellis Benson (Blomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2006), 217.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, 8-17.

<sup>25</sup> Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation*, 19.

ideal in which one needs to be conscious about the peculiarity of one's interpretation as a contextual practice which brings a particular perspective to the text. One needs to acknowledge that one has a perspective, and by doing so, open a dialogue with other interpretations. Since no one comes to the Bible with a value-free perspective, it is suggested that each perspective is valid, and as a result, all interpretations are legitimate. Any notion of "the rule of interpretation," could only mean an oppression of other forms of interpretation. The ethics of interpretation is an ethics of freedom, and as part of academic integrity, it is a freedom with a collegial responsibility.

The contemporary discussion of the ethics of interpretation highlights important themes of truth, integrity, self-awareness, justice and freedom for critical engagement with the question of ethics in biblical interpretation. Much can be gleaned from the discussions, and the studies raise some thought-provoking reflections for the church's reading of the Bible. And yet, in many analyses, it obscures the fact that integral to these studies are convictions about human beings (anthropology) which is not necessarily built on a theological anthropology, rather than upon concepts and presuppositions borrowed, often uncritically, from a general (non-theological) anthropology. More importantly, it envisions an ethical field in which one's interpretation takes place as a non-theistic history which entails a particular view of human freedom and justice. John Webster observes that "all ethical reflection has implicit and explicit within it an anthropology and ontology of history – a construal of the moral agent and of the field in which the moral agents act."<sup>26</sup> The critical element lacking in most recent studies is an ethics of interpretation which considers the presence and the activity of God as an integral part of the church's reading of Scripture, i.e., what it means to read the Bible ethically when one considers the communicative presence of God as constitutive of a text's reality. This theological claim is an indispensable belief of the church, and it requires a particular form of an ethics of interpretation in view of Scripture's theological status as the written Word of God. Barth posits, "The question about the Word and

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<sup>26</sup> John Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 98.

this question alone fulfils and does justice to the intention of the biblical authors in their writing.”<sup>27</sup>

This chapter will explore this question with and after the manner of Karl Barth’s theology. Having argued, in the previous chapters, that Barth’s hermeneutics is based on a particular theological ontology and takes the shape of a particular theological interpretation, we propose that this theological-ontological backdrop prescribes a unique ethics of interpretation for reading the Bible as Scripture. In the next section, we will first outline the basic shape of Barth’s theological ethics.

## 2. The Shape of Karl Barth’s Theological Ethics

How can one know what constitutes a good human action? Barth believes a truly Christian ethical reflection cannot be separated from dogmatics; it must be integrated and determined in dogmatics. In one of his last writings, Barth defines ethics as “an attempt to answer theoretically the question of what may be called good human action.”<sup>28</sup> In Barth’s theology, a general ethical inquiry is a deliberation of a human who takes upon herself the task of *defining* what is moral.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, by God’s grace, the fact a human can ask moral questions and respond to moral commands, is fundamental to her existence as God’s creature and elected partner of God’s covenant. Webster posits that Barth’s reflection is not a “reflection upon an immanent world of moral meaning,” but rather a “reflection upon a transcendent order of *being* and *value* organised around the grace of God in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”<sup>30</sup> This is the reason why Barth elucidates the form and the content of his ethical reflections as distinctively theological.<sup>31</sup> Barth’s ethics is an integral part of

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<sup>27</sup> Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), 35.

<sup>28</sup> Karl Barth, *The Christian Life: Lecture Fragments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 3.

<sup>29</sup> *CD II/2*, 522-23.

<sup>30</sup> Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*, 219.

<sup>31</sup> Trevor Hart, *Regarding Karl Barth: Toward a Reading of His Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 75.

his dogmatics,<sup>32</sup> for as Webster notes, the *Church Dogmatics* is “intrinsically an ethical dogmatics.”<sup>33</sup>

The distinctiveness of Barth’s ethics is it does not start with a reflection on the human as a moral agent but by firstly envisioning a particular “moral ontology” in which human action takes place.<sup>34</sup> Specifically, Barth’s ethics is a three-dimensional reflection that encompasses the ethical question and the ethical agent in a dynamic framework in which the commanding presence of God is not only noetic, but also ontological and teleological.<sup>35</sup> The Word of God generates a particular moral ontology, that is, a moral field that has a distinctive theological framework for understanding human moral action. Webster notes that Barth’s ethics is devoted primarily “to the task of describing the ‘space’ which agents occupy, and gives only low priority to the description of their character and to the analysis of quandary situations in which they find themselves.”<sup>36</sup> In Barth’s theology, moral questions must be first set up in a right moral universe before reflecting on human action. In this way, Barth’s theology delays the reflection on human morality until the description of the creative and redemptive act of God in Christ and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit has been properly elaborated.<sup>37</sup> The reality of God is a reality that is free and original, but the freedom of God is expressed in the decision of God

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<sup>32</sup> Barth, *The Christian Life: Lecture Fragments*, 3.

<sup>33</sup> Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*, 4.

<sup>34</sup> Hart, *Regarding Karl Barth: Toward a Reading of His Theology*, 75. Also, Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*, 214-30. The phrase originated from Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 8.

<sup>35</sup> Hart, *Regarding Karl Barth: Toward a Reading of His Theology*, 86. Cf. Nimmo, *Being in Action: The Theological Shape of Barth's Ethical Vision*, 6.

<sup>36</sup> Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*, 2. Barth’s unique approach has been misunderstood as a lack of ethical reflection in his theology because of the expectation of description of moral agent and her reflectivity in relation to ethical questions and realities isolated from Barth’s vision of the field of moral action. See, inter alia, Alister E. McGrath, *The Making of Modern German Christology, 1750-1990* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 104-05; Sheila Greeve Davaney, *Divine Power: A Study of Karl Barth and Charles Hartshorne* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 16, 23, 44. Some complain that Barth’s theology itself lacks of space and content to engage with the reality of ethical-political questions, see inter alia, Reinhold Niebuhr, *Essays in Applied Christianity* (New York: Meridian Books, 1959), 172-87; Charles C. West, *Communism and the Theologians: Study of an Encounter* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958), 211-22. Cf. George Hunsinger, *Karl Barth and Radical Politics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 181-92.

<sup>37</sup> Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*, 2.

to be God of humanity, i.e., to be in covenantal fellowship with humanity.<sup>38</sup> God is true God in God's movement to reach out to humanity.<sup>39</sup> But precisely because theology is understood as a church's reflection on God in relation to humanity, human action takes place in the history of God's dealing with humanity, both in view of God's eternal election and the historical act of God. A Christian moral deliberation in this context is a human action in correspondence to God's grace that elects sinful humanity as God's covenant partner.<sup>40</sup>

What is the presupposed moral field in Barth's theology? We propose it is God's election that situates human life in a definite ethical field. The centre of the problem is not a noetic question about good human action. The primary problem, rather, lies in the moral discrepancy between the good that has been revealed and the moral reality of elected human beings. Humans are sinners who decide and act in a way that denies their own being. In God's eternal election, God takes upon God-self the responsibility that must be carried by the human and in this way establishes, upholds and completes the human's justification and sanctification.<sup>41</sup> Concretely, this has taken place in Jesus Christ as the elect human in whom all humans are included in God's eternal election.<sup>42</sup> In Jesus Christ, as Trevort Hart notes, "the truth about all other humans is a function of the relationship which they have to this one man and his history which has become their history."<sup>43</sup> God's election of Jesus Christ is the moral field within which human ethical action takes place.

In this moral ontology, believer and unbeliever alike are placed under the grace of God, in which Jesus Christ fulfilled for them what God requires from

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<sup>38</sup> *CD II/2*, 7.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. "'Theology', in the literal sense, means the science and doctrine of God. A very precise definition of the Christian endeavour in this respect would really require the more complex term 'The-anthropology'. For an abstract doctrine of God has no place in the Christian realm, only a 'doctrine of God and of man', a doctrine of the commerce and communion between God and man." Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960), 11.

<sup>40</sup> *CD II/2*, 512.

<sup>41</sup> Barth, *The Christian Life: Lecture Fragments*, 16.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>43</sup> Hart, *Regarding Karl Barth: Toward a Reading of His Theology*, 80. Cf. Gerald P. McKenny, *The Analogy of Grace: Karl Barth's Moral Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), specially chapter 2.

humanity. The ethical world where the church lives and reads the Bible is a world where the moral demand of being human is defined by the man Jesus Christ, and fulfilled in his life, death and resurrection. In Jesus Christ God brings humanity to the true *telos* of its existence. Human morality finds its proper good in its correspondence and identification with the moral life of Jesus Christ, i.e., his obedience and submission to the will of God. By implication, an ethics of reading the Bible is characterized by obedience or disobedience that corresponds to the faithfulness or contradiction of human action to the very being of the human as defined and fulfilled in the history of Jesus Christ. The gospel of election determines the calling to live out the true being of humanity as it has been revealed and actualized by Jesus Christ.<sup>44</sup>

Yet this obedience is not an obedience to a particular set of rules and moral principles, nor is it a literal imitation of Jesus's ethical life.<sup>45</sup> The concrete form of ethical life is a response to the divine vocation and command in a specific time and place. This is understood actualistically as an ever new creative event of Christian life. Ethical obedience is not an obedience to a set of rules or a pattern of life as instructed or exemplified by Jesus Christ or biblical characters. Rather it takes the form of divine address that encounters a human being at this particular time and at this particular locality and the human's response to it. Barth posits,

The concept of the command of God denotes a dynamic reality. The command is that of the living God. Thus the concept speaks of God's action to the extent that this is also a specific Word directed to man. The expression "the command of God" means that the gracious God, acting as such with and for and on man, does not keep silent but says something to man, telling him what he wants from him, what he for his part is to do. The concept speaks of the directing and demanding and ordering of God which takes place in and with his action and with which he appeals to the freedom that he has given man as his Creator and Reconciler. The command of God is the event in which God commands. It is a specific command of God in each specific form of his dealings with man, in each specific time, in relation to the

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<sup>44</sup> Hart, *Regarding Karl Barth: Toward a Reading of His Theology*, 81.

<sup>45</sup> *CD IV/2*, 553. Cf. Paul T. Nimmo, "Barth and the Christian as Ethical Agent: An Ontological Study of the Shape of Christian Ethics," in *Commanding Grace: Studies in Karl Barth's Ethics*, ed. Daniel L. Migliore (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 233.

presuppositions and consequences of each specific existence of each man. It is the one very definite thing that God demands from this or that man.<sup>46</sup>

Ethics is not a matter of general principles for special application but of discerning and obeying the divine command in a specific time and space precisely because God has a will for the church in this particular situation. Barth posits,

Ethics, however, can point to the event of the encounter between God and man, to the mystery of the specific divine ordering, directing, and commanding and of the specific human obeying or disobeying. It can give instruction in the art of correct asking about God's will and open hearing of God's command. It can do this because, for all the specificity of his commanding here and now, it is always the gracious God who in the situation of the covenant which now commands our interest encounters the man who is responsible to him as such. Thus the mystery of his encounter with man is not one of a darkness in which anything might be possible and might become actual. The very specific thing which the free God wants done here and now

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<sup>46</sup> Barth, *The Christian Life: Lecture Fragments*, 33. This form of theological ethics has attracted many criticisms. Some object because Barth's ethics entails a kind of moral 'occasionalism' that fails to give proper account of a right ethical reasoning; some regard that such an approach fails to provide continuity of moral action, and in this regard, its moral deliberation entails an arbitrary moral principle; and others criticise Barth because he fails to give a proper account of non-theological factors in ethical reflection. See, inter alia, Nigel Biggar, *The Hastening That Waits: Karl Barth's Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 19ff; Robert E. Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 183, 421; James M. Gustafson, *Can Ethics Be Christian?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 160. Cf. Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought*, 1. The common weaknesses of these criticisms is that they fail to give justice to the moral ontology of Barth's theological ethics. Specifically, the first charge, fails to give justice to the fact that Barth does not retreat from all forms of reasoning but from a specific kind of reasoning, that is, an ethical reasoning deliberated by an independent ethical agent. For Barth, even if a reasoning is based on a text of Scripture, if it fails to give justice to divine commanding presence it constrains theological ethics from a living encounter with God. A system of ethics, even if the system is an open system that can be modified according to a contextual situation, for Barth, fails to give justice to the divine commanding grace that requires not only moral reasoning but human obedience. Barth assumes the moral problem is primarily ontic, not noetic. Against the charge of a lack of continuity, we believe that the criticism fails to grasp the full logic of Barth's ethics. It is true that an ethics of obedience where the content of the obedience is morally problematic (such as a conviction that one is commanded to harm others) can raise a serious moral question. But the charge fails to account for the fact that in Barth's theology, the divine-human relationship is not only a moment but also a *history*. The command of God as an ever new event (discontinuity) is part of an ongoing relationship between God and humanity in which the history of the relationship provides continuity of the divine-human encounter. God's command is not an arbitrary command, but a command in the history of relationship that has its roots in eternity, realised in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and consummated in the eschaton. Finally against the charge that Barth's ethics lacks consideration of non-theological factors, we posit that such a claim is a misunderstanding, because for Barth, what can be accounted as a theological factor is inclusive of social-political factors. In fact, given the specificity of God's command, the historical facticity and contextual factors of ethical reasoning are an integral part of divine commands, precisely because the command is the command *of God* who places the church in a particular context with ethical responsibilities. Cf. Hart, *Regarding Karl Barth: Toward a Reading of His Theology*, 85.



by free man, the content of his command, is wholly and utterly a matter of his particular disposing.<sup>47</sup>

If this is the shape of Barth's theological ethics, it is not difficult to understand how the form of ethics of interpretation is that of obedience and responsibility. If Scripture is the conduit of God's commanding grace, then it is quite logical that obedience and responsibility are the concrete forms of Barth's ethics of interpretation. But how, in this context, can one talk about the freedom of interpretation, as a theme of paramount importance in the discussion of an ethics of interpretation? Interestingly, when Barth discusses the three moments of interpretation (*explicatio-meditatio-applicatio*),<sup>48</sup> he frames the discussion within the context of freedom. In other words, it is an ethics of freedom that provides the framework of the ethics of responsibility and obedience in his hermeneutics. In what follows we will first discuss the meaning of freedom and what it means to exercise an ethics of freedom in the church's reading of the Bible as Scripture. Then, in this context, we will elaborate the meaning of responsibility and obedience in Barth's ethics of interpretation.

### 3. The freedom of interpretation

What is the meaning of the freedom of interpretation? Specifically, what constitutes the meaning of interpretative freedom in the church's reading of Scripture? More concretely, can we derive any meaning from a text or is there a constraint of interpretation, and in what ways does such constraint give justice to the text?<sup>49</sup>

In some modern theories, as discussed above, freedom of interpretation is viewed in opposition to authority. However, this perception is a serious misunderstanding of both freedom and authority.<sup>50</sup> We can trace this

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<sup>47</sup> Barth, *The Christian Life: Lecture Fragments*, 34.

<sup>48</sup> *CD I/2*, 723-40.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Imprisoned or Free? Text, Status, and Theological Interpretation in the Master/Slave Discourse of Philemon," in *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation*, ed. A. K. M. Adam (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 53.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. "...within enlightenment, the very concept of authority becomes deformed...opposed to reason and freedom... But this is not the essence of authority. It is true that it is primarily persons that have authority; but authority of persons is based ultimately, not on the subjection and abdication of reason, but on recognition and knowledge—knowledge, namely that the other is superior to oneself in

misunderstanding in the development of the Enlightenment.<sup>51</sup> Freedom is defined as the courage of using one's autonomous reason to differentiate what is right from what is wrong, and to act on this basis. Constitutive of practical reason, freedom is a necessary presupposition of the ethical life. One must obey the moral law because one has the ability to do it, and in this recognition, one identifies human freedom and moral obligation.<sup>52</sup> On this account, only with the presupposition of human freedom, is the sense of morality is meaningful. In this construal, authority is a constraint against human freedom. It is the opposite of freedom.

The difference between this philosophy of freedom and Barth's theology of freedom lies primarily in the ontology of morality that Barth perceives as the field of human action in which freedom can be understood. For Barth, a libertarian notion of freedom depends on an anthropological construal of absolute human freewill and a field of moral action that sees humans like "Hercules at the cross-roads" who can will and decide for himself what is right and wrong.<sup>53</sup> In contrast to this notion, Barth proposes that freedom is a gift from God who reveals and enables humans to know and to obey God's command. It is a freedom in and for God rather than a freedom from God. Barth posits, "Freedom is not an empty and formal concept. It is one which is filled out with a positive meaning. It does not speak only of a capacity. It speaks concretely of the fact that man can be genuinely man as God who has given

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judgment and insight and that for this reason his judgment takes precedence..." Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Historicity of Understanding," in *The Hermeneutics Reader: Texts of the German Tradition from the Enlightenment to the Present*, ed. Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (New York: Continuum, 1985), 263.

<sup>51</sup> One of the examples is Immanuel Kant who defines "enlightenment" as a movement that is driven by a spirit of human autonomy against external authority because of the risk that authority can deprive one of the freedom of making truthful judgement. Immanuel Kant, "What Is Enlightenment?," in *Critique of Practical Reason and Other Writings in Moral Philosophy*, ed. Lewis White Beck (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1949), 286-92. Cf. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 39-42. At that time this conception was a revolutionary claim, and it helped the church to rethink the proper place of authority and how it relates to church authority. Such rethinking helps to recover the true meaning of authority and how it can provide a theological basis of freedom in conjunction with church authority.

<sup>52</sup> John Macken, *The Autonomy Theme in the Church Dogmatics of Karl Barth and His Critics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 6. Macken does not acknowledge the substance of human action in Barth's ethical reflection and interprets Barth's theological ethics dissolving human activity into divine activity. Nevertheless, as we argue, Barth's theology explores the theme of divine-human partnership through a specific theme of human participation in the act of invocation, and in the act of invocation we can interpret a real participation of human being in the command of God.

<sup>53</sup> *CD IV/2*, 494.

him this capacity can in His freedom be genuinely God.”<sup>54</sup> God’s freedom defines human freedom, and human freedom derives its meaning and reality from God’s freedom. Barth proposes that freedom does not necessarily contradict true authority, i.e., God’s authority. Authority need not denote an enslaving power from above upon irresolute humans. In Barth’s account, God’s authority is divinely majestic, “it has nothing in common with tyranny”; rather than enforcing its power against human freewill, it is “the power of an appeal, command and blessing which not only recognises human response but creates it.”<sup>55</sup>

In this theological construal, the human, in and by herself, has no capacity of true freedom. The demand to be free without God is the sign of her bondage to her sinful being. In and by himself, only God is truly free. Barth believes God is free even in regard to the freedom of God’s being.<sup>56</sup> Human freedom is derivative of God’s freedom, and for the human to be truly free, she has to be initiated, sustained and completed by the act of divine grace. The divinely endowed freedom is an actualistic freedom that does not belong permanently to the human, but always and everywhere, an event of grace that God bestows ever anew. Barth posits,

Human freedom is, therefore, neither something which is already proper to man, nor a freedom which man assumes in reaction to the Word of God. It is *an event*,... Because this happens, and happens within a human gathering, and therefore happens to men, it results in an emancipation of these men, in their being endowed with a possibility which they did not have before and which they could not have from their own resources.<sup>57</sup>

In this account interpretative freedom is an event by the grace of God. It is not based on so called human freedom that enables one to interpret Scripture according to one’s free-will. Only the freedom of the Word of God can enable a human reader to have a genuine freedom. Barth assumes that it is not Scripture that is constrained by human temporality, but the human who is constrained by her sinfulness and creatureliness. While, as a human text, the Bible is marked by the humanity of its authors, it does not need to be freed from its humanity because it is

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> *CD I/2*, 661.

<sup>56</sup> *CD II/1*, 307-08.

<sup>57</sup> *CD I/2*, 697.

God's election that Scripture remains a human text. When God speaks in and through Scripture, it is genuinely as a human text that Scripture speaks to the church as the Word of God. In contrast, Barth believes that the church, as a community of interpreters, need God's grace to be free from any illusion of being free interpreters; any illusion that one is the master of the text; and any illusion that one can dissect Scripture as an object of examination. To borrow an insight from Paul Ricoeur, it is the human interpreters that need to be free from the "pretention of consciousness in setting itself up as the origin of meaning."<sup>58</sup>

This is one of the profound insights of Barth's theology. The recognition that the Word of God is the real source of freedom, and in this regard has the power to disenchant its readers from the illusion that they are the originator of textual meaning. It calls, to borrow another phrase from Ricoeur, "a true ascesis of subjectivity, allowing... to be dispossessed of the origin of meaning."<sup>59</sup> But in contrast to Ricoeur, Barth recognises clearly that one cannot achieve this virtue by one's own self-determination but only by the grace of God. Only the freedom of the Word can enable the freedom of reading the Scripture as the Word of God. Concretely, the theological fact of being in Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit create the true freedom of the church in reading the Bible as Scripture. A Christian ethics of interpretation must be based on the conviction that Scripture is free, and it remains free in spite of any human attempt to constrain and to distort its message and significance.

What is, then, the expression of human action in this ethics of freedom? More specifically, how can the church read the Bible as a free human response to the fact that it is Scripture as the Word of God and is free and able to initiate and maintain the freedom of its readers? Barth argues that if we understand the freedom of Scripture we will realise "we cannot read and understand Holy Scripture without prayer, that is, without invoking the grace of God."<sup>60</sup> But how can prayer be a

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<sup>58</sup> Ricoeur, "Existence and Hermeneutics," in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, 19.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

genuine expression of human freedom? In what sense can we understand that prayer is a real freedom in the interpretation of Scripture?

Barth's argument consists of a theological claim that the act of invocation is a distinctive form of freedom in the God-human relationship. He posits, "Prayer is literally the archetypal form of all human acts of freedom in the Church, and as such it must be continually repeated in all other acts of freedom."<sup>61</sup> How does Barth understand this? Barth believes invocation constitutes a genuine *partnership* in the God-human relationship. Invocation, as an act of freedom, is not simply an emanation of God's action in a human being, but a real and concrete ethical action in which the real freedom of the person as ethical agent is maintained and the human truly becomes God's partner.<sup>62</sup> Theologically, the partnership is a two-party participation because, in invocation, "man finds himself empowered ... by the free grace of God," but at the same time, invocation is "an authentically and specifically human action, willed and undertaken in a free human resolve... No less serious in his place than God in his, man must be present and at work in it according to the measure of his human capacity."<sup>63</sup>

In one sense prayer is an act of self-surrendering to the grace of God rather than an action of a free agent.<sup>64</sup> Barth elucidates this notion when he posits that prayer is like opening our 'empty hand' to God, in which we have "nothing either to represent or to present to God except himself as the one who has to receive all things from Him."<sup>65</sup> However, in invocation, "man as a Christian acquires his freedom, and in it consists the exercise of this freedom: his conversion and decision. It is the work of his faith and gratitude."<sup>66</sup> In the context of grace, invocation is a real participation in God because human ethical action is given room by divine self-limitation.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 698.

<sup>62</sup> Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought*, 169.

<sup>63</sup> Barth, *The Christian Life: Lecture Fragments*, 42. Cf. Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought*, 170-71.

<sup>64</sup> Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought*, 172.

<sup>65</sup> CD III/4, 97.

<sup>66</sup> Barth, *The Christian Life: Lecture Fragments*, 43.

We cannot speak of the human action-and this is what gives it its force and dignity-without immediately thinking of its continuation on the other side, on God's side. As God frees his children to take sides with him, so when they are obedient to what he commands he for his part is active on their side as their Father. ... He does not just work on and for them. As the Founder and the perfect Lord of this concursus (cf. *CD III*, 3 § 49, 2), he wills their work as well. *He for his part will not work without them. He will work only in connection with their work.*<sup>67</sup>

In the divine ordering of human participation, though God remains free, yet the self-limitation of God creates a space within which human participation is truly authentic.<sup>68</sup> In this way there is a real difference between divine initiative and the human's corresponding action.<sup>69</sup> Invocation means human involvement in taking responsibility according to human capabilities and possibilities.<sup>70</sup> Accordingly, those who invoke are claimed for action and for taking responsibility upon the content of invocation. In this regard, the action itself is a concrete demonstration of the prayer.

The Christian expression of interpretative freedom is prayer. This ethos does not simply mean that the church (or individual) reading of the Bible must always begin and end with a prayer. It ultimately means that the whole process of theological exegesis is a form of prayer. It is a spiritual exercise, a human exercise of freedom in God's gracious presence. It is an act of worship. To understand it this way means that, as an ethical action, it poses a challenge to human misuses of interpretative freedom, that is, it is rife with the risk of irreverence to God's communicative presence. The church's reading of Scripture is an invocation that is based on the understanding that humans are free to interpret the Bible without any constraint whatsoever, but that this freedom is not based on a "Herculean" freedom that the human can, will, and do what is right. Rather the freedom is expressed in the church's faith in the freedom of the Word who will enable her to be a free reader, and in this regard, she invokes, anticipates and celebrates the freedom of Scripture to speak again and again in each new context and era, in any system of thought, in any cultural-linguistic context, and in any new challenge that the church faces. The

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>68</sup> Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought*, 173.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>70</sup> Barth, *The Christian Life: Lecture Fragments*, 169.

church is free to interpret Scripture because Scripture has the power to free the church from the captivity of sin. It is not the church that has power to free Scripture from human captivity, but it is Scripture that has the power to free, and will always succeed to free, the church from the captivity of sin. This is a statement of faith, and it is the church's faith that believes that to perform an interpretative freedom, it must rely on the power of the Word in her reading and proclamation of the Gospel.

If the ethics of freedom takes the form of human invocation of God's grace, and this invocation is a real human participation in the divine grace, we propose the second form of the ethics of interpretation, and following logically from the first, it is an ethics of responsibility.

#### **4. An ethics of responsibility**

The second ethos is rooted in the conviction that a true freedom generates responsibility. Since true freedom is a divine gift, it is a sanctified freedom. Freedom entails a disciplined practice, because only those who exercise discipline live in a genuine freedom. Undisciplined practice is a sign of bondage, and undisciplined interpretative practice is a sign of a constrained hermeneutics. The form of theological freedom is invocation, and the concrete realisation of invocation is the church's responsibility in reading Scripture theologically. Since the event of the Word is divine grace, and the church will never have the Word as her possession, it must seek, hope and pray for it again and again in the act of invocation. Responsibility is part of the invocation itself; responsible reading is an act of prayer.<sup>71</sup>

As freedom under the Word, Barth defines the interpretation of Scripture as "the assumption of *responsibility* for the interpretation and application of Holy Scripture".<sup>72</sup> This responsibility is given by Jesus Christ to the church as a whole and to each individual member. It is the responsibility of the church to read the Bible and encourage its members to read for themselves, and on this basis to witness to the world. Thus, the process of interpretation is closely related to the calling and the

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<sup>71</sup> *CD I/2*, 697.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 710.

mission of the church as a whole and of all individual members.<sup>73</sup> The ethics of responsibility consists of a twofold responsibility. Barth posits,

[The] testimony of Scripture cannot be received unless the members of the Church are willing and ready, in its interpretation and application, to listen to each other. Correspondingly, we must [also] say that this testimony cannot be received unless those who accept it are ready and willing themselves to assume the responsibility for its interpretation and application.<sup>74</sup>

In relation to the first, the ethics of reading entails a dialogue with the church's confessions<sup>75</sup> and with the church fathers as the first teachers of the church.<sup>76</sup> In relation to the second, the church should not only listen and learn from others but must also take the responsibility of interpreting and applying Scripture for herself according to the challenges and the needs of her time and place.

Why does an ethics of responsibility take the form of not only individual but also communal responsibility? Barth's ethics of interpretation is shaped by his understanding of the nature of humanity, i.e., the human is, by nature, a person in relationship. Our personal encounter with the Word is relational because our existence in Christ is ontologically relational.<sup>77</sup> Human relationality is not subsequent to one's being a human or contingent upon one's willingness to relate to others but is the ontological reality of the human as a person in Christ, as elected in God's eternal decree. Barth posits,

Humanity which is not fellow-humanity is inhumanity. For it cannot reflect but only contradict the determination of man to be God's covenant-partner, nor can the God who is no *Deus solitarius* but *Deus triunus*, God in relationship, be mirrored in a *homo solitarius*. As God offers man humanity and therefore freedom in fellowship, God summons him to prove and express himself as the image of God-for as such He has created him...He wills that man's being should fulfil itself in the encounter, the relationship, the togetherness of I and Thou. He commands him, invites him and challenges him not merely to allow his humanity as fellow-humanity to be his nature, but to affirm and exercise it in his own decision, in action and omission. He

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 715.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 696.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 649.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. Robert McAfee Brown, "Scripture and Tradition in the Theology of Karl Barth," in *Thy Word Is Truth: Barth on Scripture*, ed. George Hunsinger (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 3-19.

<sup>77</sup> Hart, *Regarding Karl Barth: Toward a Reading of His Theology*, 93.



commands him to be what he is. But this means that He takes man so seriously in his vocation to be in covenant with Him that He calls him to freedom in fellowship, i.e., to freedom in fellowship with others.<sup>78</sup>

This relational ontology forms an ethics of interpretation that situates the act of reading in both a communal and a personal event, and challenges the notion that the interpretation of the Bible is a solitary event. The event remains the event of the Word in the church and in an individual's life, but in so far as it is an event in an individual's life, it is individual as a being-in-relationship-with-others. In this context, Barth proposes an ethics of responsibility as a reading with the accompaniment of the church's confessions and the teachings of the church fathers (including the reformers).

What is the relationship between the interpretation of Scripture and the church's confessions? And in what ways can the confessions help the church in her reading of Scripture? In his discussion about authority in the church, Barth does not believe the confessions stand above or alongside Scripture, but under it.<sup>79</sup> The confession derives its authority from the fact that it contains "the formulation and proclamation of a definite ecclesiastical understanding of the revelation attested in Holy Scripture."<sup>80</sup> Confessions are *a commentary* on Scripture which attempt to speak of the content of Scripture "in its own words, in the words and therefore in the speech of its age."<sup>81</sup> Confession is a universal act, i.e., it is directed to the universal church, but its universality must be understood in a spiritual rather than in a legalistic way. In principle, since the church's confession is a commentary, Barth posits,

It cannot replace Holy Scripture itself. It cannot replace our own exposition and application of Holy Scripture. It cannot be the only commentary which-because we have to read Scripture in the Church-we allow between ourselves and Scripture. But as the voice of the fathers and brethren it can and should be the first of commentaries. It can and should be the leader of the chorus or the key witness in that series.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> *CD III/4*, 117.

<sup>79</sup> *CD I/2*, 620.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 621.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 649.

Because the “church’s confession... is meant to be read as a first commentary on Holy Scripture,”<sup>83</sup> Barth compares critical commentary and confessions as two kinds of biblical commentaries and even though the purpose of reading is to understand Scripture, the priority must be given to the confessions for guiding the church’s proclamation. It is not that confessions are a source of authority but the recognition of the wealth of the deposit the church has collected through her long struggles and experiences. Confession cannot replace Scripture, as it remains under Scripture. It must not take over the responsibility of the church to read Scripture for themselves. It has its place as a guide that gives direction and helps the church to understand the Word of God, but its nature, as a commentary, is a reminder that it is Scripture that the church seeks to understand and not the confessions.

In a similar way, Barth considers the teachers in the history of the church as important resources for a responsible reading of Scripture. Barth posits,

If Holy Scripture alone is the divine teacher in the school in which we find ourselves when we find ourselves in the Church, we will not want to find ourselves in this school of the Church without fellow-pupils, without cooperation with them, without the readiness to be instructed by older and more experienced fellow-pupils: as fellow-pupils, but to be instructed. And basically the older and more experienced fellow-pupil is simply the Church teacher. He is, in fact, older and more experienced in a qualified sense of the word. He is not only a son but a father in the Church. We have to be instructed by him.<sup>84</sup>

While Barth accepts that a Christian should be humble enough to learn from anyone, he argues that a true teacher is a rare gift from God, and has a special place in the church’s reading of Scripture.<sup>85</sup>

Barth’s theology suggests a form of *sola scriptura* that provides a charitable space for the role of tradition in biblical interpretation. While *sola scriptura* means that the church must decide for herself her understanding of Scripture, Barth regards confessions as a treasured commentary that can provide directions and insights for truthful understanding. This ethos of reading is a powerful antidote to counter the

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> *CD I/2*, 606-07.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 613.

myth of modern readers from their narcissistic attitude regarding one's personal interpretation as definitive simply because it is one's own.<sup>86</sup> An ethics of responsibility means an interpretation must consist of a willingness to listen and to learn from the testimony of the church and its teachers and not be dismissive on the grounds that their commentaries are pre-critical. The church's responsibility is to the Word of God, but this basic theological virtue is accompanied by a wisdom that the event of the Word is not only a private event. Reading together with the church, past and present, is a true expression of the truth that the relationship between God's communicative presence and the church's reading of Scripture is both an event and also a history. A responsible reading gives attention to the history of God's relationship with the church through the perspective of confessions and the church fathers. God spoke and speaks in the Scripture, God spoke to the church then and there, and God will continue to speak to the church here and now. The church is called to listen to each other in their exposition of Scripture, but it is Scripture that the church reads, interprets and tries to understand.

Second, an ethics of responsibility means "that each individual who confesses his acceptance of the testimony of Scripture must be willing and prepared to undertake the responsibility for its interpretation and application."<sup>87</sup> This ethos finds its basis in the conviction that only the authority of the Word is final in the church, that the church's authority is subordinate to the Word. The implication is that while in the church we are called to listen to each other, one must take responsibility for one's reading because the Word is the final and ultimate judge of the church and her convictions.<sup>88</sup> An individual is not a person in isolation from the church, but an individual who listens humbly and willingly to fellow members, but remains an individual nonetheless.<sup>89</sup> As such, the individual who decides for herself is an individual in relation to humanity as a whole, one who sees the encounter with the

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<sup>86</sup> Brown, in *Thy Word Is Truth: Barth on Scripture*, 18.

<sup>87</sup> *CD I/2*, 661.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 697.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 703.

Word as an encounter that places one as a steward of the Word who is called to share the gift of God with the church and the world.<sup>90</sup>

This responsibility rests on the conviction that the Word of God does not need human clarification to be existentially relevant. As the Word of God, Scripture has an objective clarity, but because the Word takes up human words, Barth posits, “It has itself incurred the need of...interpretation. Our human responsibility is related to this need of interpretation, and thus to Scripture expressed in human words.”<sup>91</sup> The exercise of this responsibility must not become an axiom that is isolated from the theological concept of the clarity of Scripture, which makes the freedom of interpretation possible in the first place. It is true that the need of interpretation comes from the fact that the Word assumes the form of human words.<sup>92</sup> However, Barth argues, the task of interpretation is made possible only on the basis that the Word of God is capable of self-interpretation. Only in this context is the fulfilment of one’s responsibility of interpreting Scripture an expression of humility and obedience, and the church must seek to encourage all to participate in this calling. The task is not limited to an elite group of interpreters. While this responsibility means one has to be responsible for one’s own interpretation and also in between the speakers and the readers, the members of the church can be called to be a third party that plays the role of an intermediary in the process of interpretation (cf. Acts 8:26ff).<sup>93</sup> A third party stands as mediator, not of the Word, but of the promise given to the church that God will speak to the people. On this theological ground the church can appreciate the presence of scholars and gifted theologians among the teachers of the church who can help the church to understand Scripture better. They are not privileged because of their academic credentials but because of the vocation to take responsibility in the church’s reading of the Bible.

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 704.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 712.

<sup>92</sup> *CD I/2*, 713.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 713.

## 5. An ethics of obedience

The term Barth uses to elucidate an ethics of obedience is *subordination* to the Word of God.<sup>94</sup> Barth argues that subordination does not contradict the theological concept of freedom as Barth defines it. Barth emphasizes freedom, which is characterized by a spontaneous activity, as harmonious with the theological concept of freedom in subordination. This form of freedom, Barth argues, is not in any way less, and in many ways more, than the concept of freedom where the relationship between two or more subjects is characterized by spontaneous reciprocity. The point is that when the relationship between two or more subjects is properly one of subordination, then, within that relationship, freedom can be properly expressed in the form of subordination and super-ordination. Inability to do so may consist in a lack of freedom, i.e., of properly acting to the other who is worthy of one's subordination.<sup>95</sup>

Another way to construe Barth's ethics of obedience is to recognize that obedience also means a faithful reading of the subject matter of Scripture. Faithful reading is a true expression of obedience because it is the Lord who addresses the church in and through the text. A faithful reading is attentive to the content because one recognises the One who speaks. This does not disregard the creative imagination of the reader, but to claim that, human creativity only has its proper place in the context of obedience. John Webster rightly comments that in the church's reading of Scripture "exegetical reason is caught up in faith's abandonment of itself to the power of the divine Word to slay and to make alive,"<sup>96</sup> and in this sense the death and resurrection of Christ are enacted in the church's reading of Scripture. As a theological activity, reading Scripture is part of the continuous history of reconciliation in the life of the church whereby the power of the Spirit overcomes human sin. In this regard, the primary challenge of a faithful reading is not a cognitive incompetence but rather human sinfulness, particularly the sin of idolatry and ignorance.<sup>97</sup> Faithful reading is a theological response against the human

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 262.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 715.

<sup>96</sup> Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch*, 86.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 87.

tendency to glorify one's ideas and to ignore the communicative presence of God. Webster rightly posits, "We do not read well not only because of technical incompetence, cultural distance from the substance of the text or lack of readerly sophistication, but also and most of all because in reading Scripture we are addressed by that which runs clean counter to our will."<sup>98</sup> Reading Scripture ethically involves a hermeneutical conversion and a cultivation of a habit of reading in which the overcoming of ignorance and idolatry is understood as an event of grace.<sup>99</sup>

Thus, rather than misunderstanding, the main challenge in good interpretation is *insubordination*, that is, a denial to place our ideas, thoughts and convictions under the subject matter of Scripture.<sup>100</sup> Barth does not suggest that interpreters have to empty their preconceived ideas prior to interpreting, as such a process is not humanly possible in the first place. What it means is that the object of interpretation can compel one to adopt a new presupposition if that is required by the church's encounter with the Word. Barth argues that "Scripture itself as the witness to revelation, must have unconditional precedence of all the evidence or our own being and becoming, our own thoughts an endeavour, hope and suffering, of all the evidence of intellect and senses, of all axiom and theorems, which we inherit and as such bear with us".<sup>101</sup>

The ethics of obedience is elaborated into a process of interpretation which consists of three *moments* of interpretation: *explicatio*, *meditatio*, and *applicatio*.<sup>102</sup> These moments of interpretation must not be seen as three mechanical steps which are independent from one another, but an expression of faithfulness and obedience to the Word of God that, in itself, has a self-explanatory character. Rather than construe it as a method of interpretation that can secure the outcome of good interpretation, the word 'moment' implies a process of faithful reading which can be recognised but not separated in the interpretive performance.

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>100</sup> *CD* I/2, 716.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 718.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 722-40. Barth uses different terms for these acts. Another term for *explicatio* is *observatio*; another term for *meditatio* is *reflexio*.

The moments of interpretation derive their meaning from a theological understanding that the Word of God as *an event* by virtue of God's communicative grace. The purpose of interpretation is *to live in* and *to live by* the Word of God, as the process is not an epistemological tool that guarantees its result, but rather an ethics of reading that purports, not primarily to acquire knowledge, but to listen to and to obey the commanding grace of God. Furthermore, the word 'moment' indicates that this particular instance of reading is not an isolated event but a moment in the history of God's loving relationship with the church. It derives its continuity from the historical and literary meaning of the text through the fact that, in this text, God spoke to people in the past and will speak again and again to people here and now. As such the moments of interpretation will not tolerate an arbitrary interpretation without regard for its natural history but, at the same time, it will continue to surprise the church as each moment inaugurates a fresh event of God's speaking. The freedom of God in a faithful and loving relationship shapes the moments of interpretation as the church's ethics of obedience is in anticipation of God's commanding grace.

### 5.1. The first moment: the act of observation (*explicatio*)

According to Barth, the act of *explicatio* mainly deals with the *sensus* of the word of Scripture.<sup>103</sup> The task is twofold, which are historical and literary investigations. In both Barth does not undermine the rigorous work of literary and historical research as exercised in general hermeneutics.<sup>104</sup> However, the aim of the investigation is not to grasp the religious idea of its human author or to gain a general understanding of its literary-historical context, but to grasp, or better to be grasped by, the subject matter as witnessed by the human author.<sup>105</sup> It aims to understand the object mirrored

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 722.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 723.

<sup>105</sup> Cf. Hans W. Frei, "Scripture as Realistic Narrative: Karl Barth as Critic of Historical Criticism," in *Thy Word Is Truth: Barth on Scripture*, ed. George Hunsinger (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 49-59. Frei's description of Barth's exegesis while right in the way it compares Barth's exegesis that moves beyond historical criticism, fails to highlight that the difference is not only in the method of reading realistic narratives but in the ethos of interpretation which is shaped by the ontology and the theology of the Word. See also, Rudolf Smend, "Nachkritische Schriftauslegung," in *Parrhesia. Fröhliche Zuversicht: Karl Barth Zum 80. Geburtstag Am 10. Mai 1966*, ed. Eberhard Busch (Zürich: EVZ-Verlag, 1966), 215-37; George Hunsinger, "Postcritical Scriptural Interpretation: Rudolf Smend

by the language and the historical concepts of the prophetic-apostolic words.<sup>106</sup> Observation is not defined as a methodological investigation of compiling biblical data but a corresponding human task of the self-presentation of the divine Word, i.e., “to follow this self-presentation, to repeat it... Interpretation as presentation in an introductory attempt to follow the sense of the words of Scripture.”<sup>107</sup> Webster rightly comments that “talk of God’s action does not compete with, suspend or obliterate talk of creaturely activity. Rather, it *specifies* or *determines* the character of creaturely activity by indicating that creaturely acts take place in the overarching context of the economy of salvation.”<sup>108</sup> It is not the difference in the practical steps of exegesis but in the ethos of exegesis, in the spirit of the work, in the understanding of the interpreter that is really happening in this work. This is what makes ecclesial exegesis distinctively theological, and, in the end, makes a real distinction in the way exegesis is performed.

We can elaborate further the distinctiveness of *explicatio* in theological hermeneutics by comparing it with general hermeneutics. In general hermeneutics, the plausible structure of an interpreter governs the possibility of meaning and the historicity of an event, and isolates the meaning within this plausibility structure. In theological hermeneutics, the subject matter governs the investigation, thus determining its reality and meaning.<sup>109</sup> Barth argues that the weakness of general hermeneutics is that it pre-emptively decides the limits of possibilities in the investigation. Theological hermeneutics, he proposes, is open to the directions and possibilities revealed by the subject matter, and is truly governed by the freedom of the Word.<sup>110</sup> Thus, for Barth, *explicatio* encompasses the freedom to consider all the best evidence available in the field, e.g., all literary studies, lexicography, source-criticism, grammar, style, a comparative study of the words and concepts of an

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on Karl Barth," in *Thy Word Is Truth: Barth on Scripture*, ed. George Hunsinger (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 29-48.

<sup>106</sup> CD I/2, 724.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 723

<sup>108</sup> Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch*, 92.

<sup>109</sup> CD I/2, 725. Cf. Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 211-12.

<sup>110</sup> CD I/2, 725.



author and of various authors, and their interrelation in the development of ideas, etc.<sup>111</sup> As one moment in scriptural interpretation, “it will not have to fear any inquiry in respect of historical orientation and criticism. On the other hand, it will not tolerate any restrictions. It will allow the text to speak for itself, in the sense it will give full scope to its controlling object.”<sup>112</sup> It opens the possibility that the subject matter may redefine the structure of reality within which the contemporary method of interpretation operates and “to be newly defined and broadened and eventually shattered and re-moulded, and in certain circumstances even to bring and apply to the task of faithful understanding possibilities which hitherto and in other circumstances we regarded as impossibilities.”<sup>113</sup> In the moment of *explicatio*, the justification of the process lies not in methodological reasoning, but in the theological conviction of the clarity of Scripture and the freedom of the Word expressed in an ethics of obedience.

## 5.2. The second moment: the act of reflection (*meditatio*)

The second moment, *meditatio* (*reflectio*), is the middle point between *explicatio* and *applicatio*, but it is not a second step, independent of the first and the third, but “the one act of scriptural exegesis considered now in the moment of the transition of what is said into the thinking of the reader or hearer.”<sup>114</sup> In this process, while it is “an act of human freedom” it is based on the conviction that scriptural interpretation is an event in which, as Barth emphasizes, Scripture explains itself.<sup>115</sup> Since the interpreter remains a human, the use of philosophy to reflect upon the subject matter is a necessity of human existence. Barth posits that a theological exegesis remains an exegesis within human facticity because “we only hear with our own ears and see with our own eyes, we can apprehend by means only of our own understanding, not of that of another.”<sup>116</sup> Since it is a necessary human condition, a philosophical thought-form, as a principle, is not criticised in its own reasonability, but relative to

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 723.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 726.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 724-725.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 727.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

its ability as an instrument for reflecting the content of Scripture. Thus, Barth is quite accommodating in his use of Plato or New Platonism, Hegelianism or Anti-Hegelianism, Aristotle or Kierkegaard or the phenomenology of Husserl and Scheler as philosophical handmaidens.<sup>117</sup> What is important is that one must do this “with great care and circumspection,” from a theological principle that it is an anthropological necessity that is grounded in two theological convictions: a) that the human is called to understand and interpret as a sinful human being and b) that the Word become incarnate in this fallen world, so “we cannot basically contest the use of philosophy in scriptural exegesis.”<sup>118</sup>

Rather than branding Barth’s use of philosophy as *ad hoc*, we choose to elaborate Barth’s detailed argument to prevent a convoluted understanding of an *ad hoc* use of philosophy. Barth’s use of philosophy is marked by an attitude that is both critical and willing to learn, and one that is simultaneously determined to learn from its insight but also insistent that this use must be governed by a concentration on the act of divine communicative presence, thus forming a special attitude toward philosophy.<sup>119</sup> In this context, Barth highlights five important points of what he means by “great care and circumspection” in the use of philosophy. First, one must be self-aware of the presence of a philosophical element in one’s interpretation. The content of philosophy will never be the same as the content of Scripture, even when there are signs of similarities in the thought-forms. On the other hand, the contents of philosophy and Scripture will be in contrast to each other. However, since one must use philosophy, one cannot escape transposing the content of Scripture into the thought-form of a philosophy. In doing this one must be aware that there are differences between the transposed images and the real content of Scripture.<sup>120</sup> This awareness must continue to remind one that the ethos of employing philosophical concepts is not creativity but obedience to the grace of the Word.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 728.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 730.

<sup>119</sup> Cf. Kenneth Oakes, *Karl Barth on Theology and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 143-44.

<sup>120</sup> *CD I/2*, 730

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

Second, the use of philosophy is to formulate a *hypothesis*, which is necessary in any act of thinking; but, on the other hand, it should be noted that no philosophy is irreplaceable, and that one may find other philosophies more congenial to the task.<sup>122</sup> As such, the church does not need to attach herself to one form of philosophy. Barth posits,

On the assumption that I, with my particular mode of thought - not on account of and in virtue of this mode of thought, but in spite of it and with it - am a member of the Church, and that as a member I am invited to undertake the task of scriptural exegesis, I can and must apply this way of thought to the problems of Scripture, in an exploratory and experimental and provisional manner. It is a false asceticism if I am unwilling to do this, if I try to suppress and deny my mode of thought. For this can only mean either that I have to choose another human system of thought, or that I withdraw from the task imposed upon me. But as I apply myself to this task, it will be decided under the Word what becomes of my mode of thought, whether and to what extent it will be serviceable to me in this activity - the activity of interpreting Scripture.<sup>123</sup>

Barth's argument for the hypothetical nature of philosophy calls for an openness and humility to accept the possibility that other philosophies may be more useful than the one employed, and one is called to admit that one's philosophy needs to be revised, restructured, or in some cases, replaced. This interpretative attitude is maintained by the theological ethics of the church reading of the Bible as compelled by an obedience to the commanding grace of God.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 731.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 730.

<sup>124</sup> Recent use of various philosophical tools can be seen in their proper place from Barth's ethics of interpretation as ultimately an attempt to find a useful device for the task of understanding the Word of God rather than construing an ultimate tool that in itself may eclipse church's task of interpreting the Scripture. Among the tools that purport to modify or supplement old style historical criticism we can list several examples as in Critical Realism proposed by Ben F. Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament* (Allison Park, Pa.: Pickwick Publications, 1989), ix-xiv; N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), 34pp. The use of narrative approach in narrative theology as in Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, *Why Narrative?: Readings in Narrative Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 1-18; Garrett Green and Hans W. Frei, *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), specially chapters 7 and 8. Cf. Ford, *Barth and God's Story: Biblical Narrative and the Theological Method of Karl Barth in the Church Dogmatics*, chapters 3 and 4. Also the use of speech-act theory by Kevin Vanhoozer and Nicholas Wolterstorff, see Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics*, chapters 5 and 6; Wolterstorff, "Resuscitating the Author," in *Hermeneutics at the Crossroads*, 35-50; Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks*, chapter 5. See also a recent discussion on the use of literary, drama, fiction and musical theories to propose new ways to appreciate the content of Scripture in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, James K. A. Smith, and Bruce Ellis Benson, *Hermeneutics at the Crossroads* (Bloomington: Indiana University

Third, the use of philosophy should not become an interest in itself, separated from the purposes of theological interpretation. Barth warns of the danger of philosophy becoming a controlling concept which constrains or controls the meaning of Scripture, and contradicts the ethics of obedience.<sup>125</sup> No philosophy can become a tool that demands a consistent use of its concepts in exegesis, as if the church were obliged to be an advocate of a certain thought-form. Barth posits, “Every philosophy which is posited absolutely leads necessarily to a falsification of Scripture because to posit absolutely what is man's own and is brought by him to the Word is an act of unbelief which makes impossible the insights of faith and therefore a true interpretation of the Word.”<sup>126</sup> What is important is not the act of sorting out one philosophy from another, or of differentiating between good or bad philosophies, but an ethics of faithfulness to Scripture, in which any philosophy can be used for interpretation as long as one's loyalty is not to philosophy but to Scripture in the event of the Word.

Fourth, Barth admits that there are differences between philosophies, and so there are differences in their usefulness. What is important is that “in a specific situation this or that particular mode of thought can be particularly useful in scriptural exegesis, and it can then become a command to avail oneself of it in this particular instance.”<sup>127</sup> It is always relative to its usefulness for understanding the subject matter, and for this reason, always under the guidance of grace.<sup>128</sup> Barth warns against elevating one particular mode of thought into a normative role for all situations and times, and even for all types of text. The more attractive one finds a philosophy, and the more eager one to promote it, the more one must be especially guarded of its danger in diverting the church's attentiveness from Scripture. The

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Press, 2006), xiii-xviii. The standard survey for various possible theories is still Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*. From within Barth's ethics of interpretation the use of all these theories is inevitable as such, the important point is the way all they must be seen as a hypothetical device that serves as a tool to read Scripture that ultimately must rest on church faith in the communicative presence of God.

<sup>125</sup> *CD I/2.*, 732.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 733.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

church's faith in reading Scripture must always rest on God's gracious communicative presence rather than on the stability of a system of thought.

Fifth and finally, its use is *contributory*, and its fruitfulness is "controlled by the text and the object mirrored by the text."<sup>129</sup> It is not the aim of theological interpretation to make philosophy speak to our mind but to let the Word of God speak for itself in this particular human thought-form, inasmuch as, in this particular thought-form one encounters the Word of God, i.e., "not resisting or evading the movement to which it gives rise, but allowing it to be communicated to our own thinking."<sup>130</sup> Barth emphasises the attitude of a disciple who is teachable and willing to listen to the Word. Concretely, it is to place one's philosophy under the scrutiny of the Word of God. Barth posits, "The use of a human scheme of thought in the service of scriptural exegesis is legitimate and fruitful when it is a critical use, implying that the object of the criticism is not Scripture, but our own scheme of thought, and that Scripture is necessarily the subject of this criticism."<sup>131</sup> As long as one does not absolutely commit to a philosophical system, one should not be afraid to use any form of philosophy, and can freely appropriate it for biblical interpretation. It is in the spirit of the free appropriation of philosophy that Barth can claim, "Even from a human point of view, it is possible to regard scriptural exposition as the best and perhaps the only school of truly free human thinking - freed, that is, from all the conflicts and tyranny of systems in favour of [the Word of God]."<sup>132</sup>

### 5.3. The third moment: the act of appropriation (*applicatio*)

The third moment of interpretation, *applicatio*, cannot be separated from *explicatio* and *meditatio*, because without *applicatio* "observation can be only a historically æsthetic survey, and reflection only idle speculation, in spite of all the supposed openness to the object in both cases."<sup>133</sup> *Applicatio* is a moment when "what is declared to us must become our very own, and indeed in such a way that now we

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 734.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid. In this regard both philosophy and theology can only be *ancilla* to the Scripture, and only Scripture can be placed as *domina* in this relationship. Ibid., 735.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 736.

really do become *conscientes* (co-knower).”<sup>134</sup> An interpreter becomes “those who in virtue of what is said to them know themselves, and can, therefore, say to themselves and to others what is said to them, those who not only reflect on it but think it themselves”.<sup>135</sup> *Applicatio* means assuming the role of those who have witnessed revelation, and the interpreter attempts to let Scripture be, not only the master of one’s thinking, but the master of one’s existence.<sup>136</sup> *Applicatio* is not only an attempt to make Scripture relevant to the contemporary situations, but rather to absorb our contemporary lives into the world of the Scripture. It is ultimately *a transposition* from our existence into the existence as it is defined by Scripture.<sup>137</sup>

Barth emphasises that the moment of *applicatio* “can only be our activity in view of the free, and indeed the most proper and the most intimate activity of the Word of God itself in the form of impartation.”<sup>138</sup> The use of Scripture cannot be seen as a human using a text as an object, applying its concepts for practical life, or turning theoretical knowledge into practice. Barth insists that such a dualism of theory and practice contradicts the nature of Scripture as the Word of God. The fact that Scripture is the Word of God, means it cannot anticipate what is the message relative to one’s feeling and ideas. It is in this attitude that one expects the light of Scripture to fall upon the reader, not because one expects questions, struggles and life-contexts to be answered by Scripture but by letting the word of Scripture bring the questions and concerns to one’s life. In this way, it provides the true light to one’s life. This mode of theological reflection can only be a matter of obedience and faith in God, because in Scripture just as God spoke to the first readers, God still speaks His Word to the contemporary church. In this regard, there is a continuity of the Word between then and now, and the testimony of Scripture becomes the responsibility of the readers. Barth closes the chapter claiming strongly that,

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 737.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 739

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 736.

By faith we ourselves think what Scripture says to us, and in such a way that we must think it because it has become the determining force of our whole existence. By faith we come to the contemporaneity, homogeneity and indirect identification of the reader or hearer of Scripture with the witnesses of revelation. By faith their testimony becomes a matter of our own responsibility. Faith itself, obedient faith, but faith, and in the last resort obedient faith alone, is the activity which is demanded of us as members of the Church, the exercise of the freedom which is granted to us under the Word.<sup>139</sup>

## **6. Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that Barth's dogmatic description of the church's reading of the Bible entails a description of an ethics of interpretation. We have contrasted this ethics with methods of interpretation by elaborating a metacriticism that criticises modern methods of biblical interpretation at the level of its ethical presuppositions. The main argument of the chapter is that Barth's dogmatics provides a special form and content of interpretative ethics that is shaped by the freedom of the Word and the theological claim of the clarity of Scripture. These claims result in a distinctive form of an ethics of interpretation that is elaborated under the themes of freedom, responsibility and obedience. In the next chapter we will conclude our exploration with the achievements of the study and some important implications of the study for current discussion on the theological interpretation of Scripture and for the church's practice of reading Scripture.

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 740.

## Chapter VII: Conclusion

This thesis has demonstrated the distinctiveness of Barth's hermeneutics through a new analysis of the structure and coherence of his theological ontology. As a contribution to Barth's scholarship, it offers a new way of reading Barth's account of biblical interpretation in the light of his later theological ontology. As a contribution to broader discussions on textual interpretation, it offers Barth's theological insights in coordinating several theological loci to provide a complex account of meaning and understanding. A proper understanding of Barth's hermeneutics must therefore give due attention to the material distinctiveness of his dogmatics and the development of his theological ontology. Through a thematic reading of the *Church Dogmatics* and a close examination of its key sections, it has been shown that Barth's theology of interpretation is formed and informed by his theological ontology of the doctrines of Trinity, Christology and election. This ontology offers a theology of divine communicative presence that has a disruptive effect to modern hermeneutics, specially its ontological presuppositions, and generates an ethics of interpretation that is shaped by material dogmatics content.

In regard to Barth's scholarship, this work offers a constructive account of Barth's ontology of interpretation by utilising an interpretive approach that sets his later theological ontology to revise his earlier hermeneutics. While current discussion focuses primarily on the Trinitarian relationship between the being of God and the doctrine of election, this work has drawn the implications of such ontological revision for his hermeneutics. We have shown its relevance in relation to the task of the church to read the Bible as Scripture, particularly in maintaining the freedom and the history of God in the divine address through the text. Furthermore, it defines the locality of the church, which is not simply sociological, but primarily ontological and theological. The church is in Christ, and it means that the vision of reality within which the church must be seen is defined by the election of God to be God in Jesus Christ. This ontology defines what it means to be human, individually and collectively. The question about the being of humans is decided in the decision of God on God's being. For the church, the true meaning and understanding are originated, not in the human existence, but in the Trinitarian life of Father, Son and



Holy Spirit, specifically, in the designation of the Son as the Word of God. A theological interpretation of Scripture as such is not original but derivative of the divine life. It is not an existential event isolated from the divine life, but a re-enactment of the Trinitarian life in the life of the church.

In regard to the study of hermeneutics, this work offers a new reading of the distinctiveness of Barth's hermeneutics. In Barth's theology, the dynamic of meaning and understanding is located in the being of God while also closely related to the text of Scripture and the reality of the church. The ontology of God's being in becoming shapes a dogmatic approach to hermeneutics as a living embodiment of God's speech and action. By delineating the reality of God's communicative presence as a speech and an action, this study provides a theological description of the relationship between the presence of God in the church and the communicative action of God. But this communicative action is also a divine mystery that cannot be controlled by human method and epistemology. Yet it is not arbitrary because the mystery of divine decision is eternally determined by the history of God's relationship with the world in Jesus Christ. This complex understanding of theological ontology is capable of standing and functioning as a proper hermeneutical description for what is really taking place in the church's reading of Scripture at the ontological level, thus disregarding the need for an elaborate theory of human understanding as found in a general hermeneutic. This however does not necessitate the isolation of theological hermeneutics from general hermeneutics, but rather, an approach that consistently coordinates several doctrinal loci in its engagement with the questions of general hermeneutics.

This work defines Barth's hermeneutics as a *sachlich* hermeneutics. While this is not a new designation, this work provides a clear criterion of Barth's *sachlich* hermeneutics through a reading of his doctrine of the Word of God, and particularly draws its meaning from the threefold Word of God and the nature of the Word of God as speech, action and mystery. The term *sachlich* hermeneutics is simple enough to delineate the essence of Barth's approach, and, at the same time, the elaboration of the *Sache* of Scripture as the Word of God provides a complex understanding of the relationship between the *Sache* with human language, history and the problem of textuality. In the context of modern hermeneutics, this designation can help the

church in handling the temptation of the new frontiers in hermeneutics. Barth's hermeneutics focuses on the subject matter of the Scripture, that is, what is the real point of the text without burdening itself unnecessarily with the discussions of the author, reader and text in relation to meaning and understanding. But at the same time it can engage the complex undertaking of such discussions from the point of view of the doctrine of the Word of God. In this regard, the discussions of the humanity and the textuality of the Bible are set within the doctrine of Scripture and the work of the Holy Spirit in the church. Barth's hermeneutics shows that the church can have confidence in her doctrine by providing a proper guide for a contemporary theological hermeneutics of the Scripture.

This work has argued that the implication for such construal is an ethics of interpretation. Within this construal the church's act of interpreting the Bible is a performance of a distinctive sort of theological hermeneutics. Interpretation of Scripture is an invocation for knowledge and strength to understand and to obey the communicative and commanding presence of God in and through the Scripture. It is an act of worship. This thesis not only confirms recent proposals that ethics is integrative to Barth's dogmatics but more importantly delineates the concrete form and content of such ethics in the context of his hermeneutics. Reading the Bible as Scripture is not distinctive because of the different method of interpretation, but because of a particular ethics of reading in view of the being of the church and Scripture. This line of reasoning avoids an over-extended discussion of the role of method for church reading of Scripture and highlights the practical nature of such activity for the life of contemporary church. Reading Scripture is a simple act that suits everybody from different walks of life, but it is also a complex and serious activity in which one encounters the living and commanding presence of God. It is the disruptive presence of God that the church encounters, a presence that is communicative and commanding. This presence requires both her understanding and obedience.

The results of this study have several implications for a contemporary application of the church's reading of Scripture. The church needs to understand, above all, her theological location is in Christ. The reality of Christ is the most defining dimension of her existence. The strength of Barth's theological

hermeneutics is its insistence on placing the church in Christ as the most defining reality of her being. The contemporary reading of the Christian church must derive its power and insights from the reality of Christ. The Christ of the Gospel is the One whose life embraces all dimensions of human life. He is a cultural, a political, a historical, a sociological and an economic being. But, above all, he is a theological being. In Barth's theological ontology, this is decided in eternity by God's election. It is by realizing her being in Christ that the church is able to perform the most relevant reading of the Bible. In this way, church can read the Bible politically, historically, sociologically and culturally through her conviction of the being of Christ. The most important task of the church in reading the Bible is not to extract its textual meaning for contemporary application, but to believe in Christ as the true being of the church. By being faithful to this confession, the church is well equipped for the contemporary challenges of her faith.

Second, the voice of Scripture is the speech of God. The theological task of reading the Scripture is to listen to the voice of God who defines human existence in the decision of God to be God in Jesus Christ. He is the Word of God incarnated, not only in the eternal decision, but also in his taking sides with humanity. The reading of the Bible must be aimed at listening to the voice of God who in Jesus Christ represents the eternal voice of God in taking sides with humanity. Only the speech of God can truly represent the voices of human beings. Barth's hermeneutics represents an insightful reflection upon this calling.

Third, Barth's theological hermeneutics can provide a model for an engagement with the current development of the theological interpretation of Scripture. This study shows the insightful results of coordinating several Christian doctrines for a constructive account of meaning and understanding. The construal of modern theological interpretation is shaped by the vision of reality in which one construes an interpretative event. In this regard, this study provides a theologically distinctive approach for engaging the contemporary discussion. Specifically, the critical point is not only conceptual, but more importantly, ontological, where one presupposes the interpretation is taking place, and ethical, how one should engage with the content and the voices of Scripture.

Finally, the disruptive presence of God is a presence that continues to challenge the life of the church in reading the Bible as Scripture. Ultimately, it is the Word of God that the church must understand and obey. Barth's hermeneutics points out that the Word of God remains a disruptive presence that brings historical continuity and discontinuity between the Bible, traditions and the church's reading. It is God's communicative and commanding presence that makes the church's reading of the Bible a truly distinctive act. Barth's hermeneutics suggests that the church must continue to have faith that the most crucial aspect of textual meaning and understanding is the decision of God to speak again and again to the church. As such, the most crucial act in the church's reading of Scripture is to invoke God's mercy, that through a faithful reading of the text, the church can listen in a fresh new way the Word of God in and through the human words.

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