Creeds and bishops may have helped in the past and may have value in the present, but they are not enough and may even do more harm than good (may one assume that Bishop John Shelby Spong says the creed in the liturgy?). So Barth and evangelicals may find common cause in a commitment to a very different catholicity and a very different ecclesial concreteness than the high church and highly centralized and hierarchical ecclesiology espoused by the so-called "evangelical catholics" of today, one that focuses on concrete congregational existence rather than institutional offices and structures, as well as one that is eschatological, rather than romantic, regarding questions of ecumenism.[74]

The final similarity between Barth and evangelicals is that both define the church not only by its self-constitutive practices (as does the Augsburg Confession, for example) but make mission as evangelism and service central to the church's existence, though for evangelicals mission is often thought of as what the church *does,* whereas for Barth's actualistic ecclesiology mission is what the church *is.*[75] Nevertheless, evangelicals, who often are much better in their practice than their theory, would no doubt completely concur with Barth's statement that "the Church is either a missionary Church or it is no church at all."[76] Evangelicals indeed now seem to live this out more than their mainline counterparts.

Barth himself regretted that this missionary impulse was not to be found in the magisterial churches of his day, while readily evident in the sects, as he referred to them.[77] But the end of Christendom, which Barth saw as occurring around him, has now come to pass in the West, so it is perhaps best to retire Ernst Troeltsch's categories once and for all and recognize similarities among all like-minded missional Christians. And when we retire such categories, perhaps this too can remove one more barrier to making conversations between Barth and modern evangelicals possible and productive.

74. For such an example of an evangelical-catholic approach, see Carl Braaten, "The Special Ministry of the Ordained," in *Marks of the Body of Christ,* ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 123-36. Braaten has little regard for evangelicalism, it seems (see 134). For a very different assessment of episcopal ministry than Braaten's by one within both the high church and evangelical traditions, see Paul F. M. Zahl, "Up the Creek: Paddling in the Maelstrom of the Mainline," in *Pilgrims on the Sawdust Trail,* 177-81; see also his response to the articles in *Evangelical Ecclesiology,* 213-16.

75. See *CD* IV/3.2, esp. 795-96.

76. *CD* III/3, 64. Barth claimed to have recovered this missionary impulse not from magisterial Protestantism, but from Anabaptism and Pietism (*CD* IV/3.1, 11-38, esp. 25 and 28).

77. *CD* III/4, 505.



# The Being and Act of the Church: Barth and the Future of Evangelical Ecclesiology

*Keith L. Johnson*

## I. The Evangelical Problem

In *The Younger Evangelicals,* Robert Webber provides an often surprising account of the changing commitments of the most recent generation of evangelical scholars and church leaders. One shift that he notes among these younger evangelicals is their desire for "a more visible concept of the church."[1] This desire stems, in part, from their reaction against what they perceive as the overly individualistic tendencies of modern evangelicalism. They believe that these tendencies lead to the same kind of "ahistoricism and spiritual subjectivism" that Philip Schaff called "the great disease which has fastened itself upon the heart of Protestantism."[2] Younger evangelicals have dedicated themselves to fighting this disease. Right doctrine and a commitment to evangelism are no longer enough; they want, in Webber's words, "an embodied presence of God's reign in an earthed community."[3] To find it, they are turning to high forms of liturgy, ancient spiritual practices, sacra-

1. Robert Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 109.

2. Both citations are found in D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 14. Also see Philip Schaff, *The Principle of Protestantism,* trans. John Nevin (Chambersburg, PA: Publication Office of the German Reformed Church, 1845), 107. Williams's book can be read as an example of the trend Webber describes.

3. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals,* 109.

mental worship, and a renewed engagement with the historic faith through catechisms and confessions. They are, in other words, looking beyond the evangelical tradition for resources that supply new and more concrete forms for their faith and the ministry of their churches.

When seen in the context of this trend, the recent conversion of Evangelical Theological Society President Francis Beckwith to Roman Catholicism is not as surprising as it first appears. As he tells it, his journey toward Rome began with the sense that something wasn't right with his faith. He responded by turning to the Church Fathers, to books like Mark Noll's *Is the Reformation Over?*, and to the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*.[4] These sources led him to engage more deeply with Catholic theology, and eventually, with the Roman Catholic Church itself. In Catholicism he found the resources to overcome the deficiencies he perceived in evangelicalism. Here is how he describes the reasoning behind his conversion:

> The Catholic Church frames the Christian life as one in which you must exercise virtue — not because virtue saves you, but because that's the way God's grace gets manifested. As an evangelical, even when I talked about sanctification and wanted to practice it, it seemed as if I didn't have a good enough incentive to do so. Now there's a kind of theological framework, and it doesn't say my salvation depends on me, but it says my virtue counts for something. It's important to allow the grace of God to be exercised through your actions. The evangelical emphasis on the moral life forms my Catholic practice with an added incentive. That was liberating to me.[5]

Beckwith's problem of not having "a good enough incentive" to live a sanctified life is shared by many evangelicals. The problem is a theological one, and it stems from a failure to properly situate the church in the doctrine of God.[6] If we see our justification exclusively as a forensic event

4. See the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); Mark Noll and Carolyn Nystrom, *Is the Reformation Over? An Evangelical Assessment of Contemporary Roman Catholicism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

5. This quotation is taken from an interview from May 9, 2007, on the *Christianity Today* website.

6. John Webster has often made this point. For example: "A properly evangelical ecclesiology has to take its place within the scope of doctrinal affirmations which spell out the Christian confession of God, Christ, the Spirit, election, reconciliation, sanctification and the rest." See John Webster, "The Visible Attests the Invisible," in *The Community of the Word: Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology*, ed. Mark Husbands and Daniel B. Treier (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 112.





whose effects are felt only beyond our concrete and historical existence, then we will fail to see that God's justifying work includes in itself a subjective correlate that touches our lives here and now.[7] In other words, if we fail to articulate a clear line of sight between our justification in Christ and what we are to *do* as the church, then we will fail to understand why what we do in the church really *matters*. All that we will have left to us is what Beckwith calls "the moral life" — and that, as evangelicals have learned, cannot sustain a church.

From one angle, then, Beckwith's conversion seems like the logical outworking of the younger evangelical desire to overcome their individualistic tendencies with a more "visible" church. This visible structure is a hallmark of the Roman Catholic Church; as participants in the very historical body of Christ, one's life in the Church *matters*, and one's actions in the church "count for something" in one's faith.[8] But is there a Protestant way to accomplish the same goal? Can we, in other words, overcome evangelical ecclesiological deficiencies without going the way of younger evangelicals like Beckwith? My paper argues that Karl Barth offers a possible solution to our dilemma, and that this solution is preferable to the one Beckwith chose. To establish this claim, however, I'm going to have to address a persistent criticism of Barth's ecclesiology — a criticism similar to the one younger evangelicals level against their own tradition. Only then will we be in a position to see what Barth has to offer.

## II. Criticism of Barth's "Bifurcated" Ecclesiology

The criticism in its most common form is that Barth has a "bifurcated" ecclesiology. The roots of this critique can be found in some of Barth's earliest critics, but more recent manifestations are found in the work of Nicholas

7. Karl Barth makes this point: "We cannot be content merely with that foreordination and predisposition of man for his vocation, as though it were not necessary for his own vocation also to take place as an event in his own life. To do this is tantamount to thinking that the star which guided the wise men to Bethlehem finally shone upon an empty manger." See *CD* IV/3.2, 497-500.

8. Barth himself recognized this point; see Karl Barth, "Roman Catholicism: A Question to the Protestant Church," in *Theology and Church*, ed. T. F. Torrance (London: SCM Press, 1928), 314.

Healy, Stanley Hauerwas, Joseph Mangina, and Reinhard Hütter.[9] Hütter's critique prompts the most interest, because his is the most incisive. He worries that Barth offers us "a theology without any tangible ecclesial roots."[10] It is an ecclesiology, he argues, which exists in "an endless dialectical play" between two rejected alternatives without ever offering an "ecclesially concrete" option of its own.[11]

We find this "dialectical play" in the opening pages of *Church Dogmatics* I/1. On one side of the ecclesial spectrum is Neo-Protestantism. In this view, Barth argues, the church exists as a specific actualization of "something generally human."[12] We find the prime example in Friedrich Schleiermacher's *Glaubenslehre,* where he describes the church as "nothing but a communion or association relating to religion or piety"[13] and as "a society which originates only through free human action and which can only through such continue to exist."[14] Barth rejects this ecclesiology because it understands the church in terms of "human possibility" and "the general historicity of human existence" rather than from "the acting of God himself."[15]

On the other side of the spectrum is Roman Catholicism. Catholic ecclesiology holds that the church is not a human possibility but a divinely established institution. However, Barth argues, the church has this status only because Jesus Christ is "absorbed into the existence of the Church, and is thus ultimately restricted and conditioned by certain concrete forms."[16] The result of this absorption is that the divine act is changed "into that

9. See Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001); Nicholas M. Healy, "The logic of Karl Barth's ecclesiology: analysis, assessment, and proposed modifications," *Modern Theology* 10, no. 3 (1994); Reinhard Hütter, "Karl Barth's 'Dialectical Catholicity': *Sic et Non*," *Modern Theology* 16, no. 2 (2000); idem, *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice,* trans. D. Scott (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

10. Hütter, "Karl Barth's 'Dialectical Catholicity,'" 144.

11. Ibid., 143. For a similar analysis, see John G. Flett, "God is a Missionary God: *Missio Dei,* Karl Barth, and the Doctrine of the Trinity" (PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 2007), 68-78.

12. *CD* I/1, 38. This view, Barth says, "understands the being of the Church and itself decisively as a definition of the reality of man, of piety."

13. Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith,* ed. H. R. Macintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928), 5.

14. Ibid., 3. Barth points out that these definitions "have their origins in English Congregationalism" and "they and they alone could authorize Schleiermacher to commence his basic work of introduction with statements borrowed from ethics." See *CD* I/1, 38.

15. *CD* I/1, 38-39.

16. Ibid., 40.





which is enclosed into the reality of the Church," meaning that what should be a "personal act of divine address" instead has become "a constantly available relationship."[17] For Barth, this means that grace has become nature, and "the action of God immediately disappears and is taken up into the action of the recipient of grace."[18]

Rejecting both alternatives, Barth offers a third option: the church as "*actus purus.*" The church as *actus purus* emphasizes that the church results from a divine act "comprehensible only from and through itself."[19] The church's existence, in other words, results from the free action of God rather than from historical and cultural factors.[20] The church as *actus purus* distinguishes the church's ministry from the divine act. The being of the church, Barth argues, results from "an event of personal address" rather than "a continuously available relationship" or "a transmitted material condition."[21] Thus, in contrast to the positions on both ends of the spectrum, Barth insists both that the church "depends on God's ongoing act" for its being (*contra* Neo-Protestantism), and that "God does not divest himself into the historical contingency of the church" in this act (*contra* Roman Catholicism).[22]

Hütter criticizes this third option for subsisting in a "ceaseless critical oscillation" between the two rejected alternatives, leaving Barth's church a theological and historical impossibility.[23] If the true identity of the church rests on God's free act — and if this act is something the church receives "moment by moment" in the event of God's personal address — then the true meaning of the church is "something which in no way and to no degree subsists" in the church itself.[24] By definition, therefore, Barth's church "cannot be embodied."[25] While Barth's church witnesses to Christ, it does not serve as "the means through which believers begin to participate in the new life [Christ] brings," and the result is a "hiatus between the church (in a full theological sense) and the ordinary, empirical practices of the Christian community across time."[26] Barth's church, in other words, is an abstraction.

17. Ibid., 41.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. For this insight, see Flett, "God is a Missionary God," 70.

21. *CD* I/1, 41.

22. Flett, "God is a Missionary God," 69.

23. Hütter, "Karl Barth's 'Dialectical Catholicity,'" 143.

24. Ibid., 147.

25. Ibid.

26. Joseph L. Mangina, "Bearing the marks of Jesus: The church in the economy of sal-

The root of the problem, Hütter contends, lies in Barth's weak pneumatology. Barth's ecclesiology is predicated upon "a strict *diastasis* between Spirit and institution."[27] This is what is meant by the charge of a "bifurcated" ecclesiology. A breach exists between divine and human action in the church so that — to employ Beckwith's phrase — human action doesn't "count for something" in the church. An action "counts" in this view when it makes a real contribution to the church's true identity, meaning, or purpose, and for Hütter, this is precisely what Barth's ecclesiology does not allow. This problem results from Barth's depiction of the Holy Spirit as simply "Christ's mode of action," who is thus "accorded no work of its own in relation to church doctrine" or practices.[28] In other words, Barth offers us a disembodied and deficient pneumatology, and because he "never quite brings himself to explain how our human agency is involved in the Spirit's work," it is unclear how human participation in the church makes any difference, or "counts," at all.[29]

As an alternative, Hütter offers an ecclesiology in which the church exists as a "way of life, i.e., a distinct set of practices interwoven with normative beliefs, concretely and distinctly embodied."[30] He accomplishes this by means of a "*pneumatological enhypostasis* of the core church practices."[31] The heart of this proposal is the idea that God binds himself to the church by the Spirit in such a way that the Spirit "is identical with distinct practices or activities, institutions, offices, and doctrines" of the church.[32] "The Holy

vation in Barth and Hauerwas," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 52, no. 3 (1999): 270. Mangina draws similar conclusions about Barth as Hütter does in his work, but he does not follow Hütter's proposed alternative.

27. Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things*, 115.

28. Ibid., 113.

29. This quotation is from Stanley Hauerwas, who shares the same concern. See Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe*, 145. Hütter articulates his concern this way: "Barth is unable to interpret or render ecclesiologically fruitful in any pneumatologically relevant fashion what he calls the 'mediate forms', and his development of the relational nexus of church, church doctrine, and theology ultimately remains ecclesiologically unstable because the pneumatology itself remains deficient." See Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things*, 113. For similar thoughts, see Mangina, "Bearing the marks of Jesus," 192.

30. Hütter, "Karl Barth's 'Dialectical Catholicity,'" 149.

31. Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things*, 133.

32. Ibid., 119. He says: "In the form of these core practices, the church subsists enhypostatically in the Holy Spirit, and through them the Holy Spirit performs its economic mission, namely, the eschatological re-creation of humanity, a re-creation whose beginning is faith and whose growth is growth in faith, transforming human beings precisely in and through ongoing affliction by drawing them into God's eschatological communion." See ibid., 133.





Spirit is thus realized not 'spiritualistically' in the immediacy of the inspiration of the Spirit into individual religious consciousnesses, but in the form of concrete church practices which as such are to be understood as the gift of the Spirit in the service of God's economy of salvation."[33] No breach exists, therefore, between divine and human action in these church practices. Rather, because these practices "inhere in the salvific-economic mission of the Spirit,"[34] the church serves as the "organ of actualization" of this mission.[35] This makes the church both an embodied and indispensable reality, and thus its true identity is not located in something beyond itself, but precisely in those ecclesial practices "through which the Spirit does his sanctifying work."[36] In a very real sense, then, human action "counts for something" in this view.

Hütter is not alone in proposing an ecclesiology of this sort. John Milbank, a central proponent of the Radical Orthodoxy that Robert Webber regards as so attractive to younger evangelicals, speaks similarly of a "hypostatic descent of the Spirit" in the church.[37] Beckwith may or may not hold this precise view, but his implicit critique of evangelical ecclesiology shares the same theological roots. His movement toward an embodied and sacramental ecclesiology, his shift to a Roman Catholic doctrine of justification in which his virtue plays a part in God's salvific purpose for his life, and his desire that his actions in the church "count for something" follow the same path taken by Hütter against Barth. And as we have seen, there are many other evangelicals on the same road.

33. Ibid., 127.

34. Ibid., 133.

35. Ibid., 126. He emphasizes that this view implies that cooperation takes place between God and the human so that the human is "present fully as agent . . . *actively* present in praise, confession, prayer, obedience, and discipleship." See ibid., 125.

36. Hütter, "Karl Barth's 'Dialectical Catholicity,'" 150. Consequently, he argues, we must see the church existence as participating in the triune communion: "The church at once becomes transparent as both the body of Christ and as a creation of the Holy Spirit; bearing the eschatological earnest of the Holy Spirit itself, it already receives a portion in the life of the triune God." See Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things*, 119.

37. John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 105. He makes a similar claim earlier in the book: "It is for this reason that the gift of intrahuman forgiveness offered by the whole Trinity to Christ's humanity is passed on by Christ to us as the hypostatic presence amongst us in time of the Holy Spirit, the bond of exchange and mutual giving within the Trinity. As participators through the Sacraments and membership of the body of Christ in the divine humanity, we now also begin to be capable of a forgiveness on sufficient authority and without taint of rancor" (ibid., 62). See also ibid., 41-42, 100, 105, 133, and 208. See Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 72-75.

The reason for this trend may lie in the perception among younger evangelicals that the only solution to their problems rests in an ecclesiology of Hütter's sort. That is, if the choices are either (a) a direct connection between our ecclesial practices and divine action — such as we see in Hütter's proposal — or (b) no connection at all between our ecclesial practices and divine action — such as we see in the evangelical status quo — then the decision to move in Hütter's direction makes sense. But is there another option? Can we establish a connection between divine and human action in the church so we can say our actions in the church "count for something" in some sense? Or, to put it another way, can we connect the church as God's act to the church as an earthly-historical community in some other way than by moving in the direction in which Hütter and many evangelicals are traveling?

I believe that such an alternative is not only possible but that Barth provides it. Barth's construal of the connection between divine and human action, however, will not meet Hütter's criteria for the kind of connection that is necessary. That is, while human action "counts" in Barth's view, it does not "count" in the way Hütter wants it to. It does "count" enough, however, to complicate Hütter's critique. And as we will see, the implications of Hütter's — and by extension, Beckwith's — vision for the church make their option less attractive for evangelicals than it first appears; conversely, the strength of Barth's account corresponds to the best insights of the evangelical tradition. To understand why this is the case, we have to venture into the center of Barth's theology.

## III. Barth and the *concursus Dei*

Barth, as we have seen, believes that the church is an *actus purus*, a divine action, and it exists "only in the power of the divine decision, act, and revelation accomplished and effective in Jesus Christ."[38] This means that the church must not be understood as a natural state of affairs but as a divinely established reality; and yet it is not a reality which takes divine properties upon itself, but rather, it is one that remains at all times "an earthly-historical event."[39] This distinction raises our question: how can this divinely established reality be an "earthly-historical event" at the same time? In other words, how can the existence of the church be a divine action and not be divorced in some sense from the human beings who make it up? The answer to this question will go to the heart of addressing Hütter's critique. For that, we need to spell out Barth's understanding of the relationship between divine and human action found in his account of the *concursus Dei* in *CD* III/3. This section is important because Barth's ecclesiology can be understood rightly only in light of what he says here.

We will proceed first by outlining Barth's understanding of the *concursus Dei*, and then we will put this doctrine to the test in the context of the church. This test will show that, far from advocating a bifurcated ecclesiology, Barth seeks to articulate a particular kind of visibility, one that corresponds historically to the divine and human fellowship completed once and for all in the being and work of Jesus Christ. As such, Barth's ecclesiology provides a solution to the problems younger evangelicals find in evangelicalism that is both distinct from and preferable to the one offered by Beckwith or Hütter. It also raises questions about whether their kind of ecclesiological visibility is an attractive option for evangelicals at all.

The *concursus Dei* is the doctrine that attempts to describe the relation of two seemingly incompatible notions: "the lordship of God" and the "free and autonomous activity of the creature."[40] The relation between the two is not obvious, and for that reason Barth says that the doctrine's formulation is "not an assertion but a confession."[41] We must not "begin with empty concepts," he insists, "but with concepts which are already filled out with Christian meaning."[42] In other words, if we want to know what continuity between divine and human action looks like, then we must proceed from the right theological ground. This is an important point, given that many of Barth's critics presuppose what continuity between divine and human ac-

38. *CD* IV/3.2, 727. Paul Nimmo puts this idea well: "For Barth, then, the Church simply *is* in the event of divine action in which God lets people live as servants of God, and in which they respond accordingly." See Paul T. Nimmo, *Being in Action: The Theological Shape of Barth's Ethical Vision* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2007), 68.

39. *CD* IV/2, 696.

40. *CD* III/3, 90.

41. Ibid., 142. On this point, George Hunsinger says that this doctrine "presents not a quandary to be solved, but a miracle to be respected and a mystery to be revered." Hence, the "theologian's job, accordingly, is not to explain away the miracle or resolve the mystery, but rather to describe an event that ultimately defies explanation." It is thus an event "absolutely incomprehensible on any terms other than its own, and that can only be known from its actual occurrence. It cannot be deduced from any principle, normalized by any law, or divested of its incomprehensibility by any conceptual scheme." See George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 185-224.

42. *CD* III/3, 117.

tion must look like and then criticize Barth because his understanding of divine and human action does not fit their preconceptions. There is, however, more than one way to think about divine-human continuity, and one's starting point matters a great deal. For Barth, the only correct theological starting point is God's act in Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit.[43] This question would be "insuperably difficult," he says, if we only had "the framework of a general philosophy" from which to derive our answer.[44] But we do not have a philosophy: we have God's act of revelation.

Barth's use of the phrase *actus purus et singularis* comes to mind here.[45] When we refer to God's act, we refer to the specific act of the election of Jesus Christ in the covenant of grace, and as such, our particular election in him. This is part of the reason why, for Barth, the *concursus Dei* can only be considered in light of the doctrine of election. When we start with Christ, we see that the lordship of God over the creature is the "execution of the election of grace resolved and fulfilled by God from all eternity."[46] This covenant of grace provides the specific framework from which the relationship of divine and human action must be considered. It cannot be regarded from any other basis.

Two implications follow from this connection between election and *concursus* for Barth. First, we must say that all human history, including the action of autonomous human beings, finds its meaning and purpose in God's electing act. We simply do not exist apart from God's determination to be God-for-us, and this determination shapes, orders, and forms every aspect of our lives. All creation, Barth says, "took place on the basis of this purposed covenant and with a view to its execution," and as a result, "the meaning of the continued existence of the creature, and therefore the purpose of its history, is that this covenant will and work of God begun in creation should have its course and reach its goal."[47] This means, for Barth, that "the history of the covenant of grace accompanies the act of the creature from first to last."[48] Every time a creature acts, Barth says, "God is there as the One

43. Ibid., 141.

44. Ibid., 139.

45. See *CD* II/1, 264ff.

46. *CD* III/3, 36.

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid., 92. Nimmo thus is right to argue that "*concursus Dei* is not only noetically revealed in Jesus Christ: it is also ontically constituted and teleologically directed in the eternal election of Jesus Christ." See Paul T. Nimmo, "Karl Barth and the *concursus Dei* — A Chalcedonianism Too Far?" *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9, no. 1 (2007): 60.





who has already loved it, who has already undertaken to save and glorify it, who in this sense and to this end has already worked even before it itself began to work, even before the conditions, and the pre-conditions, and pre-pre-conditions of its working were laid down."[49]

This first implication of the connection between election and *concursus* leads to the second: when we talk about the "execution of the election of grace," we are talking about the specific and particular will of God for the reconciliation of human beings.[50] Barth says that "when we say 'the will of God' we have to understand His fatherly good-will, His decree of grace in Jesus Christ, the mercy in which from all eternity He undertook to save the creature, and to give it eternal life in fellowship with Himself."[51] The doctrine of the *concursus Dei*, therefore, "seeks to explain how it is that God executes *this* [specific] will in time."[52] For Barth, this means that we cannot say that God positively wills everything that human creatures will. For example, God does not will the evil that creatures do, nor does God actively will every particular thing that takes place in nature or history. He wills "all things" only in the sense that he "wills this world and its history *as the context* in which the covenant of grace is played out."[53] Hence, Barth says, God's "*causare* consists, and consists *only*, in the fact that He bends [human beings'] activity to the execution of His own will which is His will of grace, subordinating their operations to the specific operation which constitutes the history of the covenant of grace."[54]

These two implications from the doctrine of election lay the groundwork for two seemingly contradictory assertions Barth makes in the

49. *CD* III/3, 119. See also ibid., 92, where Barth explains further: when a creature acts, "the gracious will of God is executed in that which borders upon it, in its environment, in the nexus of being in which it has its duration. Whatever that may or may not mean, the creature is not alone on the way, but as it goes it is accompanied by God, by the God who is this Lord." On this point, John Webster notes: "That history simply is, anterior to all human choosing; it is a condition in which we find ourselves, and not something which we bring about through an act of will." The reality of human existence, as Barth says, is that before the very first human acted "God had already acted, offering his grace, making his mercy in Jesus Christ operative and effective to the creature, revealing the majesty of his beloved Son." The same is true for every creature. See John Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 123.

50. For this insight, see Bruce L. McCormack, "The Actuality of God: Karl Barth in Conversation with Open Theism," in *Engaging the Doctrine of God*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 223-31.

51. *CD* III/3, 117; cited in McCormack, "The Actuality of God," 225.

52. McCormack, "The Actuality of God," 228.

53. Ibid., 225.

54. *CD* III/3, 105; cited in McCormack, "The Actuality of God," 228.

*concursus Dei* about the relationship between divine and human action. The first assertion is that while we cannot consider human action apart from its relation to divine action, this relation does not undermine the integrity of this action *as a human action.*[55] How are we to understand this idea? From Barth's doctrine of election, we know he understands the relationship between God and humanity in terms of "two distinct aspects": God's election to be Lord and Helper of humanity and, included in this election, the corresponding election of humanity to be "witnesses of God's glory."[56] This, Barth argues, means that "the being and essence and activity of God as the Lord of the covenant between Himself and man includes a relationship to the being and essence and activity of man" — the one demands the other.[57]

Note that there is a "relationship" between the two, not a blending of their "being and essence and activity." Barth believes that even though human actions "have no significance or value apart from God's covenant will," we must insist that they remain *human* actions which "constitute an occurrence distinct from the activity of God."[58] The covenant of grace gives these actions their form, but it does not violate the integrity of these actions as *creaturely* actions.[59] God, Barth says, "does not play the part of the tyrant" toward the creature.[60] "Man is not nothing. He is God's man. He is accepted by God. He is recognized as himself a free subject, a subject who has been made free once and for all by his restoration as the faithful covenant partner of God."[61] In some sense, then, Barth believes that God works *with* the creature by making the creature a partner in his covenant. He explains:

> If God had willed to act alone, or by means of non-autonomous agents or instruments, there would have been no need to institute a covenant, and

55. *CD* III/3, 122.

56. See Nimmo, *Being in Action*, 10.

57. *CD* II/2, 511; cited in Nimmo, *Being in Action*, 11.

58. *CD* III/3, 36; cited in Nimmo, "Karl Barth and the *concursus Dei*," 66.

59. See *CD* III/3, 122.

60. Ibid., 92.

61. *CD* IV/1, 89-90. Webster provides a helpful explanation of what Barth means by "freedom": "Freedom is not — as it has come to be in modernity — a free-standing, quasi-absolute reality which both characterizes and validates the unique dignity of the human person. Rather, freedom is consent to a given order or reality which encloses human history, an order which is at one and the same time a loving summons to joyful action in accordance with itself, and a judgment against our attempts to be ourselves by somehow escaping from or suspending its givenness. Freedom is the real possibility given to me by necessity." See Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology*, 112.





> the fulfillment of his will in creation need not have taken the form of a covenant-history. Again, grace would no longer be grace if its exercise consisted only in the elimination or suppression as autonomous subject of the one to whom it was extended. The gracious God acts not only *towards* the creature but also — however we explain it in detail — *with* the creature.[62]

Hence, Barth believes that the covenant of grace — because it is a covenant of *grace* — "ensures that the creature in the *concursus* retains its own identity and integrity and full personhood."[63] The creature, Barth says, is "allowed to be, and live, and work, and occupy [its] own sphere, and exercise [its] own effect upon [its] environment, and fulfil the circle of [its] own destiny."[64]

Barth's second assertion — the one which seemingly contradicts the first — takes the form of a caution. He insists that something else must be said about the relationship between God and the human: "man is an active, not an inactive recipient," he says, "yet even in his activity he is still a *recipient.*"[65] In this relation, "the creature does not have [just] any kind of companion. *God* is with it . . . [and God] is so as the sovereign and almighty Lord."[66] Barth's point is that God's actions are not conditioned by God's creatures: God "would not be God at all . . . if there were a single point where He was absent or inactive, or only partly active, or restricted in his action."[67] Hence, when we say that God accompanies and cooperates with us in the covenant of grace, we also must say that "His activity determines our activity even to its most intimate depths."[68] Barth says: "As He Himself enters the creaturely sphere — and He does not cease to do this, but does it in the slightest movement of a leaf in the wind — His will is accomplished directly and His decisions are made and fulfilled in all creaturely occurrence both great and small."[69] In other words, because divine action "conditions abso-

62. *CD* III/3, 93. This point builds upon an earlier affirmation: "The fact that the divine lordship extends beyond the creation of the creature means also and primarily that he maintains it in its own actuality, that he gives it space and opportunity for its own work, for its own being in action, for its own autonomous activity." See ibid., 91.

63. Nimmo, "Karl Barth and the *concursus Dei*," 66.

64. *CD* III/3, 148.

65. Karl Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics IV, 4: Lecture Fragments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 29.

66. *CD* III/3, 132.

67. Ibid., 133.

68. Ibid., 132.

69. Ibid., 133.

lutely the activity of the creature,"[70] we must say that "the will of God is unconditionally and irresistibly fulfilled" in this activity.[71] Every human action stands under the sovereign will of God in his covenant of grace, and thus, every action serves the purposes of God's covenant because the divine will cannot be conditioned by anything other than God himself. As a result, Barth asserts that "we have to understand the activity of God and that of the creature as a single action."[72] What he means by this assertion is that, within the context of the covenant of grace, God "is so present in the activity of the creature, and present with such sovereignty and almighty power, that His own action takes place in and with and over the activity of the creature."[73]

How are we to make sense of these seemingly contradictory assertions? How are we to understand that, on the one hand, God's covenant of grace ensures the integrity of human beings as autonomous creatures, but on the other hand, God accompanies the creature as its *Lord* so that divine activity and creaturely activity are united as a single action? Barth's answer to this question brings us into the heart of the *concursus,* and it also brings us to the heart of his vision for how human action might "count for something" in the church. He argues that, in the relationship between divine and human action, "we have to do with the mystery of grace in the confrontation and encounter of two subjects who cannot be compared and [who] do not fall under any one master-concept."[74] We make a mistake if we think of God and creature as "two species of the same genus."[75] No — when God acts, Barth says, his work "is not merely done after a higher and superior fashion, but within a completely different order."[76]

What does this claim mean? Barth insists that it does not mean that God simply provides the hidden meaning or content of all human action, as if there were two parallel lines with the higher one determining the meaning of the lower one.[77] It also does not mean that in these actions the Creator be-

70. Ibid., 113.
71. Ibid., 117.
72. Ibid., 132.
73. Ibid.
74. Ibid., 135.
75. Ibid., 102.
76. Ibid., 135.
77. Ibid., 133. The problem is that this view posits God's action merely as a "higher or absolute force on beings whose force is less." This would mean that God and the human stand in ontological continuity with one another because their action, while differing in potency, occurs on the same plane. See *CD* III/3, 135-36.





comes a creature, or the reverse, that a creature becomes the Creator. The *concursus* is a miracle, but it is not a repetition of the miracle of the incarnation.[78] Rather, Barth says, it means that

> God, the only true God, so loved the world in His election of grace that in fulfillment of the covenant of grace instituted at the creation He willed to become a creature, and did in fact become a creature, in order to be its Saviour. And this same God accepts the creature even apart from the history of the covenant and its fulfillment. He takes it to Himself as such and in general in such sort that He co-operates with it, preceding, accompanying, and following all its being and activity, so that all the activity of the creature is primarily and simultaneously and subsequently His own activity, and therefore a part of the actualisation of His own will revealed and triumphant in Jesus Christ.[79]

We can summarize this claim by saying that there is a "genuine antithesis" between God and creature in the midst of a "genuine encounter" between them. They remain distinct subjects utterly unlike one another, each with its own integrity, and yet within the context of the covenant of grace, the divine action is fulfilled "in, with and over" the human action. This means for Barth that there is a true continuity between divine and human action, but it also means — and this is an important point — that this continuity is not a static or permanently available one. No, this continuity occurs in the *event* of divine act and human correspondence, in the specific and particular encounter of two utterly distinct subjects. These encounters, Barth says, are "not therefore so many 'cases' in the one rule, but *individual events* which have their own importance and have to be considered in and for themselves."[80]

Barth describes these encounters as events of Word and Spirit, and this pattern helps us grasp his explanation of how this divine-human encounter works. In these events, there is a genuine encounter between two distinct subjects, but they are subjects who relate to one another in a particular order — an order which implies a definite responsibility on the part of the human

78. As Barth says elsewhere: "It is one thing that God is present in and with everything that is and occurs, that in Him we live and move and have our being . . . but it is quite another that He Himself became and is man. Even this union and unity cannot therefore be compared or exchanged with the *unio personalis* in Jesus Christ." Hence, as Nimmo argues, "the encounter between two beings in actualization and two natures in actualization is qualitatively different." See *CD* IV/2, 53, and Nimmo, "Karl Barth and the *concursus Dei*," 66.
79. *CD* III/3, 105.
80. Ibid., 138.

subject. Barth says: "the free God elects and wills. The free man must elect and will what God elects and wills. God is the giver and man is the recipient."[81] "God is gracious to man," Barth says, "not man to God. And man is responsible and indebted to God, not God to man."[82] This means that "God directs, orders, and commands, while man can exercise his responsibility only by obeying God's command. That God might withhold his direction and man [withhold] his obedience is not foreseen in the covenant of grace."[83]

This pattern and order of the divine act on the one hand, and human correspondence to it on the other, reveals what Barth has in mind when he employs Word and Spirit to describe the *concursus*. On the basis of this pattern, he says that there is a continuity of action between God and the creature because God "is in both cases the one who acts, in the one case as Word and the other as Spirit."[84] At all moments, however, the genuine antithesis between God and creature remains intact, because even as their actions stand in continuity in this event, no "absorption or assimilation of creaturely activity into the divine" occurs.[85] God remains God and acts as God; the creature remains creature and acts as creature. They exist in a relation of command and obedience, but it remains at all times a relation between distinct subjects. Thus, Barth believes that because the creature's act occurs in correspondence to the Word and as a result of the Spirit's awakening, life-giving, and summoning power, we can say that her creaturely action is an action of the Spirit.[86] Defining human action in this way, Barth says, does not prejudice the autonomy, freedom, responsibility, or genuineness of the human's actions.[87] The Holy Spirit does not overpower the human in this event, because while she acts in the space cleared for her by the Spirit, she really *is* the one who acts, and she does so *as a creature* in free obedience

81. Barth, *The Christian Life*, 29.

82. Ibid., 27.

83. Ibid., 29. He elaborates further: "Also excluded is that in the dealings between God and man there might be something other than command and obedience, namely, negotiable arrangements and agreements reached on the same plane, a kind of contract or fellowship in which the definite order of first and second is either eliminated or even reversed."

84. *CD* III/3, 142.

85. Ibid., 149.

86. Barth clarifies this point in a later volume: "man's faith can no more dissolve into a divine act than God can dissolve into the human act of faith. Even in their unity in Jesus Christ himself, God does not cease to be God nor man to be man." See Barth, *The Christian Life*, 27-28.

87. *CD* III/3, 144.





to the demands of God's Word.[88] Likewise, Barth says, the Spirit does not impart "a quality or quantity of the divine essence or operation to the creature and its activity" in this event.[89] Making human action the *enhypostasis* of the Spirit, for example, would create a unity of action, but it would undermine both the distinction between God and creature, and the nature of this unity as an event with two distinct aspects. It would be a move, in other words, impossible on the soil of Barth's covenant of grace.

Thus, because it is viewed in terms of an event of encounter between two distinct subjects, Barth believes we can say that in Word and Spirit the activity of God and that of the creature stand in continuity with one another; but we cannot say either that God simply overpowers the creature or that there is a permanent or readily available union of divine and human action. To think in such terms, Barth says, would be "to forget that the activity of God is the activity of his continually free grace, an activity from above downwards, a condescension in which God is beyond comparison."[90] It would also be, he says, to forget that while "any identification, comparison, or interchange of God and man is ruled out, so is any separation between them. In the covenant of grace [God and the human] are distinct partners, but precisely in their distinction they are partners who are inseparably bound to one another."[91]

To summarize: in the *concursus*, every human action finds its meaning and purpose in the covenant of grace, which is God's particular will for the reconciliation of the world in Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit. While God and the human stand in a genuine antithesis as two distinct subjects, their actions exist in continuity as God acts "in, with and over" the human in the event of Word and Spirit, an event which mobilizes the human, at the proper level, into corresponding action as an immediate consequence of, and as an active participant in, this event. This continuity of action is not by nature but by grace, an *event* of continuity in which the distinction between the two subjects remains intact. With these insights in hand, we have a natural avenue into the question of the acting being of the church. Do the insights of the *concursus Dei* inform the life of this community? Indeed, they do. The *concursus* shows that

88. This is why we can say with Nimmo that God's act of grace, love, and freedom in the covenant includes a corresponding expectation and demand for something from the covenant partner, and this something establishes a "clearly defined space . . . within which meaningful human action can take place, as the Being in action of God calls forth a particular being in action of the ethical agent." See Nimmo, *Being in Action*, 11.

89. *CD* III/3, 136.

90. *CD* III/3, 149.

91. Barth, *The Christian Life*, 28.

our actions in the church "count for something" in Barth's theology, although they "count" in a different sense than they do for Beckwith or Hütter. This difference will present Barth's unique answer to the evangelical problem, and I will argue that this answer offers a better alternative for evangelicals as they consider the shape of evangelical ecclesiology in the future. I will make this case by turning to Barth's construal of water baptism, because the distinctions made there tread directly upon both the critiques made against his ecclesiology and the issues central to the *concursus Dei*.[92] From there, we will be in a position to see the full scope of Barth's solution to the younger evangelicals' dilemma.

## IV. Water Baptism and the *concursus Dei*

Barth's key move in the baptismal fragment of *CD* IV/4 is to draw a distinction between baptism with the Holy Spirit and baptism with water. By "baptism with the Holy Spirit," Barth means God's free work of grace which is the sole "origin of human faithfulness" and "the foundation of Christian life."[93] Our life in Christ, in other words, is an event in which God alone is the actor and the subject. Baptism with water, conversely, is a "truly human work,"[94] one in which the human commits a "wholly free, conscious and voluntary decision."[95] Water baptism thus is not a "superhuman or supernatural"[96] act but rather is a "human decision which follows the divine change effected for man."[97] Hence, for Barth, baptism with the Holy Spirit and baptism with water "are two very different things as man's free work on the one side and God's free work on the other."[98]

This construal prompts the charge that Barth creates a "disjunction" between divine and human action in baptism.[99] That is, by dividing baptism

92. For a more extensive treatment of the relationship between *concursus* and water baptism, see Nimmo, *Being in Action*, 126-30. I am deeply indebted to Nimmo's work here, as it helped me recognize the implication of this connection for Barth's theology.

93. *CD* IV/4, 4.

94. Ibid., 102.

95. Ibid., 163.

96. Ibid., 143.

97. Ibid., 162.

98. Ibid., 88.

99. John Macken, *The Autonomy Theme in the "Church Dogmatics": Karl Barth and His Critics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 80; cited in Nimmo, *Being in Action*, 128.





into two acts — the act of the Holy Spirit as the foundation of the Christian life, and the human act of obedience and correspondence to the divine act — Barth posits "the *wholly different action* of two inalienably distinct subjects."[100] This charge ties directly into the previously mentioned critique of Barth's ecclesiology. The criticism, in this instance, would be that Barth divides water baptism from any connection to divine action, meaning that, as an ecclesial practice, it is bifurcated from the divine act in which the Christian finds her true existence and in which baptism finds its true meaning. God does not act in water baptism, grace is not mediated through it, and thus this human act does not "count" with respect to the true basis of the Christian life or the true ministry of the church.[101]

What are we to make of this charge in light of what we've seen in the *concursus Dei*? One the one hand, we can agree with the critics that there are two "inalienably distinct subjects" in the act of water baptism. We know from the *concursus* that God and the creature are not "species of the same genus," and thus, we know that "divine action and human action, like their respective agents, are utterly incomparable."[102] On the other hand, we also know that in the context of the covenant of grace, an "intimate and direct connection" exists between divine and human action so that we must consider them "a single action." In other words — on Barth's terms — in the event of Word and Spirit, the divine action is fulfilled "in, with and over" the creaturely action so that the creaturely act *in its very creatureliness* fulfills God's covenant will. On the basis of this insight from the *concursus*, therefore, we can say that "precisely *as* a truly human action, the act of water baptism is accompanied by a divine action and is thus in no way independent of divine action."[103] If they were divided from one another — if, in other words, the human act of water baptism was wholly independent of divine

100. Macken, *The Autonomy Theme in the "Church Dogmatics,"* 86; see also Nimmo, *Being in Action*, 127.

101. Keep in mind that an action "counts" when it makes a contribution to one's true identity, meaning, or purpose. The charge that baptism does not fit that bill is commonly made among Barth scholars. T. F. Torrance articulates the charge well: the meaning of water "baptism is not found in a direct act of God but in an ethical act on the part of man made by way of a response to what God has already done on his behalf." The implication is that by relegating this ecclesial act to the human sphere alone, it is diminished in meaning, divided from the true basis of the church and Christian life. See T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays toward Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 99.

102. Nimmo, *Being in Action*, 127.

103. Ibid.

action — then, as Paul Nimmo notes, "a rift would appear" between the doctrines of the *concursus* and baptism in Barth's theology.[104]

Although such a rift is often appealed to among Barth scholars, it is not evident in *CD* IV/4. In fact, Barth's construal of baptism in *CD* IV/4 is simply the working out of the *concursus Dei* in an ecclesial context. In the volume's opening pages, Barth says the "real question" under discussion is the "reality of the origin of [man's] free partnership with God in God's covenant of grace."[105] The answer to this question, he says, can be found in the divine "actualization of [man's] creaturely determination and consequently of his natural powers."[106] The emphasis on the actualization of the human agent by God emerges explicitly later in the volume, and the working out of the *concursus* is most evident here. Note the use of Word and Spirit in the following quotation: "God, who as such is the *auctor primarius* of all creaturely occurrence, is specifically in the work and word of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit the free Lord of the action of the community which bears witness to Him, and therewith of its baptism too."[107] The deployment of Word and Spirit is the same as in the *concursus:* God "is in both cases the one who acts, in the one case as Word and the other as Spirit."[108] Yet, just as in the *concursus,* Barth insists that God's action in Word and Spirit does not detract from the creatureliness of this action. The creature, he says, is "taken seriously as the creature which is different from God."[109] Barth thus argues that "[God's] action within and on [the community], His presence, work and revelation in their whole action, and therewith in their [water] baptism, does not supplant or suppress their action" or "rob it of its significance."[110] In other words, Barth is saying that human causality in water baptism cannot be excluded from its relationship to divine causality, because from the *concursus* we know that in Word and Spirit "*all* creaturely activity finds its locus within the context of the divine activity."[111] Thus, "precisely as a true

104. Ibid.

105. *CD* IV/4, 6.

106. Ibid.

107. Ibid., 105.

108. *CD* III/3, 142.

109. *CD* IV/4, 35.

110. Ibid., 105-6. This is what Barth has in mind when he argues that "the omnicausality of God must not be construed as his sole causality." In the context of the covenant of grace, the human being can exercise "a free and responsible choosing and rejecting, affirming and negating, a human decision." This is what we see in particular in the act of baptism. See *CD* IV/4, 22 and 163.

111. Nimmo, *Being in Action,* 127.





and real human response, water baptism is not without the activity of God."[112] As Barth says (and note the parallel to the language of *concursus* here): "How could [water] baptism . . . be a true answer if the action of God were not *present* and did not *precede* and *follow* in his work and Word?"[113] On such grounds, we can say that Barth's doctrine of baptism and his doctrine of the *concursus Dei* "stand in profound continuity" with one another.[114]

What can we conclude from this examination of water baptism? There are three things. First, we conclude that there is no sharp "disjunction" between divine and human action in water baptism. The human act of water baptism is preceded, accompanied, and followed by divine action and thus does not occur independent of it.[115]

Second, we conclude that water baptism as a human act stands in continuity with God's act, but that it does so only on the terms of the covenant of grace. This qualification, as we have seen, means that "continuity" must be understood in a very specific sense. It is a continuity that occurs in the event of Word and Spirit: thus there is no infusion or imparting of the divine essence or operation to the creature in this act. There is not, in other words, a permanent or readily available sacramental union between divine and human action in water baptism. One could argue for such sacramentalism, Barth says, only if "God were acting in the place of men and men in the place of God."[116] But that is *not* what happens in water baptism. Yes, God's action in the covenant of grace takes place "in, with and over" the human act of water baptism so that the act of God and the act of the creature become, in this event, a "single action." But this action occurs by way of "two [distinct sub-

112. Ibid.

113. *CD* IV/4, 106.

114. Nimmo, *Being in Action,* 129-30.

115. Nimmo draws this same conclusion; see *Being in Action,* 128.

116. *CD* IV/4, 106. Webster comments that Barth is launching a "protest against the ease with which the sacramental activity of the church can come to put itself on par with, or can even supplant, the being and activity of Jesus Christ himself." See John B. Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1995), 166. Healy offers a similar observation: "Thus although the church remains under the 'special care of [God's] free grace,' grace has not been committed 'into the hand of his community.' To be sure, the church is to teach us and direct our thought and action, and it is the task of special ethics to point out 'certain lines' and 'directives' that the church must instill in us. But neither the Word nor the Spirit is bound to the church; the church, and thus the Christian, are bound to them." See Nicholas M. Healy, "Karl Barth's Ecclesiology Reconsidered," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 57, no. 3 (2004): 293.

jects] who stand in clear encounter, God on the one side and man on the other."[117] In other words, this action occurs in the event of Word and Spirit as God clears the space for true and free *human* action which corresponds with his own action. *This* is what Barth means by continuity between divine and human action. Such continuity does not "disparage, weaken, or demean the true and proper dignity of [water] baptism," he argues, but rather enhances it by placing this creaturely act in its rightful place within the context of God's eternal covenant of grace.[118]

This leads us to the third conclusion we can draw from this account: the human act of water baptism "counts for something" as an ecclesial practice, but it "counts" in a particular sense. Whereas Hütter's ecclesial practices "count" in the sense that they make tangible contributions to the true identity, meaning, and purpose of the church, Barth's ecclesial practices "count" in the sense that human actions accomplish something internal to the relationship between God and the human in the context of the covenant of grace. This accomplishment is the response of witness, which is human participation in God's act of self-revelation. The picture Barth paints is this: Jesus Christ, the one who was crucified at Golgotha there and then, lives and reigns as the resurrected one here and now. As the living one, Christ is not idle in the world but active. By the power of the Holy Spirit, he is active in proclaiming here and now the work of reconciliation accomplished there and then. Jesus Christ alone is "authorized and competent" to proclaim this Word of God, but "he does not will to be alone" in this proclamation.[119] Through the power of the Spirit, he summons Christians to serve as heralds who proclaim this Word of God alongside him. Barth says: "[God] calls them — and it is in this sense that we may really speak of their cooperation in His prophetic work — to the *ministerium Verbi divini*, to the service of God and His Word. This then, the divine Word, the Word of Christ, is the *telos* and meaning of their service."[120] In short, for Barth, human action in the church "counts" when it is an act of witness to the Word of God, which is nothing other than God's act in Jesus Christ. This is precisely what we see in the act of water baptism. As a human act, it is the "first exemplary work of faith,"[121] a human witness to God's prior act, a response of obedience that proclaims the Word of God to the world. This vision of what "counts" is certainly different from Hütter's and Beckwith's vision of what "counts," but it is not a vision which disqualifies human action altogether. Rather, Barth places human action in "its proper, limited but nevertheless real, human sphere."[122] It is a sphere defined by the covenant of grace.

117. *CD* IV/4, 163.
118. Ibid., 107.
119. *CD* IV/3.2, 606.
120. Ibid., 607.
121. *CD* IV/4, 44.





## V. Barth and the Future of Evangelical Ecclesiology

With Barth's account of divine and human action in the church in hand, we are in a position to address our central question: what are the implications of his ecclesiology for the younger evangelicals' desire to overcome evangelicalism's problems with a more visible church? I think Barth helps us see that the evangelicals who want their actions to "count" in Hütter's and Beckwith's sense are burdening themselves with the responsibility of what should be God's work, while distracting themselves from their own unique and truly evangelical task.[123] To put it another way: I think Barth's solution to the evangelical problem frees us to be truly *evangelical*, which the solution Beckwith chose does not. To illustrate why this is the case, I am going to outline one of the most important implications of their respective solutions: the effect their ecclesiology has on their understanding of the vocation of the church with respect to non-Christians. Given our missionary heritage, this issue carries special importance for evangelicals.

As they confront the problems at hand, those evangelicals who are turning to an authoritative tradition, a high liturgy, a robust sacramentalism, and a thick engagement with Roman Catholic ecclesiology have found a resource that provides an answer to their problem. In such a framework, ecclesial practices can be seen as vital to the Christian life and faith, and as we have seen, these practices can even serve as the indispensable means of God's grace in the world. This framework can thus legitimate an ecclesiology in which human action and virtue matter. Beckwith's comments about his move to the Roman Catholic Church illustrate this fact well. As he notes, Roman Catholicism provides a way for him to understand God's grace being

122. Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology*, 170.
123. This point comes from Webster: "Hütter underplays the fact that one of Barth's primary motives in rejecting a mediatory understanding of the church's action was a desire not to burden the church with responsibility for what is properly God's affair, and thus a desire to liberate the church for its own proper work. To deny that church action is mediatory is, for Barth, not to detract from its status but to establish the limits within which it can fulfill its real office with liberty." See ibid., 146.

exercised through his actions and in turn, this allows his virtue to "count for something" with respect to his faith. Indeed, as he sees it, the justification begun by Christ is preserved and increased by his own grace-filled cooperation with God's act. His life of virtue and obedience, formed by ecclesial practices, thus plays a vital role in the manifestation of Christ's justifying work in his life. His action makes a contribution to his identity in the church as well as to the meaning and purpose of his faith. For him, the evangelical ecclesiological problem has been overcome.

The ecclesiological cost of this type of solution, however, proves to be too high, and this is especially evident when we consider this solution's effect on the form of the church's vocation. To see the nature of this problem, we turn to Barth's worry that an ecclesiology which focuses upon the mediation of God's grace through church practices inevitably makes the reception and possession of this grace the primary end of human action in the church. In his view, when the *telos* of the church is the facilitation of the ongoing reception, preservation, and cultivation of Christ's benefits in our lives, then the distribution of these benefits through ecclesial practices becomes the church's primary vocation. This is the action that "counts" in the church. The task of witnessing and proclaiming God's Word to those outside the church becomes secondary to the task of cultivating God's grace in the lives of those inside the church. As a result, Barth argues, the "being and act of the church [becomes] a circle closed in on itself": the church's reason for existing resides in the reception of the gift of God's grace, and the church witnesses to God precisely in its reception of this gift.[124] This description sounds very much like Webber's account of the vision many younger evangelicals have for the church. For them, "The church does not 'have' a mission. It *is* mission, by its very existence in the world."[125] The inevitable result of this kind of ecclesiology, Barth contends, is that the "Church becomes an end in itself in its existence as the community and institution of salvation."[126] It never needs to look outside its own walls to realize its true vocation.

Barth's ecclesiology — seen in light of the *concursus Dei* — offers us a different vision for the *telos* of the church. His vision begins with the reality that our justification in Christ is a complete and finished work: we stand enclosed in the history of Jesus Christ. The reconciliation that objectively occurred there and then needs no further subjective actualization in our lives here and now in order to be effective. John Webster describes this idea well:

> The perfection of Jesus Christ's work is such that it stands in need of no human or created mediation. Christ's work is characterized by what might be called "inclusive perfection": its completeness is not only its "being finished," but its effective power in renewing human life by bringing about human response to itself. Consequently, the relation of "objective" and "subjective" shifts. The objective is not a complete realm, separate from the subjective and, therefore, standing in need of "translation" into the subjective. Rather, the objective includes the subjective within itself, and is efficacious without reliance on a quasi-independent realm of mediating created agencies.[127]

Note again: the objective work of Christ includes within itself the subjective realization of that work. This means that the church does not continue the being of Christ in a changed form, distributing Christ's benefits in history by means of its practices. This distribution has already occurred, and every human stands under the banner of Christ's reconciling work. Subjective participation in this reconciliation, Barth says, simply has "the character of *revelation,* of the *Word* of God demanding expression" in the lives of the humans who hear it.[128] This expression, following the pattern we saw in the *concursus Dei,* takes place by the power of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, the mission of the Spirit is to form a community that exists in correspondence to the word of Christ's reconciling work. The Spirit works as the awakening and life-giving power of this community. It is, as Barth says, "the summoning power of the divine promise, which points the community beyond itself, which calls it to transcend itself and in that way to be in truth the community of God — in truth, i.e., as it bears witness to the truth known within it, as it knows itself to be charged with this witness and sent out to establish it."[129]

The being of the church thus is realized in its "service of witness and proclamation."[130] It finds its meaning and purpose, Barth says, beyond "the

124. See *CD* IV/3.2, 766.

125. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals,* 113.

126. *CD* IV/3.2, 767.

127. Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation,* 127-28.

128. *CD* IV/3.1, 38.

129. *CD* IV/1, 152.

130. *CD* IV/2, 133. On this point, Healy notes: "Accordingly, the witness of the church is truthful witness just to the extent that it points to the truth that is not itself, or not in the first place at least. Christians are to live 'ec-centrically,' looking beyond themselves. The church is ec-centric, too, in that it 'exists for the world' in visible form." See Healy, "Karl Barth's Ecclesiology Reconsidered," 293.

reception and experience of its members, [and] beyond all that is promised to them personally."[131] In short, the church's being is in its act — and its act is its proclamation of God's Word to the world. *This* is what it means to be the church, and human action in the church "counts" inasmuch as it participates in this activity of witness. For Barth, then, Christ's reconciling work does not reside *in* the church; it propels, charges, and enlists the church as a partner in the proclamation of this work to the world.[132] "The true community of Jesus Christ," Barth says, "is the community which God has sent out into the world in and with its foundation. As such, it exists for the world."[133] Our *telos* is not simply to *be* the church; our *telos* is to find our being in our action as we work as partners in God's covenant of grace by proclaiming his word to the world.

To conclude: this illustration of how each solution to the evangelical problem frames our understanding of the church's vocation provides an example of one way Barth can serve as a good conversation partner for the evangelical future. For all our problems, the strength of evangelicalism lies in the reality that the task of proclaiming the word of the gospel to the world is ingrained in our theological DNA. Mission is who we *are* — *it* is what "counts" for evangelicals. Ironically, as the younger evangelicals have discovered, our strong focus on mission has become the source of our weaknesses. Our overly flexible ecclesiology, our nearly exclusive focus on the individual aspects of salvation, our reliance on technique over doctrine, and our goal of being relevant to the culture all have their roots in our desire to be effective in sharing the gospel with those who have not heard it. The unintended consequence of these tendencies has been ahistoricism, subjectivism, and the lack of an incentive to make our actions in the church count. Barth supplies a way for us to overcome this problem. In his solution, human action in the church counts. It does not count for our own benefit, however; it counts for the benefit of those who have yet to hear. In this sense, Barth's ecclesiological commitments overlap with the best insights of the evangelical tradition, and he helps evangelicals see why these insights truly matter.

131. *CD* IV/3.2, 764.

132. Healy's insights are again helpful: "In sum, perhaps Barth's greatest legacy in the area of ecclesiology was his massive awareness of the providential rule of God, and thus of the fundamental joyfulness of the gospel. He understood Christianity to be adventurous, to be about letting God lead us, work in and with us, the church, so that we may enjoy partnership with God. We can trust God to act to preserve the body of Christ in its historical and Spirit-filled form until the eschaton." See Healy, "Karl Barth's Ecclesiology Reconsidered," 299.

133. *CD* IV/3.2, 768.



## Universalism

# So That He May Be Merciful to All: Karl Barth and the Problem of Universalism

*Bruce L. McCormack*

For most evangelicals today — even those most sympathetic with many of Karl Barth's concerns — the real sticking point with his theology lies in his universalistic tendencies. Differences with respect to his doctrine of Scripture can be negotiated — and have been, most recently by Kevin Vanhoozer.[1] His use of German idealistic philosophies (ranging from Immanuel Kant to G. W. F. Hegel) in his efforts to explicate theological subject-matters can be shown to be controlled by those subject-matters — and has been.[2] So that should not be an insuperable problem either. The problems that have proven to be most intractable all have to do in one way or another with the allegation of universalism.

Let me give two quick examples. First, Barth's actualistic ontology would probably be taken more seriously were it not for the fact that the ground of the "exaltation" of human "nature" in the history of Jesus of Nazareth is to be found in the election of all human beings in Him. It is because all are in Him

1. Kevin 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 (Bletchley, England, and Grand Rapids: Paternoster Press and Baker Academic, 2006), 26-59.

2. See Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 43-49, 129-30, 216-40, 327-74; idem, "Der theologiegeschichtliche Ort Karl Barths," in *Karl Barth in Deutschland (1921-1935): Aufbruch-Klärung-Widerstand*, ed. Michael Beintker, Christian Link, and Michael Trowitzsch (Zürich: TVZ, 2005), 15-40.