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11

Depravity and Hope in the City

Karl Barth in Conversation with *The Wire*

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MANY COMMENTATORS HAVE NOTED that *The Wire* is "bleak," and sometimes relentlessly so.[1] Despite the occasional redemptive moment, the show tends to leave its viewers with feelings of despair rather than hope. This despair arises from an overwhelming sense that the characters and the city—and, by extension, the viewer—are trapped in destructive cycles from which no escape can be found. Every attempt to improve or correct social ills is crushed by the bureaucracy; every vote cast for change only further entrenches a corrupt political class; every dollar spent not only upholds, but also undermines, the livelihood of someone struggling to survive; and every tax dollar invested, store patronized, or school funded contributes to a turf war between figures on both sides of the law who finally are concerned only with their own self-interest. Society is fundamentally broken, and our best efforts cannot fix it.

This bleak impression seems to be precisely what *The Wire* creator David Simon intended. In a 2006 interview, he noted: "We're worth less every day, despite the fact that some of us are achieving more and more. It's the triumph of capitalism. Whether you're a corner boy in West Baltimore, or a cop who knows his beat, or an Eastern European brought here for sex,

1. For example, see the remarks in Bowden, "Angriest Man in Television," 50–57.

your life is worth less. It's the triumph of capitalism over human value."[2] Note how Simon places human achievement in an inverse relationship to human value: no matter how hard we work or what we achieve, everyone becomes less important and less valuable at the end of the day. This leaves viewers with a sense that they are both perpetrators and victims: they have dirty hands due to their implicit or explicit participation a broken system, but they also can do nothing to clean them. Hence the despair. Something beyond our control is arrayed against us, twisting our efforts so that they become the means of our demise. So why fight at all? Is not *The Wire* simply "an elaborate, moving brief for despair and (ultimately) indifference," as one critic put it?[3] If we truly are caught up in the broken machinery of the system, then why should we attempt to resist its workings?

One reason to resist, of course, is that ceasing to do so would be fatal for society itself. Progressive political commentator Matthew Yglesias makes this point: "[David Simon's] vision of the bleak urban dystopia and its roots is counterproductive to advancing the values we hold dear . . . Simon believes that we are doomed; political progress requires us to believe that we are not."[4] In other words, to buy into *The Wire*'s portrayal of society's hopelessness is to surrender it as a lost cause, to concede that we will live always and only under the shadow of death. But for Yglesias, this cannot be: to live progressively in this context is to believe that the situation can be altered and, in some sense, redeemed. Most Christian would agree, since a surrender to the broken system would be a betrayal of our basic Christian identity, a pronouncement of the victory of the very enemies the church claims have been defeated in Jesus Christ. This point of agreement does not mean, however, that Christians would agree wholesale either with Yglesias' progressivism or his notion that Simon's bleak vision is misguided. In fact, from a Christian perspective, *The Wire* gets the human situation exactly right: we *are* trapped in a system from which there is no human means of escape, and there *are* forces arrayed against us that no human can defeat. Indeed, in my view, this accurate depiction of the reality of human life marks the great contribution *The Wire* makes to the life and work of the church. A church that watches this show and really *sees* it will be one that obtains a clearer grasp of the depth of human depravity, humanity's helplessness in the face of it, and the nature of the response that such depravity requires. It will be a church that, in light of what it sees, turns to scripture more closely,

2. Simon, "Behind the Wire," para. 4.

3. Salam, "Bleakness of *The Wire*," para. 3.

4. Yglesias, "David Simon and the Audacity of Despair," para. 2.

preaches the message of the gospel to the world more faithfully, and acts more courageously in its work for social justice.

This essay will explore this line of thinking by placing the *The Wire* into conversation with the theology of Karl Barth, and specifically with some of Barth's late insights about the church's relationship with society.[5] These insights show Barth at his most forward leaning, trying to describe what it might mean to be the church in the midst of the complexities of the modern world. The conversation between Barth and *The Wire* should lead to a mutual enrichment: Barth's material will help us see things in *The Wire* that we might have otherwise overlooked, and *The Wire* will help us make the implications of Barth's vision for the church more concrete. The goal will be to develop a vision for how the church might live faithfully and hopefully in a world marked by despair.

SIN AND THE POWERS

What *The Wire* depicts as a broken social system, the New Testament depicts as the consequence of human sin, which is at its root the human alienation from God. This alienation manifests itself in humans through their sinful acts and their state of being against God, other humans, and creation. This separation leaves humanity prey to the "powers" who are arrayed against it.[6] These powers are well armed, rule in darkness in the service of a dominion of evil, and work to corrupt creation until it succumbs to the final enemy, death itself.[7] As Barth notes as he reflects upon these powers, their presence is felt in every area of our life. They are "palpable in their impalpability in every morning and evening newspaper in every corner of the globe, the great impersonal absolutes in their astonishing willfulness and autonomy, in their dynamic, which with such alien superiority dominates not only the masses but also human personalities, and not just the small ones but also the great."[8] *The Wire* does not mention the powers directly, of course, but by depicting the stark reality of sin and its consequences, it portrays their work accurately. As in the Bible, so in *The Wire*: sin takes on a life of its own,

5. I draw primarily from lectures that were composed late in Barth's career, but only published posthumously. These unfinished fragments were gathered and published posthumously as *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics Volume IV, Part 4: Lecture Fragments*, hereafter *Christian Life*.

6. Rom 8:38; 1 Cor 15:24; Eph 1:21.

7. Col 2:15; Eph 6:12–13; 1 Cor 15:26.

8. Barth, *Christian Life*, 219.

becomes an autonomous force that acts against human being, and holds humanity firmly in its grasp.

One of the ways sin works throughout Scripture and *The Wire* is by transforming order into disorder. In Scripture, for example, the very capacities God designed to secure human flourishing—human work and effort—are twisted into the traits that undermine this flourishing.[9] We see this, for example, in the creativity and work that are invested in the building of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11. Barth views this kind of transformation as sin's "denaturalizing" of humanity, the decommissioning of humans from their God-given task to be stewards of creation and one another and their commissioning into the act of destroying these very things. This shift occurs as capacities are transformed into "spirits with a life and activity of their own," forces that seem to work in distinction from human life to destroy humanity from without and within.[10]

Barth gives three concrete examples of this phenomenon, and all of them are illustrated in nearly every episode of *The Wire*. The first is *government*. Even though it was created to serve human beings, under the conditions of sin, government becomes a Leviathan working *against* humans. The problem, Barth argues, is that once the exercise of power becomes alienated from its context in God's sovereign plan for the world, its exercise is directed toward itself: "Power no longer protects the right, nor finds in it determination and limit. It subjects the right to itself and makes triumphant use of it. The state no longer serves man; man, both ruling and ruled, has to serve the state."[11] Under the conditions of sin, in other words, even the best governments are twisted until they exist for their own sake rather than for the sake of those for whom they were designed. We see this reality displayed again and again in *The Wire*. From politicians who use power to secure their own reelection, to a police bureaucracy that stifles the pursuit of justice, to a school administration that actually inhibits the learning of its students, the powers of the government are directed against the people more often than they are used to support them.

Lying behind all of these problems, in some way or another, is Barth's second example of the distortion of human capacities: *money*. Humans acquire and save wealth in order to find comfort and security,[12] but in reality, Barth says, "if his resources are to be faithful to him, to serve him and give

9. Gen 2:15.

10. Barth, *Christian Life*, 213–14.

11. Ibid., 220. I have left Barth's use of the masculine pronoun for "human beings" intact.

12. Luke 12:16–21.

him comfort, does he not have to be faithful to them and serve them?"[13] Once again, something that was originally intended to serve our good actually acquires power over us, so that our money possesses *us* in the sense that our lives are ordered around its pursuit, maintenance, and use. Again, *The Wire* displays this reality accurately. Union boss Frank Sobotka works with "the Greek" in order to acquire the money that he and his coworkers need to live, but this pursuit locks him into an underworld that leads to his demise. Politicians like Clay Davis exercise tremendous power and influence, but they also always are bound to both their contributors' wishes and their need to fund the next campaign. And drug dealers like Avon and Stringer sell drugs partly in order to make money that will help them escape poverty, but despite the wealth they acquire, they never are able to leave the very streets where they experience the forces of poverty most strongly.

Barth's third example, *ideology*, works more subtly, both in real life and in *The Wire*. An ideology provides a lens through which one can see and understand the world more clearly. This can be helpful inasmuch as it provides a framework from which a human can understand his or her presuppositions, approach problems, and propose solutions to these problems. The trouble, Barth explains, is that an ideology almost always leads the one who holds it toward a "numbness, hardening, and rigidity, and therefore an inertia in which he will cease to be a free spirit." Once a person is locked into a particular way of thinking, he "no longer has anything of his own to say" and "disappears behind the mask that he must wear as [the ideology's] representative."[14] This not only stifles creativity, but it also creates *partisans*: we fight for our side at the expense of the other side, and everyone who does not approach the world from our framework becomes an opponent who must be vanquished. We see this again and again in Baltimore. Politicians and police fight against one another even though they supposedly share the same aims, because they have different presuppositions about the goal of their organization. The dealers' "co-op" finally breaks down because Marlo approaches the drug trade with a particular vision that leaves no room for compromise. And the journalists find reporting the true story of Baltimore nearly impossible because they are bound both to the Baltimore political machine and the money-driven ideology of the paper's corporate owners. Again and again, something that was meant to help people approach the world more effectively actually hinders them by blinding them to reality, dividing them from one another, and forcing them to seek one another's defeat.

13. Barth, *Christian Life*, 222.

14. Ibid., 225.

BALTIMORE AND THE CITY OF CAIN

As he considers these particular forms of the "dehumanization" of humanity, Barth argues that they are merely modern manifestations of the single "twofold history" of humanity: the history of Adam, where the relationship with God was broken, and the history of Cain, the one whose violence brings Adam's sin to its fulfillment.[15] The one act leads to the other, and both acts provide a template from which all human history can be understood. Barth's move here is to read human history in light of the biblical story, so that the latter interprets the former.[16] This move provides insights when applied to the city of Baltimore as portrayed in *The Wire*. When seen within the trajectory of scripture, Baltimore can be viewed in light of a characteristic it shares with all human cities: it is a descendant of the very first human city, the one built by Cain after the murder of his brother Abel. We find the story in Genesis 4. After the Lord rejects Cain's offering but not Abel's, Cain becomes angry. Even though the Lord warns him that "sin is lurking at the door" (v. 6), Cain gives in to his anger, lures Abel into the field, and kills him. When the Lord asks about Abel, Cain lies: "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" (v. 9). The Lord then condemns Cain for the murder, puts a mark on him to protect him from vengeance, and casts him out to live as "a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth" (v. 12). This punishment corresponds to the nature of the crime. Before the murder, Cain had enjoyed the security of God's protection and a close relationship with his fellow humans and the earth. Now, this security has been shattered, Abel's blood soaks the ground, the bonds between God, humans, and creation have been broken. Cain is condemned to a life of insecurity, sentenced to roam the earth as a fugitive, fearful of those around him. After his exile, however, Cain does not wander long. Instead, he travels east to the land of Nod and builds a city, which he names "Enoch" after his son (v. 17). This name, which means "initiation" or "dedication," symbolizes Cain's rejection of God's sentence against him. Instead of wandering as a fugitive, he will start anew, rebuild a sense of order, and establish security and stability apart from God.

From a biblical perspective, all cities in some way reflect Cain's hopes for Enoch.[17] They are created with good intentions to be outposts of the future, stable centers that provide security against outsiders, social and economic order, and a space for the development and promotion of culture. But as human enterprises, every city betrays these aims in some way or another.

15. Ibid., 212.

16. This approach corresponds to what George Lindbeck would call an "intratextual" reading of scripture. See Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 113–14.

17. For a book-length treatment of this theme, see Ellul, *Meaning of the City*.

Consider, for example, the security that cities are meant to provide. For all of our talk about either fearing or accepting "the other," it is often those closest to us, the ones whom we know the best, whom we have the hardest time embracing. This is especially true in cities, where the most basic form of violence is fratricide. Russell Jacoby examines this phenomenon in chilling detail in his book *Bloodlust: On the Roots of Violence from Cain and Abel to the Present*. He notes, for example, that in the years 2003–2005, nearly three-quarters of murder victims in New York City knew their attackers; that most rapes and assaults during the same period were committed by a spouse, ex-spouse, coworker, or acquaintance; and that gang members most often target other gang members rather than innocent bystanders.[18] These more recent examples follow an ancient trend repeated again and again throughout human history. "We prefer to stigmatize the strangers and the outsiders," he notes. "But most violence emerges from *within* the community."[19] This is the case in *The Wire*, where most of the violence takes place among those who are in "the game," and some of the most notable murders are performed by killers who know their victims well. Stringer Bell's murder-by-hire of D'Angelo Barksdale and Snoop's killing by Michael stand out prominently in this regard.

The Wire is unique, however, in that it makes its viewers *participants* in "the game." This happens at a general level simply because of the show's realism: Baltimore is a real place, the characters are based upon actual people, and the show's writers have firsthand knowledge of the situations and realities being depicted. But the viewer's participation goes much deeper, and it occurs from two directions. On the one hand, as the episodes pass, it becomes more and more difficult to make any character an "other," because those whom viewers initially may have set against themselves become increasingly sympathetic. Think, for example, of the drug dealers on the corners. We quickly learn that these "hoppers" are cogs in the machinery of a large and complex criminal organization, and many if not most of them have been drawn into their roles by the forces of poverty, hopelessness, and ironically, community. Over time, we begin to identify with them, and we might even be able to imagine ourselves standing on those same corners in the same situation. Characters like Stringer Bell and Omar remain abhorrent in many ways, but as their virtues are displayed alongside their vices, we begin to identify with and perhaps even admire them. Stinger's creativity in the face of tremendous complexity and opposition displays all the leadership qualities typically associated with success; and while Omar is a

18. See Jacoby, *Bloodlust*, xii.

19. Ibid., 32.

murderer and a thief, he also is unflinchingly loyal and, in an odd way, *likable* as a person. On the other hand, and at the same time, the characters many viewers might initially have been inclined to identify with become less and less sympathetic as the episodes pass. We discover that the police, politicians, journalists, and school administrators, despite being generally decent, are just as twisted in their own contexts as the criminals are in theirs. McNulty and Kima, for example, are "good police," fair, and fearless in their pursuit of the truth; yet they struggle with authority, sobriety, and familial obligations. Mayor Carcetti genuinely desires to use political power for the good of the people, but as he eventually gives in to workings of the system and its temptations, he becomes increasingly *unlikable* on a personal level. And the qualities that make Michael so sympathetic—his leadership, courage, and fierce loyalty to friends and family—become the very traits that make him a terrifying killer. All of these characters, both good and bad, are placed within a city that itself displays these same contradictory qualities at once: Baltimore is a place of both promise and despair, wealth and poverty, power and powerlessness, beauty and ugliness, generosity and corruption.

By placing viewers in the company of these characters in the midst of this city, *The Wire* causes its viewers to recognize the common humanity they share with these characters, so that they see that the bonds holding the characters' lives together and the forces driving their actions are the same ones that hold *our* families, cities, and nation together and drive our activities day by day. By the end of the series, there is no "other" anymore: Baltimore is *our* city, because we participate in the society that upholds it; the characters are our neighbors, or more accurately, they are *us*, because in so many ways, we are just like them. To watch *The Wire* is to bear witness to a fratricide, to see our kin struck down both by one another and the powers of the city machine. And because we are participants in this machine, we share in the guilt that covers it.

This insight leads us to the gift that *The Wire* offers to the church. Even though it never acknowledges the existence of the powers arrayed against humanity, *The Wire* depicts their effects powerfully. As we watch a broken government squandering its authority while its people suffer; see characters enslaved to money and the pursuit of it; and find that ideologies of every stripe are bankrupt in the face of the challenges of the streets, we are witnessing humans dehumanized to the point of becoming "worth less" before our eyes. This vision is shocking because *sin* is shocking, but also because modern technology and culture allows many of us to live sanitized lives that remain at a distance from sin's effects, most notably death. To watch *The Wire* is to encounter these effects in heartbreaking detail. And not only do we see the true nature of human depravity and the hopelessness of human

remedies to address it, but we also come away with the sense that we are both a perpetrator and a victim of this same depravity. No one escapes this story clean: "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."[20]

What *The Wire* does *not* give, as its critics note and the church should quickly recognize, is hope in the face of this reality. And how could it? If the problem depicted is the reality of sin, and if the despair is due to our enslavement to the "powers" that constrain our efforts, then there *is* no human solution. This marks the point where the church must step in, for Paul notes, God's divine order is that his wisdom will be revealed both to the powers and to humanity "through the church."[21] But how can the church fulfill this task? What concrete steps can the church take to offer hope in the midst of cities like Baltimore?

DIVINE ELECTION AND HUMAN CORRESPONDENCE

In his response to similar questions, Barth argues that hope is found only in the church's praying for the kingdom of God. For, as the critics of *The Wire* note in their own way, hope is precisely what the world under the dominion of the powers lacks. Despair and indifference arise when we no longer believe justice can be done, righteousness found, and order brought out of disorder; they come when we believe nothing we do matters, and that resistance against powers is futile. Barth argues that this kind of despair and indifference is precisely what the gospel of Jesus Christ overcomes, and that the church's great commission includes within itself the confrontation of these very things. "To bid man hope," he says, "and thus to mediate to him the promise that he needs, is [the Christian] task. Concern for this is their conflict."[22] This promise takes concrete shape as the church proclaims the kingdom of God as the alternative to the present state of the city. This preaching is not distinct from the preaching about Jesus Christ, in Barth's view, but central to it: to claim that "the kingdom of God is at hand" is to claim a victory over the powers, and this is identical to the church's claims about the salvation God achieves in and through Jesus Christ.[23]

Working behind Barth's argument here is his doctrine of election, which he develops in *Church Dogmatics* 2/2 around the claim that Jesus Christ is both the subject and object of divine election and thus the beginning and end of all created works. Barth sees this idea as the working out of

20. Rom 3:23.
21. Eph 3:10–11
22. Barth, *Christian Life*, 270.
23. Ibid., 249.

Paul's claim that God "chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love."[24] He argues that every created thing is determined in its inner depths by God's decision to enter into covenant with sinful humanity in and through Christ. This covenant is precisely what the Bible and church are talking about when they talk about God's grace, Barth says, and "[t]here is no such thing as a created nature which has its purpose, being or continuance apart from grace, or which may be known in this purpose, being or continuance except through grace."[25] This means the created order is intrinsically defined by the covenant, because it exists precisely in order to be the space where God's covenantal plan is executed.[26] Likewise, human being is intrinsically defined by the covenant, since Jesus Christ himself is the ontological ground of human existence, and true human being is found only in him. "It is not that [God] first wills and works the being of the world and [the human], and then ordains [the human] for salvation," Barth says. "But God creates, preserves and overrules [the human] for this *prior* end and with this *prior* purpose, that there may be a being distinct from himself ordained for salvation, for perfect being, for participation in his own being."[27] Barth's doctrine of justification shapes Barth's thought here: our relationship with God is a relationship by grace alone through Christ alone as we participate *in* Christ, and through him, in God. What we are intrinsically as humans is determined at every moment by our relationship to Christ, who as the fully human and fully divine mediator also remains utterly distinct from us in his unique relation to the Father. From the basis of this view of the nature of God's covenantal relationship with the world, Barth argues that the church can bring hope to the world inasmuch as its own human existence corresponds to both its and creation's being "in Christ."

To this end, Barth outlines four concrete ways the church can begin to live in correspondence to its being "in Christ" within the context of a fallen world. The first way is by *hearing* the Word of God. Specifically, the church must hear "the proclamation of the righteousness of God and in and with it the proclamation of the order of right, freedom and peace which is given to man."[28] As Barth sees it, the fact that all creation exists for God's covenant of grace means that any claim about God, creation, and human being—and

24. Eph 1:4.

25. Barth, *CD* 2/2:92.

26. Barth sees the covenant of grace as the created order's "material presupposition." See Barth, *CD* 3/1:232. For Barth's discussion of the relationship between creation and covenant, see *CD* 3/1:42–329.

27. Barth, *CD* 4/1:9.

28. Barth, *Christian Life*, 212.

thus any claim about the being of the church and the relationship of the church to the world—must be based upon the revelation of God found in the scriptural narrative of God's covenant with Israel and its fulfillment in and through the kingdom of God ushered in by Jesus the Messiah. If the church is to know Christ and his kingdom, it first has to listen to the revelation of Christ and his kingdom found in scripture. This listening orders both the church's internal life of worship as well as its external interaction with the world, particularly in its act of praying for the world. "Praying for the coming of the kingdom of God and his righteousness . . . Christians can look only where they see God looking and try to live with no other purpose than that with which God acts in Jesus Christ."[29] In other words, if the church is to live faithfully *as* the church in the midst of the world, the church first must listen to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and then, on the basis of this hearing, live in correspondence to it by being like Christ and declaring the truth of what has been revealed about him to the world.

This insight relates to the second way the church corresponds to God's reality: through its *vision*. Barth insists that the church will be able to confront human unrighteousness only when it can envision the "possibility and necessity of human righteousness."[30] The disorder wrought by the powers cannot be seen as a "final reality that cannot be altered" but as a "phantom that is destined to disappear."[31] The development of this eschatological vision marks the point where the church brings its view of the external world into correspondence with the true inner reality of created being and human history, which is the reality of the covenant. To see humanity in light of God's plan for it, Barth argues, is to confess that the possibility of human righteousness already exists and is being fulfilled even now by God within human history. It is to declare that Christ's own righteousness—and the reality that through grace humans can be *in Christ*—creates and guarantees the possibility and establishment of human righteousness though Christ even within disordered systems of the powers. To base one's view of reality upon Christ, therefore, is to envision the world through the lens of Christ's atonement of sin on the cross; it is to look at the broken systems of Baltimore and see them, not in terms of their unrighteousness, but in the light of the reality of Christ's justifying work; it is to claim that the forces of death visible on the streets of Baltimore were conquered in the resurrection; and it is to look at the both the perpetrators and the victims and to declare that

29. Ibid., 266.

30. Ibid., 212.

31. Ibid.

one day, tears, death, and mourning "will be no more."[32] In short, a church with a God-centered vision of the world sees the world in light of Christ rather than the other way around, because it is a church that recognizes that because the history of the world is determined *by* Christ, the reign of powers that appears to be intractable actually is limited in nature and scope.[33]

This vision helps to explain the nature of the church's third act by which it corresponds to God's reality in Christ: *prayer for the kingdom.* Barth argues that Jesus Christ's command that his followers pray "Thy kingdom come" is an instruction for the church to exercise freedom over against sin and powers.[34] Prayer for the kingdom is a revolt against the disorder that dominates the world, a rebellion against despair, and a refusal to slip into inaction and indifference. This is not a human rebellion, because humanity as such cannot defeat the forces of sin and death; rather, it is a declaration that salvation—the restoration of order out of disorder—comes "from God, from above, from heaven."[35] This prayer proclaims the reality that God has acted and continues to act against the powers in and through Jesus Christ, and that despite the hopelessness that appears around them, humans are not "worth less" but worth more because their work is determined in Christ. It is a signal of the church's hope that the kingdom, which is at once manifested incompletely and yet truly in the life of the church, is "God himself in the victorious act of overcoming the disorder which still rules humanity" and thus "God himself in the act of normalizing human existence."[36]

This rebellious prayer for the kingdom leads to the fourth and culminating act of the church's correspondence with its reality in Christ: its *obedient deeds.* As an act aimed in a "vertical direction," Barth says, prayer for the kingdom leads to "the horizontal of a corresponding human, and therefore provisional attitude and mode of conduct in the sphere of freedom."[37] Prayer, in other words, leads to *action.* Christians cannot pray for the coming kingdom without "being projected into this corresponding action of their own which is provisional but nonetheless serious."[38] To pray for God's kingdom is to become "empowered, instructed, and summoned to fight against human unrighteousness."[39] If the church's confession about God's

32. Rev 21:4.
33. Barth, *Christian Life*, 252.
34. Matt 6:10.
35. Barth, *Christian Life*, 212.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid., 213.
39. Ibid., 266

righteousness in Christ is to ring true both within the church and to those outside of it, then this prayer must be accompanied by a "simultaneous and related revolt" against the unrighteousness that is in the world.[40] This means that the church's gospel preaching must be integrally related to its pursuit of justice: to preach and pray for the kingdom is to live in revolt against the powers. And this revolt must be an *active* one, going beyond mere non-participation in sin or a withdrawal from broken systems, because the church's claims arise from what God *has done* and is *still doing* in Christ and through the Holy Spirit. The church's resistance against unrighteousness corresponds to this divine action, and it marks the church's participation in it. As it prays for the kingdom to come, the church seeks to reflect the reality of this prayer in concrete ways by working to help the world begin to reflect the redemption coming to it. This work, Barth argues, marks the church's "entering into battle for [the kingdom's] actualization," a battle won solely by God, but one that does not exclude the active participation of his people.[41] Barth sees precedents for this battle throughout scripture, from Jacob's wrestling with God,[42] to Christ's struggle in Gethsemane,[43] to Paul's references to the "armor of God,"[44] athletic contests,[45] and fighting a "good fight."[46] The church of Christ has been commissioned to live in this same pattern: they are "citizens of heaven"[47] precisely in and through their active struggle against the "ungodliness" and "unrighteousness" that arise because of sin.[48] This struggle, Barth says, takes concrete form in ordinary acts of Christian faithfulness, so that the church's rebellion against the powers is "actualized in little steps" as Christians go about their daily lives, turning their hope for the kingdom into an ongoing and relentless fight against sin and its effects.[49] "As they may live by the great hope," Barth says, Christians "stand by others even in the little things, in hope venturing and taking with them little steps to relative improvements wherever they attempt them, even at the risk of often going astray and being disappointed with them."[50]

40. Ibid., 206.
41. Ibid., 207.
42. Gen 32:24.
43. Mark 14:32.
44. Eph 6:11.
45. 1 Cor 9:24; 2 Tim 2:5.
46. 1 Tim 6:12; 2 Tim 4:7.
47. Phil 3:20.
48. Rom 1:18.
49. Barth, *Christian Life*, 213.
50. Ibid., 271.

THE CHURCH FOR HUMANITY

Barth's vision for a church that pursues justice through daily actions gives the church a coherent approach to the task of addressing social problems, because it allows the church's pursuit of justice always to remain linked to its internal acts of worship and prayer as well as its reality of its being "in Christ" as a result of his saving work. We can draw two further implications as we consider how such a vision might be worked out in concrete ways. First, and on the one hand, it opens the door to the possibility that the church might engage in a real and vibrant partnership with other groups who also are working against unrighteousness and injustice within society, because their work can align with the church's own work even if it stems from different motivations. So, for example, in order to address the kind of social problems found in *The Wire*, the church could join forces with a political movement, social organization, or even the government. This might take the form of a partnership with the government to start and staff tutoring or job-training programs; working with social organizations to meet the needs of the elderly, young families, or children; partnering with police to establish crime-prevention programs and activities for young people living in gang-dominated neighborhoods; or investing in businesses in order to create job opportunities and foster a localized economy. Whatever the activity, the church can join with these other groups and practice together the "little steps and relative improvements" needed to work against unrighteousness and injustice. This fosters a distinct type of Christian politic, one that promotes and encourages involvement in the structures and programs of a society under the confession that this world is *Christ's* world, and that he actively works his will within it through his Spirit, the same Spirit who dwells inside believers.[51]

Second, however, and on the other hand, the church's work against unrighteousness always remains distinct from that of other groups because this work never exhausts the church's commission. The church is not called to struggle only against sin's effects, but against sin itself. This means that the church's pursuit of righteousness always includes within itself aims that go beyond those of the other entities fighting for the same thing, because the church's pursuit begins from the confession that the fight for justice is included within God's plan for the salvation of sinners in and through Christ. This distinct starting point leads to a unique perspective. For example, the church knows what all other groups do not: hardships, anxiety, persecution, hunger, nakedness, danger, and even violence can never separate anyone

51. John 14:16–26.

from the love of Christ, nor can they compare to the "glory about to be revealed."[52] Such evils, in fact, can be and are transformed by God so that they work for good, such as by increasing endurance, refining character, and turning one more fully to the hope found only in God.[53] This means that the church approaches the issue of justice always from within the larger context of God's providence, and this gives the church a level of patience and endurance that other groups lack.[54] The church can remain hopeful even in the face of the brutality of the bureaucracy and the seemingly intractable reign of the powers because it always acts under the presupposition that the powers' days are numbered: God will prevail over them, because they have been defeated by God in and through Christ. This knowledge helps the church resist the temptation to fall into the kind of indifference that too often grips those working for justice, because the church can proceed from the certainty that its actions matter even if they produce no tangible consequences. Neither the strength of the opposition nor the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of the church's efforts can ever be the church's primary focus. Rather, the church's chief concern is obedience: Christians fight for justice and against unrighteousness simply because that is what it means to follow Christ, and the goal is not success but a life lived in correspondence to him. This perspective provides Christians with the motivation to "swim against the stream regardless of the cost or consequences," because it gives them reason to continue their work against sin and its effects even when it does not make any sense to do so.[55] Such an approach makes all the difference in a city like Baltimore as depicted in *The Wire*, because it means that the church does not give up even when its work is stymied at every turn and failure, at least as some would define it, is a near certainty.

This insight leads to another particularity of the church's work in the world: among all the other organizations participating in the struggle for justice, only the church fights by working for *every* human being. Since the church first seeks God and on this basis struggles against the powers and their effects, its fight for justice can never be directed against any single entity, group, or person.[56] Political movements, social organizations, or governments tend to focus on an "other" that must be defeated, so that the pursuit of justice inevitably takes the form of a "friend-foe" dynamic. This is what we see in *The Wire*: the government, police, and citizens who struggle

52. Rom 8:18, 35.
53. Rom 5:3–5; 8:28.
54. Rev 13:10, 14:12.
55. Barth, *Christian Life*, 267.
56. Ibid., 210.

against injustice do so by fighting the people and groups they rightly or wrongly perceive to be the cause of these problems. But the actual problem is not these people but the *powers*, the forces that twist natural gifts and good efforts in misguided and problematic directions. The government, police, and good citizens have no solution to the problems on the Baltimore streets because none of them can grapple with their true foe, the actual enemy that remains beyond everyone's grasp while holding the city and its people in its sway and thwarting every move made against it. The church, in contrast, addresses its efforts against humanity's true enemies—sin and the powers—because it knows that history is defined by Jesus Christ's victory over these enemies through his life, death, and resurrection. The Christian God is the God who is for humanity in Christ, and this God awakens and enlivens his church so that it also exists for all humans by resisting, not other people, but the powers of sin and death that hold them in their grasp. To fight in this way is fight for *every* person, even "those with whom they may clash."[57] This is because every human—from the Christian in the church to the law-abiding citizen to the criminal—stands guilty of sin, the "disorder which both inwardly and outwardly controls and penetrates and poisons and disrupts all human relations and interconnections."[58] To fight against those who share this problem as if they were the enemy would merely confirm and increase the disorder fostered by the powers, to feed into the very cycle of sin that manifests itself at every turn. This is what we see happen again and again in *The Wire*. But to fight primarily against sin and the powers is to take the "cause of all people—wise and foolish, good and bad." It means not being "led astray either by the guilt of others toward them or by the idea that they themselves have no guilt whatever toward others."[59] Rather, it is to become a "peacemaker" (Matt 5:9), to turn the other cheek (Matt 5:39), to love one's enemies and persecutors (Matt 5:44), and to reverse Cain's indifference by becoming the "keeper" of one's brother, even when one's brother is the perpetrator of injustice. This, in turn, is to begin to live into the future of the kingdom and redeem the city made in Cain's image. No longer do we rely on the city to hold up human security or invest in its systems as ends in themselves. Rather, in and through its prayer, "Thy kingdom come," the church looks toward the heavenly city, the one that comes from the east where Cain once traveled (Zech 14:4), the one that comes with the promise of hope that all things will be made right. This new city marks the horizon of the church's hope, and by keeping their eyes fixed upon it, Christians in

57. Ibid.
58. Ibid., 211.
59. Ibid., 212.

the church continue to fight for every human even when it does not make any sense to do so, and even when everyone else has given up in despair.

CONCLUSION: IMAGINING THE KINGDOM

As Barth considers the despair caused by the powers and the church's response to it, he argues that the church must begin by starting with the reality of God's eternal decision to reconcile the world in Jesus Christ. The God Christians worship and serve is the God who created this world for Christ,[60] and we know Christ because he has come to us in the flesh in the fulfillment of God's covenant for humanity and creation.[61] This divine plan in and through Christ intrinsically defines all created being, including the being of every human. There is no part of creation that exists independent of this plan, and everything in creation can be seen in its light. From this posture, the church can envision the world around it in light of Christ rather than the other way around, giving it "ears to hear" and "eyes to see" Christ's ongoing work in creation, through his Spirit, "to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross."[62] The "in heaven" part of God's reconciling work includes Christ's defeat of sin on the cross, where he "rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."[63] The "on earth" part is being worked out in time, according to God's plan, in part through God's work through his elect, his church, who were "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be [their] way of life."[64] The church, commissioned to live in obedience to God, prays for the coming of Christ and his kingdom. As they pray, they seek to correspond to their being "in Christ" by working out their salvation in concrete ways through daily obedience to Christ, knowing that God is at work in them enabling them to will and work according to his divine plan.[65] This work takes the form of living for others, which involves abandoning their own interests and putting others first in an imitation of the mind of Christ.[66] They exalt Christ through their work by seeking to make the world around them begin to reflect Christ's own will

60. Col 1:16.
61. John 1:14; Gal 4:4–5.
62. Col 1:20.
63. Col 1:13–14.
64. Eph 2:10.
65. Phil 2:13.
66. Phil 2:3–8.

for it. This is an act of worship, because it is an act of readiness: it marks the church's preparation for their coming king, so that when they go out to meet him at his coming,[67] they will do so as people who are "ready" for his arrival.[68] In the meantime, they pray for his coming and act in accordance with their prayer by seeking righteousness, a search that takes concrete form in lives given over to loving the people around them though proclaiming the gospel to them and seeking a justice for them that reflects God's own justice.[69]

This is a profound vision, but also a difficult one. Christians face opposition along the way from the "cosmic powers of this present darkness" that work against them.[70] The effects of those powers are on full display in *The Wire*. Viewed in isolation from God's coming kingdom, this display leads to despair, a hopelessness that all our efforts fail and we have no option but indifference in face of so great a foe. But when viewed in light of God's plan in Christ, the picture of humanity found in *The Wire* becomes a call to the church to enter into the city and struggle on behalf of humanity. This is *The Wire*'s clarifying contribution to the church mission, and it helps the church see how it might begin to link up with what God is doing in cities like Baltimore. These kinds of cities need people who will be willing to "speak the truth to [their] neighbors"[71] no matter what the cost, and they need citizens who, in the face of the powers, focus upon "building up, as there is need, so that [their] words may give grace to those who hear."[72] This work brings hope, not because it is merely another human work, but because it is a work performed through the church by God himself, the one "who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine."[73]

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67. Matt 21:8–9; 1 Thess 4:17.
68. Luke 12:32–39.
69. Rev 22:20.
70. Eph 6:12.
71. Eph 4:25.
72. Eph 4:29.
73. Eph 3:20.

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Edited by
JONATHAN TRAN
and MYLES WERNTZ


CASCADE *Books* · Eugene, Oregon