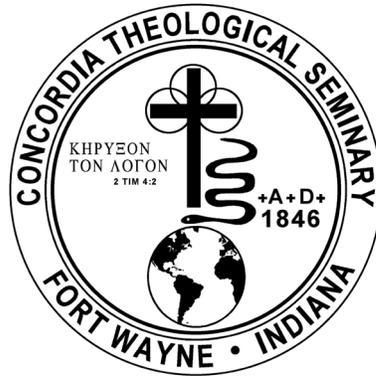


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The Challenge of Karl Barth's Doctrine of the Word of God

Jack D. Kilcrease

I. Introduction

Although Pope Paul VI was certainly exaggerating when he said that Karl Barth (1886–1968) was the most consequential theologian since Thomas Aquinas,¹ Barth is still generally regarded as the most important theologian of the twentieth century.² It is for this reason that over the last century theologians from across the spectrum have been forced to engage either negatively or positively with Barth's theology.

Moreover, in spite of the fact that Barth was a distinctly Reformed theologian, over the last century Lutheran theology has been significantly shaped by engagement with him.³ It was in reaction to the Barmen Declaration and Barth's "gospel-law" theology⁴ that Werner Elert penned his famous rebuttal⁵ that some regard as having exaggerated the Lutheran law-gospel distinction.⁶ Robert Preus studied under T. F. Torrance, one of Barth's chief Anglophone expositors and translators.⁷ Preus's classic works *The Inspiration of Scripture* and *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism* are to an extent defenses of confessional Lutheran theology against neo-orthodoxy in general and Barth's theology in particular.⁸

¹ T. F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990), 1.

² Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 76.

³ Much of this section is based on, but is not identical to, my discussion of Barth in my doctoral dissertation: Jack Kilcrease, "The Self-Donation of God: Gerhard Forde and the Question of Atonement in the Lutheran Tradition" (PhD diss., Marquette University, 2009).

⁴ Karl Barth, "Gospel and Law," in *Community, State, and Church: Three Essays*, ed. Will Herberg (New York: Doubleday, 1960), 71–100.

⁵ Werner Elert, *Law and Gospel*, trans. Edward Schroeder (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 4–10.

⁶ Scott Murray, *Life, Law, and the Living God: The Third Use of the Law in Modern American Lutheranism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2001), 28–30.

⁷ David Scaer, "The Theology of Robert David Preus and His Person: Making a Difference," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 74.1–2 (2015): 86.

⁸ Robert Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture: A Study of the Theology of the Seventeenth Century Lutheran Dogmatists* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003); Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 2 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970–1972).

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Lastly, the two most influential theologians of the late-twentieth-century ELCA, Robert Jenson and Gerhard Forde, both engaged with the theology of Barth extensively in their doctoral dissertations and drew on his work throughout their careers.⁹ Therefore, as we remember the one-hundredth anniversary of the publication of the first edition of *Der Römerbrief* (1919),¹⁰ it is important for confessional Lutherans to revisit Barth's work since it remains such an important challenge even in the present.

Among Barth's many significant teachings is his doctrine of the Word of God. Although highly problematic from a confessional Lutheran perspective, Barth's doctrine of the Word of God is extremely sophisticated and spans most of parts I and II of the first volume of his *Kirchliche Dogmatik* (1932–1967).¹¹ When one considers its importance for contemporary theology, it is not a challenge that confessional Lutherans can ignore. Many mid-twentieth-century confessional Lutheran responses to Barth's doctrine of the Word of God focused on his rejection of inerrancy, verbal inspiration, and his overly existential view of scriptural authority.¹² Although these are important criticisms of Barth, we will examine his teaching from the perspective of other key issues. Below, we will argue that Lutherans must necessarily reject Barth's understanding of the Word of God because its premises conflict with two other key confessional principles: the full communication of the divine attributes to the humanity of Christ (*genus majestaticum*) and the proper distinction between law and gospel.

II. Barth's Movement toward an Analogical Doctrine of the Word

Central to Barth's theology of the Word is the concept of revelational analogy. Barth's analogical theology of the Word is primarily concerned with making God knowable, while preserving his transcendence. On the one hand, God's act of entering creation in the incarnation of Jesus Christ makes a genuine impact on the creaturely realm. Because of his incarnation in Christ, God may be thought

⁹ Gerhard Forde, "Karl Barth on the Consequences of Lutheran Christology," in *The Preached God: Proclamation in Word and Sacrament*, ed. Steven Paulson and Mark Mattes (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 68–88; Forde, *The Law-Gospel Debate: An Interpretation of Its Historical Development* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1969). Also see Robert Jenson, *Alpha and Omega: A Study in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002).

¹⁰ Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief* (1919; repr., Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1985).

¹¹ We will be citing the English edition of the *Kirchliche Dogmatik* throughout this article: Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols. trans., G. T. Thomson et al. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936–1977). Hereafter *Church Dogmatics* will be abbreviated as "CD."

¹² See Robert Preus, "The Word of God in the Theology of Karl Barth," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 31 (February, 1960): 105–115; Preus, "The Doctrine of Revelation in Contemporary Theology," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 9.3 (1966): 111–123.

about and known by humans. On the other hand, human knowledge of revelation does not objectify God. Through revelation humans know God as only an analogical echo of the infinite and eternal divine being. Even in the event of the revelation, God remains wholly other.

Regarding Barth's concept of the Word of God, a number of scholarly trends have emerged. Most scholars have recognized and struggled with two tendencies in Barth's doctrine: one dialectical and the other analogical. The first scholar to recognize the dual dialectical and analogical aspects of Barth's teaching was the Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar.

Balthasar claimed that Barth's early writing (particularly his various editions of the commentary on Romans) represented a "dialectical" understanding of the Word of God.¹³ In this view, creation, due to both its creatureliness and its fallenness, is a realm wholly other to God. When God speaks his Word, a violent rupture occurs, thereby destroying the old demonic order and establishing a new one by an act of irresistible grace. Balthasar posited that, after the 1930s, Barth moved away from this stance (particularly in light of his study of Anselm of Canterbury¹⁴) and began to talk about an analogy of the revelation, or more precisely "the Analogy of Faith."¹⁵ God remains wholly other in the giving of his Word. Nevertheless, the event of revelation is now no longer thought of as being one of the pure negation of temporality. Rather, God is conceptualized as being able to take up creaturely signifiers and use them to echo his eternal reality in a non-objectifying way. He thereby reveals himself while maintaining his transcendence.

In the mid-1990s, Bruce McCormack reevaluated Balthasar's interpretation and concluded that Barth's theology of the Word had been part of a single continuous development that was initially purely dialectical, but gradually also became analogical. According to this interpretation, analogy does not negate dialectic, but is in fact simply an expansion and refinement of the initial insight. Commenting on the level of development in this line of thinking, which Barth had achieved by the time he was teaching at Göttingen, McCormack concludes:

[I]t should be pointed out that one of the central defects of the von Balthasarian formula of a "turn from dialectic to analogy" has now become clear. Von Balthasar placed both of these things—dialectic and analogy—on the same plane of discourse. He treated them both as methods. Dialectical method was

¹³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. Edward Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 64–85.

¹⁴ See Karl Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum: Anselm's Proof of the Existence of God in the Context of His Theological Scheme* (London: SCM Press, 1960).

¹⁵ Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, 86–121.

simply replaced by analogical method. In truth, however, while the dialectic in question is a method, analogy is not. Analogy belongs to a vastly different realm of discourse. Analogy—whether the analogy of the cross or the later analogy of faith—is a description of the result of a divine action. It is the description of a relation of correspondence between divine Self-knowing and human knowledge of God which arises as a consequence of God’s act of Self-revelation. Talk of analogy has to do with what God does; talk of dialectic emerges here in the context of what human beings can do in light of the fact that they have no capacity for bringing about the Self-speaking God.¹⁶

In other words, the dialectical and analogical descriptions of the Word of God are not mutually exclusive, but in fact work together. Whereas dialectic is a method for engaging of divine revelation, analogy describes how God makes himself knowable. The analogy of revelation presupposes that God is knowable in created concepts, but that knowledge of God is always the result of divine initiative and not human endeavor. In a dialectical fashion, humans recognize that the revelation of the Word is a form of disruptive grace. This is a total eschatological break with what came before. Nonetheless, the eschatological revelation of the Word also presupposes a need for partial creaturely correspondence (brought about by divine grace) to the act of God’s self-disclosure. McCormack’s view has generally been accepted within the scholarly community. We will therefore roughly follow McCormack’s scholarly trajectory in our discussion of Barth’s mature position as expressed in his *Kirchliche Dogmatik*.

III. Revelation: Dialectical and Analogical

First, it is important to recognize the theocentrism of Barth’s understanding of the Word. Revelation is about God: “God reveals Himself. He reveals Himself through Himself. He reveals *Himself*.”¹⁷ Because the revelation of the Word is about God, it is not about human consciousness or other forms of philosophical knowledge. Knowledge of God is always disruptive. It comes about not on the basis of immanent possibilities within creation, but on the basis of a divine act: “If we really want to understand revelation in terms of its subject, i.e., God, then the first thing we have to realize is that this subject, God, the Revealer, is identical with His act, in revelation and also identical with its effect.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Bruce McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909–1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 313–314.

¹⁷ CD I/1.296.

¹⁸ CD I/1.296.

Because God is triune, the event of God's act of revelation is triune. John Webster comments, "Revelation is not the manifestation by God of realities other than God: as self-revelation, it is Trinitarian in character, since God is God's self as Trinity."¹⁹ Therefore, just as God is actualized in his eternal being as triune, he acts in time to reveal himself in a triune manner. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are "Revealer, Revelation, and Revealedness."²⁰ There is then a threefold form of God's temporal manifestation as the Word in the form of the man Jesus, the Bible, and the preaching of the Church.²¹ In this, God "repeats in his relationship *ad extra* a relationship proper to Himself in His inner divine essence."²² Indeed "He makes a copy of Himself."²³

This way of thinking about revelation has several effects on how human language is understood as a vehicle of God's Word. Since revelation as it is comprehended by creatures is a temporal and creaturely echoing of the divine being, it can by no means be directly identical with God's own eternal being and therefore must necessarily be analogical. God's being infinitely transcends human words, and therefore, there can be only a dialectical similitude between the created and uncreated word: "Pressed by the revelation of God we are pushed on to the word 'analogy.'"²⁴ The creaturely echo of God's act is merely similar to God's own eternal being. In spite of this, his being remains mysterious; indeed the act of revelation is one of "veiling."²⁵ There is a "likeness and unlikeness . . . a partial correspondence and agreement"²⁶ between the divine act of revelation and the creaturely analogue. God by way of analogy remains free and revealed simultaneously. He reveals himself, while at the same time he is not objectified by his act of revelation.

Second, because God remains free in his revelation, the analogical similitude between the created signifier and the divine signified is always the result of divine initiative. In spite of Psalm 19 and Romans 1, Barth nevertheless insists that creation in and of itself lacks any inherent ability to reveal God. This is one of the many reasons why Barth does not favor the Thomistic doctrine of the analogy of being: "I regard the *analogia entis* [the analogy of being] as the invention of the Antichrist,

¹⁹ John Webster, *Karl Barth* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 58.

²⁰ CD I/1.295.

²¹ See short description in CD II/1.870–871.

²² CD III/2.218.

²³ CD III/2.218.

²⁴ CD II/1.225.

²⁵ CD II/1.225.

²⁶ CD II/1.225.

and I think that because of it one cannot become Catholic.”²⁷ Not only does Barth claim that this doctrine incorporates humanity and God into one knowable general category of being²⁸ (a charge largely dismissed by his critics as a misrepresentation of the doctrine²⁹), but he also claims that it represents a kind of epistemic Pelagianism, wherein God is knowable automatically without divine grace and initiative. Barth comments:

If grace is alongside nature, however high above it may be put, it is obviously no longer the grace of God, but the grace which man ascribes to himself. If God’s revelation is alongside a knowledge of God proper to man as such, even though it may never advance except as a prolegomenon, it is obviously no longer the revelation of God, but a new expression (borrowed or even stolen) for the revelation which encounters man in his own reflection.³⁰

Of itself, human language does not have an inherent capacity to convey the divine being. What therefore must happen is a divine act of grace that will exalt human language and make it capable of witnessing to the divine being. It is “not that language could grasp revelation” writes Barth, but rather that revelation “could grasp language.”³¹ T. F. Torrance therefore correctly writes: “While God himself infinitely transcends all creaturely forms of our thought and speech, nevertheless he has freely and graciously *bound his written Word to himself* in such a way that *we are bound to it* as the direct canonical instrument of his divine truth and authority.”³²

At best, Barth will allow for what he refers to as the “Analogy of Faith”³³ in the first two volumes of *Kirchliche Dogmatik* (i.e., the doctrines of the Word of God and God). Finally, in the third volume (i.e., the doctrine of creation), Barth introduces the “Analogy of Relation.” The former refers to the previously discussed idea that the grace-wrought word that God gives in his revelation echoes and stands in analogy to God’s own eternal being and Word. The “Analogy of Relation,” on the other hand, refers to the recognition that the structures of the created order (heaven and earth, male and female) bear a resemblance to God as he has already revealed himself (e.g., God’s relationality as Trinity). Barth comments:

²⁷ CD I/1.ix.

²⁸ CD II/I.310. Also see CD II/2.48.

²⁹ Notably Hans Urs von Balthasar. See Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, 147–150.

³⁰ CD II/1.139.

³¹ CD I/1.340.

³² Torrance, *Karl Barth: Biblical and Evangelical Theologian*, 92 (emphasis added).

³³ CD I/1.237–247.

[T]here is disparity between the relationship of God and man and the prior relationship of the Father to the Son and the Son to the Father, of God to Himself. But for all the disparity . . . there is a correspondence and similarity between the two relationships. This is not a correspondence and similarity of being, an *analogia entis*. The being of God cannot be compared with that of man. But it is not a question of this twofold being. It is a question of the relationship within the being of God on the one side and between the being of God and that of man on the other. Between these two relationships as such—and it is in this sense that the second is the image of the first—there is correspondence and similarity. There is an *analogia relationis*. The correspondence and similarity of the two relationships consists in the fact that the freedom in which God posits Himself as the Father, is posited by Himself as the Son and confirms Himself as the Holy Ghost, is the same freedom as that in which He is the Creator of man, in which man may be His creature, and in which the Creator-creature relationship is established by the Creator.³⁴

There are two important elements here. First, the recognition that there is an analogical correspondence between creator and creature is not due to a knowledge of God gained independently of supernatural revelation (i.e., *analogia entis*, natural theology). Second, because God is infinite and humanity is finite, there is no correspondence between the being of the creator and that of the creature. In other words, as a result of divine aseity and infinity, God's "whatness" does not resemble the "whatness" of his creatures. Nevertheless, God is relationally configured in a particular way (i.e., as the Trinity), and so there is an analogical resemblance between relationally constituted creatures and divine relationality. Put another way, although there is no resemblance of the "whatness" of creature and creator, there is a resemblance of the "howness."

Now that we have established the analogical structure of the revelation of the Word of God in Barth's theology, it is important to examine its connection to Barth's understanding of the incarnation and the authority and inspiration of Holy Scripture. Such an examination will serve as a helpful clarification of the contrast between the confessional Lutheran and the Barthian views of the doctrine of the Word of God.

First, Barth defines the revelation of the Word of God in what might be described as "Christomonistic" terms.³⁵ It is not simply the case that the message of the Bible centers on Jesus, something with which confessional Lutherans would

³⁴ CD III/2.220.

³⁵ See helpful observation in Richard Muller, "A Note on 'Christocentrism' and the Imprudent Use of Such Terminology," *Calvin Theological Journal* 68 (2006): 253–260.

doubtless agree. Rather, for Barth, Jesus is the only true revelation of God,³⁶ although Barth does allow that this single revelation of God is anticipated in the history of Old Testament Israel.³⁷ Hence, Scripture is authoritative only because it is a witness to Jesus as the Word of God.³⁸ Therefore, Barth's view of Scripture is overwhelmingly defined by his understanding of the person of Christ and, as a result, how the two natures in Christ relate to each other.

Second, Barth is a thoroughly Reformed thinker and therefore his system maintains the basic structural priorities one finds in Zwingli, Calvin, and later Reformed scholasticism.³⁹ True to his confessional identity, Barth utterly and completely rejects the *genus majestaticum* and the Lutheran *capax* (*finitum capax infiniti*, "the finite is capable of the infinite") in favor of the Reformed *extra calvinisticum* and *non-capax*.⁴⁰ The *extra calvinisticum* refers to the idea that there exists an unincarnate Word (*logos asarkos*) alongside the incarnate Word (*logos ensarkos*) after the incarnation.⁴¹ In other words, the divine being does not become completely tangible in identifying with the humanity of Christ, but continues to retain something of its otherness and intangibility alongside and outside his flesh. It is the logical christological consequence of the Reformed *non-capax*, the idea that what is finite cannot contain what is infinite.

Throughout the later volumes of the *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, the Lutheran *capax* is the subject of a strong negative polemic. Predictably following the traditional Reformed line of argumentation, Barth largely regards the *genus majestaticum* as docetic in that it inappropriately deifies humanity. Ultimately, he finds the notion of any communication of divine glory to the man Jesus problematic.⁴² Nonetheless, this gives rise to the question as to how the divine person acts through the human nature without any act of genuine self-communication. In order to explain this and to make up for this deficit of sanctifying divine glory in the man Jesus, Barth settles on the concept of the *communicatio gratiarum* borrowed from Reformed

³⁶ CD I/1.119.

³⁷ See an interesting argument in Katherine Sonderegger, *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew: Karl Barth's "Doctrine of Israel"* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992).

³⁸ CD I/2.457.

³⁹ Much of this material is covered in a different form in my work, Jack Kilcrease, *The Self-Donation of God: A Contemporary Lutheran Approach to Christ and His Benefits* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 149–197.

⁴⁰ CD VI/1.180; CD IV/2.167–170.

⁴¹ See discussion in Jan Rohls, *Reformed Confessions: From Zurich to Barmen*, trans. John Hoffmeyer (Louisville, KY: John Knox Westminster Press, 1998), 102–107.

⁴² CD IV/1.143. Also see brief discussion in CD IV/2.82–83.

scholasticism.⁴³ Barth states that there is a “total and exclusive determination of . . . [Jesus’] human nature . . . by the grace of God.”⁴⁴ According to this concept, although the humanity of Jesus lacks divine glory, it possesses a superabundance of creaturely perfections.⁴⁵

The christological concept of the *communicatio gratiarum* is partially rooted in the Reformed scholastic distinction between the communicable and the incommunicable attributes of God.⁴⁶ Put succinctly, the older Reformed theologians held that God could communicate his wisdom and moral perfections to his creatures through their created similitude to his being (interestingly, a form of the *analogia entis* doctrine), whereas his qualities of glory (omnipotence, omnipresence, etc.) could not be communicated. If these later attributes could be communicated, God would transmute creatures into himself, which would be a contradiction in terms. When applied to Christology, such a concept also had the advantage of being able to explain the harmony between Jesus’ morally perfected will and the divine person of the Son, without recourse to a real communication of glory within the hypostatic union, which was posited by Lutherans. Therefore, as we will see below, the primary function of the *communicatio gratiarum* for Barth is to describe the activation of the obedience of Christ’s human nature in an analogical correspondence to his divine nature. Such a capacity is the result of the human nature’s created perfections and is not the result of the divine nature’s deification of the human nature’s will.

Barth views Jesus Christ as an image and actualization of the covenant between God and humanity. Christ is the “real man” and the true “covenant-partner of God.”⁴⁷ This covenant is decidedly bilateral, rather than unilateral. Christ the man is exemplar of spontaneous human submission to divine sovereignty under the determination of divine grace. Within this bilateral structure, Christ’s divinity moves toward humanity via the kenotic exercise of his priestly office,⁴⁸ whereas

⁴³ See lengthy discussion in CD IV/2.91–115.

⁴⁴ CD IV/2.88. Also see discussion in Paul Jones, *The Humanity of Christ: Christology in Karl Barth’s Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark International, 2008), 117–182.

⁴⁵ Heinrich Hepp, *Reformed Dogmatics Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources*, trans. G. T. Thomson (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1950), 434–438. It should, of course, also be borne in mind that the Lutheran scholastics never denied that Christ had an abundance of created gifts. They simply insisted that he also possessed divine glory. See FC SD VIII in *Concordia Triglotta*, ed. F. Bente and W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 1033. Hereafter *Concordia Triglotta* will be cited as “*Triglotta*.”

⁴⁶ Hepp, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 60–64; Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 3:223–226.

⁴⁷ CD III/2.203.

⁴⁸ CD IV/1.142–143.

in his humanity he ascends toward God via the exercise of his kingly office.⁴⁹ In the sequence of Jesus' life, the priestly office corresponds to his *kenosis* and crucifixion, whereas the kingly office manifests itself in the resurrection. As a result, the covenant is actualized because the man Jesus properly corresponds to and analogically echoes the series of God's eternal decrees (i.e., the rejection of sinful humanity = crucifixion, the election of a new humanity = resurrection). In this event, all humanity is irresistibly elected.⁵⁰ Although Barth explicitly rejects universalism,⁵¹ it is difficult not to see this as the ultimate implication of his position.⁵²

From this, it may be observed that in Barth's Christology the accent falls heavily on Christ's grace-determined human agency cooperating with the divine person, rather than on the unity of the divine subject with the *anhypostatic* humanity.⁵³ Unlike the Lutheran understanding of the person of Christ, Barth does not view God's personal agency as present and active in, under, and through the humanity of Christ (*genus apotelesmaticum, genus majesticum*).⁵⁴ Rather, by its obedience, the humanity of Christ analogically corresponds to God's series of decrees (i.e., the Reformed scholastic *communicatio gratiarum*).

By interpreting the relationship between the two natures in this manner, Barth distances the two natures in order to maintain divine transcendence. Also, much like Thomas Aquinas in his concept of theology as "speculative,"⁵⁵ Barth envisions his theology of the incarnation as giving human beings the ability to think into the event of revelation and indirectly see into God's eternal being. By looking on the human nature of Christ, one can see into God's eternal being above and beyond the external Word. In a word, Barth ever remains on the side of the Reformed theologian Johannes Oecolampadius, who at Marburg in 1529 chided Luther for clinging to Christ's humanity, when he should have been looking past it and focusing on his invisible divinity.⁵⁶

⁴⁹ CD IV/2.4.

⁵⁰ CD II/2.116–118.

⁵¹ CD II/2.417–419.

⁵² Interestingly enough, Emil Brunner famously argued that Barth's system represented the most consistent universalism in the history of Christian thought. See Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, trans. Olive Wyon (London: Lutterworth, 1949), 314.

⁵³ CD II/2.94–194.

⁵⁴ FC SD VIII; *Triglotta*, 1031, 1041.

⁵⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: The Blackfriars English Translation*, ed. Thomas Gilby (New York and London: McGraw-Hill, 1964–), 1:15–17, 1a q 1 art 4.

⁵⁶ Martin Luther, "The Marburg Colloquy and the Marburg Articles" (1529): vol. 38, p. 46, in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis:

Since Barth views Scripture and revelation in christomonistic terms, the function of the Bible is exclusively to witness to the covenant enacted between God and humanity actualized in Jesus. Likewise, his rejection of the Lutheran *capax* in favor of the Reformed *non-capax* also has an impact on how Scripture functions as revelation. Just as the humanity of Christ cannot be the medium of the real presence of his divinity (as it is in the confessional Lutheran understanding), Scripture likewise cannot truly be the Word of God. At best, Scripture is a written human witness to the Word of God. Just as one should look past Christ's humanity and see into his divinity, according to Barth, one should look past the word of the Bible to the real Word of God which it reflects.⁵⁷

Among other things, this means that for Barth Scripture is neither inerrant nor verbally inspired.⁵⁸ Doubtless, part of Barth's rejection of inerrancy and verbal inspiration is simply a holdover from the theological liberalism in which he was trained as a seminarian and young pastor.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, it must be observed that his rejection of verbal inspiration and inerrancy also corresponds to his very Reformed concern that God's revelation in the Word in no way objectifies him or compromises his transcendence. That is to say, if Holy Scripture were actually the Word of God and represented (one might say) the "real presence" of his truth (one could also say, the Lutheran "is," as in "this is my body"),⁶⁰ God's transcendent truth would become objectified in a book and thereby be dragged down to the level of creatures. Such a conclusion is unacceptable to Barth.

Following from this, it should also be observed that for Barth the Bible's witness to the events of salvation history must necessarily be conceptualized as "legendary" and "sagic."⁶¹ It must be borne in mind that this does not (as in the case of Rudolf Bultmann and other modern theologians) entail a rejection of God's miraculous and saving supernatural activity in history. Barth is quite clear throughout his *Kirchliche Dogmatik* that miraculous redemptive events did more or less happen, and the Bible

Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–), hereafter AE.

⁵⁷ CD I/2.457.

⁵⁸ CD I/2.507–509; CD I/2.529–533.

⁵⁹ McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 30–128.

⁶⁰ Perhaps we might say that the Orthodox Lutheran position is what Robert Preus called "Biblical Realism." See Robert Preus, "How Is the Lutheran Church to Interpret and Use the Old and New Testaments?" *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 14.3 (1973): 31–32. Also, see summary and appreciation of Preus's position in Kurt Marquart, "The 'Realist Principle' of Theology," in *Doctrine Is Life: Essays on Justification and the Lutheran Confessions*, ed. Klemet I. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 367–373.

⁶¹ CD I/1.326–329; CD III/1.80–94; IV/2.478–479. See description in George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 47.

does in fact bear witness to them. Nevertheless, when Scripture witnesses to these events it does so in an analogical and non-objectifying manner. Hence, they are recorded in a manner that mixes literal history together with non-literal and (although Barth would resist the term) mythological elements.⁶²

The logic here is clear: Just as God would be objectified and brought down to the level of his creatures (thereby losing his transcendence) if he truly and fully communicated his glory to Jesus, so, too, his miraculous actions in salvation history would become objectified if they were set down in literal language. Hence, the reports of the events of the history of salvation as they are presented in the Bible must be “similar to, with an even greater dissimilarity” from what literally happened.⁶³

Lastly, with regard to the efficacy of the Word, Barth could often speak of the Bible as “becoming” the Word of God. That is to say, for Barth the Bible possesses its identity as the Word of God only to the extent that it is a medium of God’s communication of his Word to his creatures (what George Hunsinger refers to as Barth’s “actualism”⁶⁴). This can only occur by God’s own sovereign initiative in causing certain human beings to hear him in the words of the Bible. Hence, the Bible is not inherently efficacious, but only occasionally when God chooses to make it so.⁶⁵ Again, Barth’s underlining Reformed logic is clear. If the word of the Bible were inherently efficacious, then God would risk tying himself to a particular creaturely medium and would risk becoming objectified.

This stands in significant contrast with the Lutheran understanding of the inherent efficacy of Scripture as developed in greater detail by Johann Gerhard (1582–1637) against Herman Rathmann (1585–1628) during the “Rathmann Controversy” in the early seventeenth century.⁶⁶ Although Rathmann agreed that the Bible was inerrant and verbally inspired (something Barth would reject), he nevertheless insisted that it was not inherently efficacious outside of its use (*extra usum*). In this, he largely mirrored the position of Reformed scholasticism.⁶⁷

⁶² See discussion in Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 47–49.

⁶³ See fascinating discussion in George Hunsinger, “Beyond Literalism and Expressivism: Karl Barth’s Hermeneutical Realism,” in *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 210–225.

⁶⁴ Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 30–35.

⁶⁵ CD I/1.123; CD I/2.457.

⁶⁶ Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 1:367–370. On the controversy, see Johann Anselm Steiger, “Das Wort sie sollen lassen stahn...’: Die Auseinandersetzung Johann Gerhards und der lutherischen Orthodoxie mit Hermann Rahtmann und deren abendmahlstheologische und christologische Implikate,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 95.3 (1998): 340–344.

⁶⁷ Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:322–339.

In response to this, Abraham Calov (1612–1686) later pointed out that the Bible (unlike the sacraments) is always God’s Word, even when it is not being used in proclamation. Since it is intrinsically a communication of God’s truth, it must necessarily always be effective. Ultimately, God’s truth is inherently living and effective.⁶⁸

IV. The Confessional Lutheran Response

Barth’s treatment of the Word of God is problematic from the perspective of confessional Lutheran theology for a number of reasons. Central to our critique will be the Lutheran affirmation that the finite is capable of the infinite (*finitum capax infiniti*). As we have already observed, Barth systematically applies the Reformed christological principle of *finitum non capax infiniti* to his whole theology of the Word of God. This manner of thinking about the Word of God also allows creatures to think into revelation, thereby intellectually ascending into God’s eternal being above the dialectic of hidden and revealed, wrath and grace. Therefore, we will argue that this also leads to Barth’s rejection of the proper distinction between law and gospel.

First, it should be recognized that the distinct structural commitments and trajectories of Reformed and Lutheran Christology translate into differing understandings of the purpose and function of the external Word and the means of grace in general.⁶⁹ In profound contrast to Barth, Luther wrote against Zwingli and his other sacramentarian opponents:

We are not willing to give them room or yield to this metaphysical and philosophical distinction, as it was spun out by reason—as though man preaches, threatens, punishes, gives fears and comforts, but the Holy Ghost does the work; or a man baptizes, absolves, and hands out the supper of the Lord Christ, but God purifies the heart and forgives sin. Oh no, absolutely not! But we conclude thus: God preaches, threatens, punishes, gives fear, comforts, baptizes, hands out the Sacrament of the Altar, and absolves Himself.⁷⁰

Earlier in the debate with Zwingli over the Lord’s Supper, Luther similarly stated that “the glory of our God is precisely that for our sakes he comes down to the very

⁶⁸ Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 1:368.

⁶⁹ Again see Kilcrease, *The Self-Donation of God*, 149–197.

⁷⁰ Lowell Green, “Philosophical Presuppositions in the Reformed-Lutheran Debate on John 6,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 56.1 (1992): 29, quoting from Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Tischreden*, 6 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1912–1921), 3:673, no. 3868 (Lauterbach text), hereafter abbreviated WA TR. Lowell Green’s translation.

depths, into human flesh, into the bread, into our mouth, and into our heart, our bosom.”⁷¹

Gustaf Wingren offers similar critiques of Barth to those that Luther made of Zwingli and his other sacramentarian opponents: “The Word of the Bible contains within itself the coming of Christ as its general aim to which all tends. . . . It is in the simple words, in what is human in the Bible, that God’s power is hidden; divine and human must not be separated.” Indeed, Wingren states, “Even in the passage and even in preaching, *communicatio idiomatum* holds sway.”⁷² Johann Gerhard writes similarly: “The Holy Spirit speaks to us in and through Scripture. The voice and way of speaking of the Holy Spirit, therefore, sounds in those very words of Scripture.”⁷³

This being said, it is undoubtedly the case that much of the language that Scripture and church tradition uses about God is analogical (e.g., trinitarian “persons” and their relations).⁷⁴ The Bible also uses metaphor and simile. Nevertheless, it is not the specific language employed by the Bible about God that is at issue. Rather, what is at issue is how God becomes present to his creatures in revelation (particularly in the person of Christ), as well as in the Word and sacrament ministry of the Church.

Seen in this light, from the confessional Lutheran perspective the Word and sacrament can never be an analogical word that points beyond itself to some other word of God or higher truth. Rather, in the flesh of Jesus, in the Bible, and in the sacraments, God’s Word and truth become a “real presence” to believers. Christ and his truth are not present as an analogical representation, or, to recall Zwingli’s controversy with Luther, a “figure” that merely indirectly “signifies” God and his truth.⁷⁵ Rather, when God reveals himself and acts upon his creatures, he does so not equivocally or analogically, but literally and concretely through the sacramental mediation of the Word. Therefore, the divine law and gospel proclaimed in the Church are not “like and unlike” God’s judgment and mercy. Rather, they are the

⁷¹ Luther, *This Is My Body* (1527), AE 37:72.

⁷² Gustaf Wingren, *The Living Word: A Theological Study of Preaching and the Church*, trans. Victor C. Pogue (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 208.

⁷³ Johann Gerhard, *On the Legitimate Interpretation of Holy Scripture*, trans. Richard Dinda (Malone, TX: Repristination Press, 2015), 20.

⁷⁴ See Luther’s views in Christine Helmer, *The Trinity and Martin Luther* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017), 239–241.

⁷⁵ See discussion in Huldrych Zwingli, “Friendly Exegesis, that is, Exposition of the Matter of the Eucharist to Martin Luther, February 1527,” in *Huldrych Zwingli Writings*, 2 vols., trans. and ed. H. Wayne Pipkin (New York: Pickwick Publications, 1984), 2:250–252.

real presence of God's judgment and mercy being enacted on the hearers of the Word (Matt 10:14–15, 40; Luke 10:8–16).⁷⁶

To illustrate how Lutherans have confessed the “real presence” of God's truth in the Word of God (perhaps we might say the Lutheran “is” rather than the Zwinglian “signifies”), it is perhaps useful to revisit a debate that broke out between the Lutheran and Reformed traditions in the mid-seventeenth century. This debate concerned whether the man Jesus possessed what Protestant scholasticism termed the “archetypal theology” and the “ectypal theology.”⁷⁷

In *A Treatise on True Theology*, the Reformed theologian Francis Junius (1545–1602) differentiated between what he called the archetypal theology and ectypal theology. Subsequently, the distinction was introduced into Lutheranism by Johann Gerhard.⁷⁸ In making the distinction, Junius was probably borrowing from Duns Scotus in his differentiation between *theologia in nobis* or *nostra* and *theologia in se*.⁷⁹ Scotus taught that because God was the only one who truly knows himself in an act of eternal self-comprehension (*theologia in se*), he himself was the only true theologian. At best, a human could hope for a small and partial share in God's own eternal act of self-understanding (*theologia in nobis* or *nostra*).⁸⁰

Likewise, Junius posited that because of the ontic distance between humanity and the divine, God communicates an incomplete theology (ectypal theology) through the mediums of nature and Scripture.⁸¹ Through God's eternal act of self-comprehension in the Trinity, he alone possesses the archetypal theology.⁸² Although humans in heaven will possess a much fuller version of the ectypal theology (Matt 5:8; 1 Cor 13:12), they nevertheless can never fully know God in the manner that God knows himself (Isa 40:13; Rom 11:34; 1 Tim 6:16).

True to his Reformed confession, Junius accepted the *non-capax* and therefore posited that the man Jesus only possessed the ectypal theology and not the

⁷⁶ SC V; *Triglotta*, 553. “We receive absolution, or forgiveness, from the Confessor, as from God himself.”

⁷⁷ See Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:225–238; Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 1:112–114; Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles Hays and Henry Jacobs (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 16.

⁷⁸ Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 1:113–114. See Johann Gerhard, “On the Nature of Theology,” §§ 15–17, in *On the Nature of Theology and on Scripture*, trans. Richard Dinda, ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 22–24.

⁷⁹ Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:227–228.

⁸⁰ See Richard Cross, *Duns Scotus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 7.

⁸¹ Franciscus Junius, *A Treatise on True Theology*, trans. David Noe (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 113–120.

⁸² Junius, *A Treatise on True Theology*, 107–112.

archetypal theology.⁸³ In the mid-seventeenth century, Abraham Calov rejected this assertion in his debate with the Reformed theologian Johann Berg (1587–1658).⁸⁴ Calov pointed out that because Jesus possesses the fullness of the divine glory within his humanity (Col 2:9), he must therefore also possess the fullness of divine truth and wisdom: “[Christ] in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:3).⁸⁵ Quenstedt and the other Lutheran theologians of the later period of scholastic orthodoxy followed Calov in this judgment.⁸⁶

The implications from this debate are clear. For Junius and the other Reformed scholastics, the ectypal theology could be only a created analogical echo of the divine archetypal theology (i.e., a mere “signifies”). By contrast, for the Lutherans, the ectypal theology was implicitly a limited, though nevertheless very real, participation in the archetypal theology mediated to them by the risen Jesus present to them in Word and sacrament: “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 4:6; also see 1 Cor 2:16). The “is” of the means of grace gives Christians a share in the real presence of God’s truth.

Hence, from the confessional Lutheran perspective, in the same manner that the humanity of Christ contains the communication of his divinity (*genus majesticum*), through the written Word of Scripture and the preached Word, God truly communicates himself and his truth. This is the case in the sense that he verbally and inerrantly inspires the prophets and apostles to communicate his truth in concrete and literal human words that correspond directly to his truth (John 16:13; 1 Tim 3:16; 1 Pet 1:20–21). It is also the case in the sense that in the written and preached Word of the Bible, the risen Christ is present in the power of the Spirit, justifying, sanctifying, and mystically uniting himself with sinners (Matt 18:20; 28:20; Luke 10:16).

This, of course, prompts the question as to why the Reformed and Lutheran traditions have moved in opposite directions on the question of the *capax*. One reason might simply be the differences in philosophical backgrounds between the

⁸³ Junius, *A Treatise on True Theology*, 121–127.

⁸⁴ Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 1:171. Oddly, Gerhard holds that the man Christ knows only the ectypal theology, yet due to the personal union of the two natures in Christ, it is a unique ectypal theology categorically different than what is in other rational creatures. See Gerhard, “On the Nature of Theology,” § 15, in *On the Nature of Theology and on Scripture*, 22.

⁸⁵ Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

⁸⁶ Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:252; Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 1:170–172.

various reformers. Although this probably was a factor, in light of the wide variety of philosophical backgrounds of the various reformers, such a suggestion is likely to be of limited explanatory power.⁸⁷

Perhaps a more convincing answer to the question of the differing trajectories of the two traditions might be the competing understandings of idolatry. That is to say, both wings of the Reformation believed that the chief problem with human beings (and, indeed the late medieval forms of Christianity which they sought to reform) was idolatry. Nevertheless, as Paul Hinlicky has observed, how the Lutheran and Reformed traditions defined idolatry differ profoundly.⁸⁸ Put succinctly, for Luther and later Lutherans, idolatry was placing ultimate trust in anything that was not God. For the southern reformers (as well as for Reformed scholasticism and Barth), idolatry is primarily characterized as the confusion of the glory of the infinite God with anything created.

The contrast between the two traditions can be particularly observed in how their key confessional documents treat the prohibition against images in the Ten Commandments. It is well known that the Heidelberg Catechism separates the prohibition of images from the larger prohibition against idolatry, whereas according to Luther's division in the Large Catechism, the prohibition against images is simply an example (probably the most relevant examples for the environment of the Ancient Near East) of the prohibition against idolatry.⁸⁹

In other words, for Luther, idolatry may indeed take the shape of following a form of primitive superstition that assumes that physical objects are conduits for various nature deities, or even give one the ability to manipulate certain superhuman powers.⁹⁰ But this is only one particular instance of the overall problem of becoming deaf to God's Word and treating creatures as if they are worthy of our ultimate trust. As Luther puts it, "A god means that from which we are to expect all good and to which we are to take refuge in all distress, so that to have a God is

⁸⁷ See Daniel Bolliger, *Infiniti Contemplatio: Grundzüge der Scotus- und Scotismusrezeption im Werk Huldrych Zwinglis* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

⁸⁸ Paul Hinlicky, *Luther and the Beloved Community: A Path for Christian Theology after Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010), 98.

⁸⁹ Contrast LC I 1; *Triglotta*, 581–593 with Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G. W. Williard (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 517–536.

⁹⁰ LC I 1; *Triglotta*, 585. "Thus, for example, the heathen who put their trust in power and dominion elevated Jupiter as the supreme god; the others, who were bent upon riches, happiness, or pleasure, and a life of ease, Hercules, Mercury, Venus, or others; women with child, Diana or Lucina, and so on; thus every one made that his god to which his heart was inclined, so that even in the mind of the heathen to have a god means to trust and believe."

nothing else than to trust and believe Him from the [whole] heart; as I have often said that the confidence and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol.”⁹¹

As can be observed, for Luther, the issue is not (as in the case of the Reformed) the confusion of the finite and the infinite. On the contrary, Luther speaks of creatures as God’s “channels,” “wrappings,” and “masks.”⁹² God is active in and through his creatures, most especially in his full communication of his glory to the man Jesus. Indeed, it is highly problematic to look past the visible and auditory words, through which God has manifested himself, into his hidden being (*Deus absconditus*). God hidden in his majesty apart from any means and promises is necessarily a terrifying God who cannot be trusted (Deut 32:39; also see 1 Sam 2:6; Isa 45).⁹³ God removes the terror of the creature and makes himself a true and proper object of trust and worship precisely by making himself tangible in the man Jesus, and then in the Word and sacrament ministry of the Church.

Creatures become objects of idolatry for Luther when one does not listen to the divine word and therefore fails to see the creature as a “channel”⁹⁴ of the invisible and uncreated God behind it. As a result, the creature comes to see the object in and of itself as the giver of the good, thereby making it into a false object of trust. In this, the human fails to hear God’s Word and therefore believe that it is the Lord himself who is behind the mask, channel, and covering communicating the good in and through it:

We need the wisdom that distinguishes God from his mask [i.e., creature]. . . . When a greedy man, who worships his belly, hears that “man does not live by bread alone, but by every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4) he eats the bread but fails to see God in the bread; for he sees, admires, and adores only the mask.⁹⁵

Gustaf Wingren describes the contrast between the Lutheran and Reformed/Barthian theories of idolatry from a somewhat different angle. He observes that at the heart of Barth’s theory of revelation is the belief that there is a fundamental opposition between the infinite and finite. As we observed earlier, idolatry and sin for the Reformed tradition is primarily seen as a function of the confusion of the finite and the infinite, of creature and Creator.⁹⁶ Indeed, this is what

⁹¹ LC I 1; *Triglotta*, 581.

⁹² Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–45/1544–54), AE 1:15; *Lectures on Galatians* (1531/1535), AE 26:95; LC I 1; *Triglotta*, 587.

⁹³ Luther, *Bondage of the Will* (1526), AE 33:140.

⁹⁴ LC I 1; *Triglotta*, 587.

⁹⁵ Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1531/1535), AE 26:95.

⁹⁶ Wingren, *The Living Word*, 91–93.

drives Barth's theory of revelational analogy. It is precisely for this reason that Wingren views Barth as a quasi-Gnostic. Barth moves in a Gnostic direction by prioritizing the God of salvation over the God of creation. Likewise, he comes very close to conflating temporality with fallenness in a manner similar to the Gnostic myth of the fall.⁹⁷

In contrast to this, Wingren argues that God made his creation as a medium of his infinite goodness. Although creatures are of course distinct from the Creator, ultimately the finite was made for the infinite. Therefore, finitude and temporality do not in and of themselves stand in fundamental opposition to God.⁹⁸ Ultimately, the finite becomes problematic only when it takes on a demonic character and opposes the divine. In doing this, it attempts to usurp the place of God as an alien object of trust. In putting itself in the place of God, the demonic seeks to enslave other creatures. The root of all this demonic activity is ultimately Satan. Consequently, what is the opposite of the divine is not creation (as in Barth's theology), but Satan.⁹⁹

Wingren goes on to show that the Lutheran *capax* in both Christology and subsequently in the theology of Word and sacrament means that God in Christ has not left us to ourselves but has entered the battlefield of creation in order to wrestle it away from demonic forces.¹⁰⁰ In, under, and through creaturely means, God restores creation's true identity by freeing it from enslaving powers.¹⁰¹ God's presence within his creation as incarnate places him in total solidarity with all that he has made and thereby prioritizes a relationship of self-donation and trust over Barth's spiritualism and implicit legalism. It also validates creation as an expression of God's goodness and love.

Ultimately, when idolatry is understood in the manner of the Reformed tradition, law becomes consistently prioritized over the gospel. That is to say, from the Reformed perspective the proper structure of the divine-human relationship is conceptualized as being ultimately rooted in divine power and corresponding human submission. By contrast, the Lutheran understanding of the divine-human relationship is fundamentally based on divine grace and passive receptivity to divine grace.¹⁰² This, of course, does not mean that Lutheran theology

⁹⁷ Gustaf Wingren, *Theology in Conflict: Nygren, Barth, Bultmann*, trans. Eric Wahlstrom (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958).

⁹⁸ Wingren, *The Living Word*, 92–93.

⁹⁹ Wingren, *The Living Word*, 93–94.

¹⁰⁰ Wingren, *The Living Word*, 32.

¹⁰¹ Wingren, *The Living Word*, 31–32, 94–95.

¹⁰² See Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas Trapp (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008), 42–43.

rejects the importance of submission to God's authority and obedience to his commandments. Nevertheless, as Luther's catechisms and the Formula of Concord make clear, Christian obedience should have its source in God's own self-giving grace (Rom 12:1; Gal. 5:6; 1 John 4:19).¹⁰³ The passivity of faith gives rise to an active love which obeys God's commandments.

By contrast, it is Calvin and not Luther who serves as model for Barth. Calvin consistently viewed the third use of the law as the main use. The apparent implication of this is that the gospel exists in order to make the law work as the most proper mode of divine-human interaction.¹⁰⁴ Barth went even further than Calvin. Ultimately, he claimed that the reformational order of law-gospel (shared by both Lutheran and Reformed) should be revised as gospel-law.¹⁰⁵ For Barth, the law is only properly the law when it is the non-accusatory medium through which the divine-human relationship must function within the bilateral covenant enacted in Christ. The "law is nothing else than the necessary *form* of the gospel."¹⁰⁶ The implication of this is that humans become righteous by the power of grace insofar as they are actualized as the proper covenant-partners of God in Christ.

The prioritization of the law over the gospel makes sense of the dynamic of the Reformed *non-capax*. Within this legal relationship, God must stand apart from his creatures in order that there might be a proper distance between them. Much as in Islam,¹⁰⁷ in the Reformed tradition the legal relationship works on the basis of the creature's recognition of God's otherness and sovereignty. Seen from this perspective, the trajectories of the Reformed/Barthian tradition and the Lutheran tradition are the very opposite of each other: for the Reformed tradition, to solve the problem of idolatry creation must increasingly be evacuated of God's presence,

¹⁰³ This can be particularly seen in Luther's exposition of the First Commandment. See LC I 1; *Triglotta*, 581–589; FC SD IV; *Triglotta*, 938–951. Also see Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1531/1535), AE 26:4–12; *Two Kinds of Righteousness* (1519), AE 31:297–306; *Freedom of a Christian* (1520), AE 31:333–377.

¹⁰⁴ For discussion of the second use of the law, see ICR, 2.7.9–10 in *Calvin: The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., trans. and ed. John T. McNeill and Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967), 1:357. It should be noted that we are using the Lutheran numbering here. Calvin reverses the order of first and second uses of the law. For the third use, see *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.7.12–13 in McNeill and Battles, eds., *Calvin: The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1:360–362. See discussion in William Edgar, "Ethics: The Christian Life and Good Works according to Calvin," in *Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes: Essays and Analysis*, ed. David Hall and Peter Lillback (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2008), 320–346.

¹⁰⁵ Karl Barth, "Gospel and Law," 71–100.

¹⁰⁶ Karl Barth, "Gospel and Law," 80.

¹⁰⁷ See Ian Richard Netton, *Allah Transcendent: Studies in the Structure and Semiotics of Islamic Philosophy, Theology, and Cosmology* (London: Routledge, 1994).

whereas for the Lutheran tradition, God's solidarity and presence within creation must become ever deeper.

Barth's Reformed attempt at distancing God from his creation results in a thoroughgoing theology of divine sovereignty at the expense of the incarnation and the cross. As we have already seen, the main focus of Barth's theology of the incarnation and the Word of God is that one does not so much find God embedded in the life of Jesus. Rather, the life of Jesus is meaningful because it is a temporal recapitulation of God's eternal decrees existing before time. The man Jesus is a created analogy that substitutes for the real presence of God and his truth.

The ultimate effect of Barth's attempt to look past the external Word is to reject Luther's dialectic of the hidden and revealed God, as well as the distinction between law and gospel. Because God is known above the external Word, any kind of dialectical manifestation of God in the Word itself is essentially eliminated and neutralized in favor of a dialectic between creator and creature, the eternal and the temporal.¹⁰⁸ For Barth, God cannot operate in two different manifestations (hidden and revealed), and according to two different words (law and gospel). For Barth, God is manifested in a single and unitary Word (i.e., the bilateral covenant enacted in Jesus Christ) above the duality of law and gospel. As a result, law is collapsed into grace, and grace into law.¹⁰⁹ This effectively creates a higher synthesis of the sinner's relationship with God as being structured on the basis of a grace-induced submission to God within the matrix of a bilateral covenant. Although probably an exaggeration, Hans Küng famously argued that there was in reality very little difference between Barth's view of justification and that of the Council of Trent.¹¹⁰

Therefore, for Barth, the passive human reception of grace is not the goal of the divine-human relationship, but is a first step toward establishing a relationship based on performative righteousness. The believer is to engage in an "act of responsibility, offering himself as the response to the Word of God, and conducting, shaping and expressing himself as an answer to it. He is, *and is man, as*

¹⁰⁸ See similar observations in Wingren, *The Living Word*, 208–209. Also see similar critiques to the ones offered above in Gerhard Forde, *The Law-Gospel Debate: An Interpretation of Its Historical Development* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1969), 200–210; Steven Paulson, "Analogy and Proclamation: The Struggle over God's Hiddenness in the Theology of Martin Luther and Eberhard Jüngel," (PhD diss., Lutheran School of Theology, 1992), 216–217. Although we ardently disagree with Forde and Paulson on the key issues of the eternity of the law and the third use of the law, their criticism of Barth's functional rejection of the law-gospel distinction is valid to an extent. Also see a critique of the use of analogy in theology in Lowell Green, *Adventures in Law and Gospel: Lectures in Lutheran Dogmatics* (Fort Wayne, IN: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1993), 47–53.

¹⁰⁹ Wingren, *The Living Word*, 208–209.

¹¹⁰ See Hans Küng, *Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2004).

*he does this.*¹¹¹ For this reason, *coram Deo* the freedom of the gospel is not the goal of the law's determination of the divine-human relationship. Rather, grace's aim is fundamentally to activate human agency and place it in the right direction. Humanity is ultimately defined by "willingly corresponding to the claim laid upon us by the Word of God."¹¹² As a result, creation's essence and identity is not to be found in receiving, but rather in doing. In one of the later volumes of his *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, Barth very bluntly states regarding this ontic determination that "the statement 'I am' demands further explanation. It means: 'I do.'"¹¹³ By contrast, Luther defines the divine-human relationship as being primarily defined by humanity's passive receptivity to the Word in faith."¹¹⁴

Again, all of this is a byproduct of Barth's analogical concept of the Word. If one is permitted to use analogy to think into God's reality above the duality of his two words (law and gospel), one will ultimately come to see God's grace universally revealed in Christ as a law of God's general relationship with the world. Barth's implicit universalism may appear initially to be a form of antinomianism, but it very quickly becomes a form of legalism. Since the divine-human relationship is exhaustively defined by grace, Barth functionally turns all knowledge of God into law. Grace becomes a law because instead of being a remedy for God's wrath revealed in the word of law, it functions as disclosing the law of God's relationship with the world. This information then demands that the believer conform their behavior to this general situation of grace, rather than trusting in the divine promise of grace juxtaposed with divine wrath. One can find a similar situation in the standard theology of American Mainline Protestantism, which has undoubtedly been influenced by Barth's theology. Universal acceptance of all without the call to repentance sets forth inclusiveness as a new law that must be obeyed.

By contrast, the confessional Lutheran sees God's will dialectically revealed in the two distinct, yet related, words of law and gospel. As David Scaer correctly observes: "The Lutheran position is perhaps the most philosophically unsatisfying because the Christian is continually confronted by a God who hates and loves him at the same time."¹¹⁵ Although faith does lead to the fruit of obedience in the kingdom of this world (*coram mundo*), the divine-human relationship (*coram Deo*)

¹¹¹ CD III/2.175. Emphasis added.

¹¹² CD III/2.181.

¹¹³ CD III/2.181. Emphasis added. For a good summary of how Barth views divine and human agency, see Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 185–224.

¹¹⁴ Luther, *Disputation Concerning Man* (1536), AE 34:139.

¹¹⁵ David Scaer, "Law and Gospel in Lutheran Theology," *Grace Theological Journal* 12.2 (1991): 167.

is fundamentally defined by the fleeing of the repentant sinner from the word of God's wrath to the word of his grace.

V. Conclusion

As we have observed in our brief study, Karl Barth's doctrine of the Word of God remains problematic for confessional Lutherans for multiple reasons. In their criticisms of Barth, mid-twentieth-century Lutherans were certainly correct to focus on Barth's low view of scriptural inspiration. Nevertheless, as our study has demonstrated, the weaknesses in Barth's view of scriptural inspiration and authority are symptomatic of a larger problem, namely, Barth's distancing of God from the flesh of Jesus and the means of grace. Ultimately, Barth's unwillingness to identify the literal words of the Bible with God's Word is rooted in the failure of his doctrine of the incarnation. Similarly, although his monism of grace initially may seem like a form of antinomianism, it results in a form of covert legalism. The consequence of not taking seriously God's utter hiddenness outside the gospel, and his complete tangibility within it, is the collapse of grace into law, and law into grace.