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The Christian as Witness in View of the True Witness

Emily Patricia Wilton
The University of Western Ontario

Supervisor
Gary Badcock
The University of Western Ontario

Graduate Program in Theology
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts
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THE CHRISTIAN AS WITNESS IN VIEW OF THE TRUE WITNESS

(Thesis format: Monograph)

by

Emily Patricia Wilton

Graduate Program in Theology

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada

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Abstract

This thesis examines Karl Barth's understanding of what it means for Christian individuals to be witnesses of Jesus Christ. By analyzing the structure of Barth's doctrine of reconciliation, with attention to his view of Jesus Christ as mediator, the thesis establishes the christological context of Barth's concept of witness. The thesis demonstrates how Barth arrives at the conclusion that witness is central to the definition of Christian existence and identifies key features of Barth's view of witness, namely, its theocentrism, its basis in ontology, and its enactment in human history. The thesis engages secondary scholarship in a critical appraisal of Barth's concept of witness. The main points of criticism surround Barth's account of human reality, action, and self-understanding. The thesis concludes with some provisional indications of how the theme of hope might orient interpretation of Barth's concept of Christian witness, with a view to addressing the criticisms identified.

Keywords

Barth, Witness, Christology, Human Agency, Doctrine of Reconciliation, Theological Ethics, Hope, Eschatology, Ontology, Epistemology

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Introduction

This thesis is a study of Karl Barth's understanding of the Christian as witness. Karl Barth (1886-1968) is among the most influential theologians in the Christian Protestant tradition and, arguably, within the Christian tradition as a whole.¹ In part, Barth's influence can be traced to the way he "reorganized an entire discipline," writes John Webster, comparing Barth to Wittgenstein, Freud and Saussure in terms of his revolutionary impact in his field.²

Part of what made Barth's theology so distinctive was his resolute insistence on allowing his object of study to dictate the terms and method of his work. As a consequence, Barth's theology is unapologetically articulated in the language of the Christian doctrinal tradition, without attempting to situate this language within the broader range of other academic disciplines.³ It follows that in summarizing and commenting on Barth's own dogmatic themes I will be employing the same language, as a reflection of Barth's thought, its internal logic, and its application within the Christian tradition in which and for which it was written.

The aspect of Barth's work that will be under study in this thesis is his theology of vocation as it forms the basis for his distinctive understanding of Christian witness. The notion of "witness" has a long history in the Christian tradition, a history intertwined with church practices of mission and evangelism.⁴ While, for many centuries, the missionary dimension of Christianity took the form of an enterprise of expansion and occupation of

¹ See, for example, Eberhard Jüngel, *Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy*, trans. Garrett E. Paul

² Webster, *Barth*, 1.

³ For example, Barth writes, "Theological thinking [...] will refrain from attempted self-vindication as its theme demands, and thus show its responsibility and relevance by simply fulfilling itself as thinking on this basis, and therefore by simply existing as the witness of faith against unbelief." *Church Dogmatics*, study ed. eds. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. G.W. Bromiley, G.T. Thomson, and Harold Knight (1932-1938; repr. London: T&T Clark, 2009), I/1: 29. Citations refer to the 2009 edition for all volumes of *Church Dogmatics* cited.

⁴ For further reading on this history, see, for example, David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* 20th ann. ed. (New York: Orbis Books, 2011).

non-Christian lands, implicated in the conquest of non-Christian peoples and their religions, David Bosch suggests that this interpretation of mission changed gradually over the course of the twentieth century.⁵ At the beginning of the twentieth century, the focus of missionary practice, as notably but not exclusively seen within the North American context, for instance, was largely split into two branches, one broadly conservative branch emphasizing evangelism, and another broadly liberal branch emphasizing social change and reform.⁶

While the aim of this thesis is neither one of historical comparison nor the application of Barth's view of witness in a given sociocultural context, the enduring and ongoing significance of "witness" as a feature of the Christian tradition, and the impact of its outworking both in religious and public spheres, form part of the background which makes this thesis a worthwhile undertaking. Even though Christian mission and witness might look different in every age, it does not seem likely that they will disappear altogether, at least anytime soon. The reason, as Bosch suggests, is that "the Christian faith [...] is intrinsically missionary;" it understands its truth to be both ultimate and important for all of humanity.⁷ Therefore, it can be argued, the study of witness and mission remains an ongoing task of responsible theology.⁸

Barth's theological work on witness and related issues are particularly interesting given the varied reception of his theology and his active involvement in public life. Barth's theology is well known for the intensity of its focus on christology. Some of Barth's critics see his christological rigor as inhibitive of his ability to make statements about the realities and complexities of human life. Given that theological discussion of witness has largely to do with human words and actions that purportedly bear testament to the divine, a theologian's inability or neglect to adequately address these complexities would certainly call into question the value of his or her work on the matter.

⁵ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 1-2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 290-291.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

Strikingly, the example of Barth's own life demonstrates that while on one hand he wrote prolifically and profoundly about the transcendent God, he was also deeply involved in this-worldly matters of politics, church life, and social issues. To name but a couple of examples, as a pastor in Safenwil, Switzerland, Barth helped to establish labour unions,⁹ and presided over a local anti-alcoholism group.¹⁰ Later, in Hitler's Germany, Barth played an instrumental role in writing the Barmen Declaration, a document presented to the Confessing Church in Germany, which outlined a theological counter-position to the German Christians' pro-nationalist stance.¹¹ Clearly, whether or not his theology reflected it, Barth's actions demonstrated an abiding commitment for very human concerns.

Furthermore, in the last two to three decades, a number of scholars have challenged the perception that Barth fails to address "the human question" in his theology. They have largely done so by writing works that highlight and explain the importance of ethics in Barth's theology, especially in his *magnum opus*, *Church Dogmatics*. These studies have done much to redeem Barth's reputation when it comes to the perceived lack of attention to anthropological and ethical matters in his work.

This thesis aims, in its own small way, to contribute to the work of fleshing out the "human" side of Barth's work, through a close analysis of the way he develops his theology of Christian witness. To achieve such ends, the thesis will be largely expository, particularly in the first two chapters, then moving to a third chapter of more critical analysis, and ending with a brief constructive conclusion.

In chapter one, I will lay out the christological basis for Barth's concept of witness. This christological basis will help to situate Barth's thought on Christian witness within the broader scope of his doctrine of reconciliation and his theology as a whole. A clear articulation of this christological foundation is critical both for understanding how Barth

⁹ Donald Wall, "Karl Barth and National Socialism," *Fides et historia* 15, no. 2 (1983): 80.

¹⁰ Frank Jehle, *Ever Against the Stream: The Politics of Karl Barth, 1906-1968*, trans. Richard and Martha Burnett (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 27.

¹¹ Wall, "Karl Barth and National Socialism," 84-86.

develops his view of the Christian as witness, and for making sense of the criticisms leveled against his view.

After having laid this foundation, I will proceed to an exegetical chapter on Barth's concept of witness proper. This chapter will show how, for Barth, witness is not considered as a separate or secondary activity to the primary fact of 'being a Christian' but rather forms "the controlling principle of the structure of Christian existence."¹² The chapter will also explore key features of Barth's unique understanding of witness, namely, its theocentrism, its grounding in ontology, and its outworking in human history.

Throughout the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth repeatedly refers to human action that relates and corresponds to God's action as "witness." This thesis will, on the whole, restrict its focus to Barth's view of the individual Christian person as witness, rather than exploring the ecclesial dimension of witness in his theology in any depth. I am limiting the thesis' scope in this way because it would be impossible to adequately address the ecclesial dimension of witness, given the vast amount of material on it in *Church Dogmatics*.

The third chapter brings Barth's view of the Christian as witness under critical analysis. Here, features of his view identified in chapter two will be discussed in terms of the interpretive difficulties they present, namely, difficulties around the relationship between Barth's view of witness and human experience.

The thesis will end with a constructive conclusion, in which I will suggest that scholarly interpretations of Barth's theology of Christian witness can be augmented by an emphasis on the theme of hope, as Barth outlines it in the concluding section of *Church Dogmatics*.

¹² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, study ed. eds. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. G.W. Bromiley (1953-1967; London: T&T Clark, 2009), IV/3.2, bk. 28:182-242.

Chapter 1

1 The Christological Context of Witness in Barth's Theology

The aim of this chapter is to situate Barth's understanding of Christian witness within the broader context of his theology. Barth's concept of the Christian as witness follows from his understanding of Jesus Christ as witness, and so before turning to what it means, in Barth's theology, for Christians to be witnesses, we must examine the christological foundation he prepares.

In this chapter, I will establish that Barth primarily views witness as the ongoing work of reconciliation of Jesus Christ himself. This means that Barth not only views reconciliation in terms of its objective accomplishment in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, but also in terms of Christ's making this objective reconciliation known to Christians subjectively. I will also show how Barth's distinctive understanding of *parousia* forms the basis for his suggestion that reconciliation is the ongoing work of Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

1.1 Witness Situated in the Doctrine of Reconciliation

Barth's discussion of Jesus Christ as the "True Witness" is located in his doctrine of reconciliation (*Church Dogmatics*, IV). This doctrine discusses the person and reconciling work of Christ in three aspects or as three 'problems.' The titles given to each of these three aspects of reconciliation are distinctly Christ-centred. They are: i) "Jesus Christ, the Lord as Servant," ii) "Jesus Christ, the Servant as Lord," and iii) "Jesus Christ, The True Witness." These titles reflect Barth's emphasis on reconciliation as fully accomplished by and in Jesus Christ, in contrast to, for example, naming the sections by reference to their human "benefits" (i.e., justification, sanctification, and so on). As John Webster comments, Barth "is quite clear that [the person and work of Christ] are ingredient in each other and therefore cannot be expounded in isolation from each

other.”¹³ For each of the three aspects, Barth explicitly states the importance of beginning with christology, before turning to what Christ’s work means for the rest of humanity.¹⁴

That a Christian understanding of reconciliation is Christ-centred is hardly surprising; however, a closer look at the structure and content of the doctrine will show how Barth’s conception of Jesus Christ as True Witness and his understanding of Christ’s witness as belonging to his work of reconciliation are quite distinctive. For the purposes of this thesis, our interest lies particularly in how the inclusion of “Jesus Christ as Witness” in the doctrine of reconciliation frames a theologically unique understanding of Christian vocation, within which the role of Christian witness is explored.

For each aspect of his doctrine of reconciliation, Barth describes a) who Christ is and what he does, b) a corresponding facet of human sinfulness which contradicts but is, more importantly, contradicted by Christ’s being and action, c) the effect of Christ’s work on “the renewal of human life,”¹⁵ d) the corresponding way in which the Holy Spirit works in the Christian community, and e) the corresponding work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the individual Christian person. Barth outlines these various parts of his doctrine of reconciliation in section §58. To make reference to this structure simpler, as well as to provide a visual representation of the triadic structure of the doctrine, I have constructed a table presenting these elements:

¹³ Webster, *Barth*, 115.

¹⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, study ed. eds. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. G.W. Bromiley (1953-1967; London: T&T Clark, 2009), IV/1, bk.21: 150-151; Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, study ed. eds. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. G.W. Bromiley (1953-1967; London: T&T Clark, 2009), IV/2, bk 24: 17-18; Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, study ed. eds. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. G.W. Bromiley (1953-1967; London: T&T Clark, 2009), IV/3.1: 9.

¹⁵ Webster, *Barth*, 117.

Table 1: The Triadic Structure of Karl Barth's Doctrine of Reconciliation

	I) Jesus Christ, the Lord as Servant	II) Jesus Christ, The Servant as Lord	III) Jesus Christ, The True Witness
A	The Obedience of the Son of God	The Exaltation of the Son of Man	The Glory of the Mediator
B	The Pride and Fall of Man	The Sloth and Misery of Man	The Falsehood and Condemnation of Man
C	The Justification of Man	The Sanctification of Man	The Vocation of Man
D	The Holy Spirit and the Gathering of the Christian Community	The Holy Spirit and the Upbuilding of the Christian Community	The Holy Spirit and the Sending of the Christian Community
E	The Holy Spirit and Christian Faith	The Holy Spirit and Christian Love	The Holy Spirit and Christian Hope
F ¹⁶	<i>Priestly Office</i>	<i>Kingly Office</i>	<i>Prophetic Office</i>

The focus of this chapter will be on the third column in table 1, although reference will be made to the others, as the entire doctrine functions as a complex whole, and as the shape and rhythm of the doctrine's structure are driven by Barth's particular understanding of its content.¹⁷

¹⁶ This last row is not taken directly from the section and subsection titles as the rest of the table is but Barth does write extensively about the 'offices' of Christ corresponding to the three problems of reconciliation.

¹⁷ Webster comments that "although it is a structure of remarkable fascination and not a little intellectual beauty, its form is strictly subservient to Barth's material aim, which is to present the heart of the Christian gospel as God's work of reconciling all things to himself in Christ." *Barth*, 117.

1.2 Jesus Christ as Mediator and Prophet

After having discussed Jesus' role as son of God and his role as son of man, Barth moves on to discuss his role as mediator. As mediator, Barth suggests, Christ is prophet and true witness. Barth distinguishes Christ's work as mediator from his work as son of God and son of man by suggesting that the concern of the third problem of the doctrine of reconciliation "is with the How of the event in its inalienable distinction from the What."¹⁸ In other words, while Christ reconciles humanity to God, described doctrinally as justification and sanctification, this reconciliation "also expresses, discloses, mediates and reveals itself,"¹⁹ by way of Christ's action as mediator, witness, and prophet.

Barth engages his theological predecessors on this point of the prophetic office of Christ and comes up dissatisfied with their lack of clarity in five main areas. His concerns revolve around the tendency of older theologies 1) to be unclear about the 'content' of Christ's prophecy,²⁰ 2) to describe Christ's priestly, kingly and prophetic roles as occurring in distinct stages and therefore not to be understood in unity,²¹ 3) to place Christ's prophecy alongside other prophecies or modes of revelation,²² 4) to either conflate or separate Christ's prophecy with the Church's prophetic role too strongly,²³ and 5) to be unclear about to whom Christ prophesies, whether only to the Church or 'elect' or also to the world at large.²⁴

Examining each of these criticisms in great detail would detract from the purpose of this chapter, but I contend that there is an overarching element present within all of them, which is worth pointing out. Namely, Barth's main issue with earlier treatments is the possibility that reconciliation could at some point be abstracted from Jesus Christ as the

¹⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.1: 6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

²² *Ibid.*, 14-15.

²³ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

acting subject of its revelation or as the objective content of reconciliation. That the distinction between the “How” and the “What” of reconciliation is “inalienable,” therefore, becomes the focus of Barth’s own exposition. For Barth, Jesus Christ is his own self-witness, at all times and in all instances in which witness is truly borne to him. What seems to be at stake here, for Barth, is the unity of the objective basis and the subjective basis of reconciliation.

1.3 Jesus Christ: The Objective Basis of Reconciliation

First, let us consider how Barth emphasizes that Jesus Christ is the objective basis of reconciliation. Basically, Barth suggests that the message Jesus Christ delivers – as mediator, prophet, and witness – is identical with his own being and act. In suggesting Jesus Christ is not only the “messenger” but also “the message,” Barth excludes the possibility that reconciliation is “a principle and system of divine truth,”²⁵ “a timeless idea,”²⁶ a projection of what humans judge as significant,²⁷ “the *ratio* of our own life-action,”²⁸ “a word of ecclesiastical or theological teaching,”²⁹ or a worldview.³⁰ In short, the reconciliation which Christ is and which Christ declares cannot be equated or substituted with anything else, including faithful theological exposition of it.

Nevertheless, for Barth, the non-substitutable nature of reconciliation in Christ does not foreclose the possibility of faithful theological exposition altogether. Rather, Barth suggests, in discharging “the debt of response to what comes upon [one] in this encounter [with Christ],”³¹ one is capable of “confirm[ing] that the life of Jesus Christ speaks for

²⁵ Ibid., 13.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 69

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 240

³⁰ Ibid., 245-248.

³¹ Ibid., 44.

itself.”³² The possibility for humans to confirm or acknowledge the self-declared reconciliation of Christ is foundational to Barth’s view of Christian witness, as will be developed in later chapters. In Barth’s view, acknowledgment of the self-spoken Word of Christ serves as the basis on which humanity can speak theologically at all.³³

1.3.1 The Particular Life of Jesus Christ: True God

Barth proceeds to articulate his understanding of reconciliation by pointing to the life of Jesus Christ itself, the life of the God-man. The ‘fact’ that Jesus Christ is God is revealed, Barth suggests, through his own self-authenticating power. This self-authentication does not require any approval or verification by or from a different source, nor is any such approval or verification possible.³⁴ George Hunsinger identifies revelation, in Barth’s theology, as the source of “divine facts” in distinction from all other human knowledge as “creaturely facts.”³⁵ Hunsinger suggests that for an ordinary piece of information to be established as fact, it “must be assessed from a particular standpoint,” whereas “factuality, significance, and force cannot be conceded to [divine facts],” rather, such facts are self-demonstrating.³⁶ This is not to suggest that humans cannot know such revelation-based facts, but rather that humans cannot explain such facts in terms of their other knowledge.³⁷

It follows that the self-revelation of Jesus Christ as God is not a statement that relates the name Jesus Christ to a preconceived, abstractly defined notion of what or who “God” is. For one, Jesus Christ’s life is intimately situated within the history of Israel and his self-declaration, “is a similar expression and attestation of the dealings of God with men [as is

³² Ibid.

³³ Barth develops this idea in detail in §6, “The Knowability of the Word of God,” especially in §6.2 “The Word of God and Man,” *Church Dogmatics*, I/1.

³⁴ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.3.1: 45-46.

³⁵ George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 195.

³⁶ Ibid., 195-6.

³⁷ Ibid., 195-197.

found in the prophets of the Old Testament],”³⁸ not a declaration of divinity in the abstract.

Secondly, as God the son, Jesus Christ has the authority and power to reveal who God actually is, and thus to fill up the notion of “God” with its true content. Barth delineates his full understanding of what this means in *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, “Jesus Christ, the Lord as Servant,” corresponding to the first column in table 1. The fact of Jesus Christ’s existence as a man in history, with the self-authenticating power to declare himself God, shows that the God of Israel is a God who is willing to humble himself for the sake of his people because he wills to be God with them and not without them.³⁹ Barth describes this as “the turning of God to man.”⁴⁰ As this God, “He can give Himself up not merely to the creaturely limitation but to the suffering of the human creature, becoming one of these men, Himself bearing the judgment under which they stand willing to die and, in fact, dying the death which they have deserved.”⁴¹ In doing so, Jesus Christ justifies humanity.

1.3.2 The Particular Life of Jesus Christ: True Human

Yet Jesus Christ’s life also declares itself as a genuinely human life and not simply so as a vehicle by which God can communicate with humanity. Jesus Christ exists as the one human who, because he is also the Son of God, is able to declare what it is to be truly human and on the basis of whom all humanity is sanctified as well as justified. Barth’s full understanding of this is outlined in *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, “Jesus Christ, The Servant as Lord,” corresponding to the second column in table 1. Barth writes, “What has happened in Him as the one true man is the conversion of all of us to God, the realisation of true humanity.”⁴²

³⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.3.1: 47. Note that in order to simplify the quoting of Barth’s work, throughout this thesis, direct quotations will replicate the unfortunately gendered language that remains in the study edition of the English translation of *Church Dogmatics*. I do not ideologically condone the use of this language.

³⁹ See, for example, Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, bk. 21: 79.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.1: 3.

⁴¹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, bk. 21: 126.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 127.

Jesus Christ's life demonstrates this true humanity as life lived in a free, faithful, and obedient relationship to God. "His practice in the continuing intercourse with God, His fellows and Himself is fashioned [...] in analogy with the confidence which He has in the God who has so fully entrusted Himself to Him. It can consist only in a series of offerings, of acts of obedience, of achievements of service."⁴³ Barth is especially adamant that in the human life of Jesus Christ, the relationship between God and humanity that is revealed is not one "of a *Do* and *Des*, a *Credit* and *Debit*, a balance and debt."⁴⁴ It is a relationship of "reciprocal freedom" in which Christ's "act of obedience, His rendering of service is His free act. It is not prompted or conditioned by the thought of a reward to be received from God,"⁴⁵ just as God "crowns him [...] without any consideration of merit [...] but simply and solely in the sovereign good-pleasure which He has in Him and for the sake of this man Himself."⁴⁶

The reconciliation, which is effective once and for all, is constituted in the acts of Jesus Christ who is true God and true human, and which is not merely a symbol for a deeper reality, nor can it be substituted by anything else. This, in Barth's view, is the *objective* basis of reconciliation in Christ.

1.4 Jesus Christ: The Subjective Basis of Reconciliation

Barth's claim is not only that Jesus, in his earthly historical life, reconciled God and humanity in covenant partnership and declared what he was doing so it could be known by those around, only to be attested by them to future generations who themselves would not personally know Jesus. Barth claims that Jesus personally continues to declare this reconciliation. With reference to Barth's theology, John Webster writes, "To speak of Jesus as prophet is to speak of him as the immediate agent of the knowledge of himself:

⁴³ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2, bk. 28: 13.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

he is, literally, self-proclaiming.”⁴⁷ Jesus not only was, but also continues to be the *subjective* basis for the knowledge of reconciliation that humans experience.

1.4.1 Resurrection

Barth’s argument that Jesus Christ creates all knowledge of himself up to this day is based on his understanding of the resurrection. In Barth’s view, the reconciliation of the world, described as Christ’s work in his priestly and kingly offices, took place *before* Christ’s resurrection.⁴⁸ The resurrection did not ‘add’ anything to the reconciliation accomplished in Christ. However, Barth writes that without the resurrection event, “the alteration of the situation between God and man as accomplished in Him, would have remained shut up in Him, because it would have been completely hidden from the disciples and the world and us, being quite unknown and therefore without practical significance.”⁴⁹ Without Christ’s resurrection, death would have kept reconciliation hidden from human knowledge. In the resurrection, however, Christ re-crosses the border of death in such a way as to demonstrate death’s new powerlessness in him:

The radically new thing in the coming again of the man Jesus who obviously died on the cross was [...] the appearance of this terminated existence in its participation in the sovereign life of God, in its endowment with eternity, in the transcendence, incorruptibility and immortality given and appropriated to it in virtue of this participation for all its this-worldliness. He came again in the manifestation or revelation of His prior human life as it had fallen victim to death as such, but had been delivered from death, invested with divine glory, and caused to shine in this glory, in virtue of its participation in the life of God.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Webster, *Barth*, 131.

⁴⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.1: 271.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 299.

For Barth, it is of the utmost importance that Christ's coming again in his resurrection is understood as occurring in earthly history just as he understands Christ's life *before* his death on the cross as occurring within this history.⁵¹ In part, the historical occurrence of the resurrection is of such importance for Barth because it introduces the self-revelation of Christ, and in so doing the reconciliation of the world, as an objective "factor" in all that happens in the world *post Christum*.⁵² If the resurrection was based in, or contingent on human subjectivity as, for example, "a preservation of His picture in the memory, or perhaps its endowment with new significance," or "a strengthened conviction of the correctness and importance of His message,"⁵³ Barth argues, it would not have the power to summon faith in Christ.⁵⁴

However, the faith-summoning character of the resurrection does not derive solely from its historical happening, as though its occurrence in objective reality serves as "proof" of the reality of Jesus Christ and his Gospel. If that were the case, we could still posit a gap between the "the objective reality of Christ's saving working" and its subjective realization.⁵⁵ Rather, Barth understands that the resurrected Christ is the living Christ, who as such directly effects and maintains subjective knowledge of himself in those whom he encounters. By their own capacities, humans cannot establish this knowledge for themselves, nor can they create it in others.

As discussed in the work of both Webster and Joseph Mangina, Barth's treatment of the resurrection speaks to a problem Barth saw in liberal Protestant theology, in which objective claims about God needed translation into the realm of human subjectivity in order for them to have any significance for human life.⁵⁶ This translation often took place

⁵¹ Ibid., 300.

⁵² Ibid., 280; 285-286.

⁵³ Ibid., 296.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 296-297.

⁵⁵ John Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 96-7.

⁵⁶ Joseph Mangina, *Karl Barth on the Christian Life: The Practical Knowledge of God* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2001) 51-85; Webster, *Ethics of Reconciliation*, 96-7, 26-129.

through “theor[ies] of spirituality, experience, or morality,”⁵⁷ which Barth understood as a threat to the primacy of divine agency, according to Webster, as it created a need for “intermediate agencies” apart from Christ, for the actualization of God’s saving work in human life.⁵⁸ This thesis does not have the scope to address whether or not Barth’s assessment of liberal Protestant theology was accurate or correct. The point here is simply to delineate Barth’s view of the relationship between objective and subjective aspects of reconciliation with respect to what *he* understood as problematic in liberal Protestant theology.⁵⁹

Humorously but not without a ring of truth, Barth writes that if intermediaries were necessary, a person would have “the not very encouraging prospect of being referred to the witness of Christianity and the impression made by the clarity, cogency and credibility of the institutions and activities of the Church or of various Christian personalities, groups and movements.”⁶⁰ Consequently, in Barth’s understanding, the only way knowledge of Christ can have any real “validity and force” is if it comes directly from the living Christ,⁶¹ as he witnesses to himself in our age by the Holy Spirit.

1.4.2 The Holy Spirit and *parousia*

Barth spells out his understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit as Christ’s self-witness in our time in his subsection titled “The Promise of the Spirit.” He suggests that the resurrection is the “new coming” or “coming again” of Christ and discusses this coming again under the New Testament term *parousia*, or “effective presence.”⁶² According to Barth, in the New Testament the term *parousia* never refers to the first coming of Jesus Christ (“ i.e., to His history and existence within the limits of His birth and death, of

⁵⁷ Webster, *Ethics of Reconciliation*, 97.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁵⁹ Similar logic applies throughout the thesis. I do not aim to assess the correctness or validity of Barth’s interpretations of other theologians and, therefore, any reference to such interpretations is intended to demonstrate Barth’s thought only.

⁶⁰ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.1: 332.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 274.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 279-285.

Bethlehem and Golgotha”⁶³) and suggests that this is because, prior to the resurrection, “the incarnate Word was not yet revealed and seen in his glory.”⁶⁴

Interestingly, while Christ’s *parousia* and “coming again” often carry connotations of the “end times” in Christian theology, Barth makes the somewhat peculiar argument that “the New Testament knows of only one coming again of Jesus Christ,”⁶⁵ which occurs in the Easter event.⁶⁶ This does not mean that Barth posits a fully realized eschatology. Rather, Barth suggests that the one and only “coming again” of Christ takes place in many different forms through time and will “take place in a different and definitive form [...] as the return of Jesus Christ as the goal of the history of the Church, the world and each individual, as His coming as the Author of the general resurrection of the dead and the Fulfiller of universal judgment.”⁶⁷ Nevertheless, “The Easter event is [...] the first form of this happening. From the standpoint of its substance, scope and content, it is identical with its occurrence in the forms which follow.”⁶⁸ This move – placing Jesus’ coming again at the Easter event and introducing different “forms” to leave room for an eschatological return – has two implications or consequences that are noteworthy for the purposes of this study.

First, on Barth’s interpretation, if Christ’s “coming again” occurred in its first form in the happening of the Easter event, then we cannot think of ourselves as living in a time in which Christ is absent. There is only one second coming and no “second departure” (or second death of Christ), so if it has already happened, Christ lives! If Christ’s *parousia* continues without break between the resurrection and the final judgment, then this “effective presence” of Christ in our time must, at least in Barth’s view, be that of the Holy Spirit. Significantly, though, Barth says “that the question of the operation of this

⁶³ Ibid., 281.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 281-2.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 282.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

power [...] does not originate in man's sombre and sceptical assessment of himself and the world, but at the point where he is summoned to be confident and comforted in relation to himself and the world."⁶⁹ In other words, humans can speak about Christ's continuing effective presence because Christ in his presence encounters us, and not because we need to fill a conceptual gap explaining Christ's presence between the resurrection and his final return.

John Webster notes that "Barth often maintained that this christological definition of the Spirit [...] offered a way of rescuing theological talk of the Spirit from its fate at the hands of the theologians of immanence – whether that be in Schleiermacher's account of Christian subjectivity or in Hegel's metaphysics of absolute Spirit."⁷⁰ In addition to explaining the continued presence of living Christ, by identifying Christ and the Holy Spirit so closely, Barth (arguably) avoids the reduction of language about the Spirit to a religious moniker for what, in actuality, are human "intermediate agencies."

Webster goes on to identify a common criticism of Barth's christological understanding of the Holy Spirit that "[...] the Spirit tends to be swallowed up by Christology. The personal agency of the Spirit in the life of the church and the Christian life is eclipsed and the Trinitarian structure of the work of reconciliation deformed, or at least left in need of completion."⁷¹ This is not the place to enter into a full discussion of the adequacy of Barth's understanding of the Holy Spirit but Webster's comments do draw attention to a second noteworthy feature of Barth's *parousia* discussion – the nature and *telos* of Christ's work as the Holy Spirit.

For Barth, the "effect" of the effective presence of Christ, as inaugurated at the resurrection, is that the particular existence of Jesus of Nazareth, has been shown to be "an existence as an inclusive being and action enfolding the world, the humanity distinct

⁶⁹ Ibid., 310.

⁷⁰ Webster, *Barth*, 138.

⁷¹ Ibid.

from Himself and us all. [...]”⁷² Therefore, in Barth’s theology, this universal effectiveness does not remain to be fulfilled at the end of time, and so ongoing divine activity is understood as a witness to the effectiveness of reconciliation already accomplished. What seems to be the absence of the universal lordship of Christ in our time is only an “apparent absence,” it is “hidden from us.”⁷³

By contrast, if the final verdict regarding human reconciliation with God were still to come, such that Christ’s saving work were an opportunity that needed to be acted upon in order for it to be effective, the Holy Spirit’s role might be construed as bringing people to this effective faith. In this latter case, the details of which could be articulated in many ways, the resurrection and the final judgment would not only differ in form; they would differ in scope as well.⁷⁴ Whether or not Barth’s interpretation of the biblical use of the term *parousia* and discussion of Christ’s coming again is correct, it does illustrate the distinctiveness of his understanding of the Holy Spirit as Christ’s self-witness, in contrast to other ways in which the Holy Spirit’s work might be construed.

1.5 Reconciliation as Ongoing

Returning now to a phrase quoted earlier, Barth claims the third problem of the doctrine of reconciliation “is [concerned] with the How of the event in its inalienable distinction from the What.”⁷⁵ So far, this presentation has mostly considered the “How” and the “What,” (or Christ as both the subjective and objective basis for reconciliation), in relative distinction from one another, and this has been done for the sake of clarity. At this point though, a reminder of the inalienability of these two aspects will help lead into the discussion of how Barth sees Christ’s self-witness as having implications for human lives and human history.

⁷² Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.1: 272.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 304-305.

⁷⁴ For example, where the resurrection announces the reconciliation of the world to God in Christ, the final judgment announces for whom this reconciliation has actually become effective.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 6

Barth, although he does strongly emphasize the “once and for all” character of Christ’s reconciling work, does not think of Christ’s self-witness as *merely* relaying the narrative of his earthly life or relaying a message that could, theoretically, be relayed by someone else. While witness must be Christ’s self-witness to guarantee its validity and force, Barth does not regard Christ’s self-witness as a sort of “rubber stamp,” authenticating the content of the message.

Rather, in the act of declaring the reconciliation accomplished in him, Jesus Christ is actively reconciling people to himself. The declaration belongs to the reconciliation, and this is why Barth discusses “Jesus Christ, The True Witness” as a third movement in the doctrine of reconciliation alongside his work as the turn of God to humanity and of humanity to God. In connection with the discussion of resurrection and *parousia* above, while in Barth’s view reconciliation is fully accomplished, Jesus Christ continues to make this reconciliation effective in different forms.

The paradox of the fully accomplished reconciliation that continues to be made real and true in human life is indeed a confusing one. George Hunsinger helpfully describes this paradox as the “problem of how to relate the existential⁷⁶ to the objective moment of salvation [...] to which Barth finds himself returning again and again.”⁷⁷ While Hunsinger acknowledges that Barth is, in many cases, content to rest with the mystery inherent in such paradoxes,⁷⁸ Hunsinger also explores this particular paradox through the motif of personalism, which “signifies that in Barth’s theology truth is ultimately a matter of encounter.”⁷⁹ The truth about the (already) reconciled relationship between God and humanity, necessarily involves humans and though only Christ can initiate this encounter, he does so in a way that truly *involves* human beings in “a personal fellowship established in Christ between divine freedom as truly divine, and human freedom as truly

⁷⁶ Hunsinger explains his use of the term existential as follows, “The term existentialism is adopted for lack of a better alternative and is meant in a strictly formal sense (having nothing to do with the modern philosophical movement of the same name).” *How to Read Karl Barth*, 105-106.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁷⁸ See, for example, Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 110.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 152.

human.”⁸⁰ Christ’s self-witness is not one-way communication ... it creates a “[divine-human] community of action”⁸¹ with real consequences in human history. Barth writes that “[the life of Jesus Christ] could not be called good news,” if it were abstracted from the realm of creaturely life, though “it might perhaps be described as the interesting disclosure of an ontological reality.”⁸² Referring back to table 1, Barth sees “vocation” as the renewal in human life that corresponds to Christ’s actions of self-witness.

1.6 Chapter Conclusion

A detailed examination of Barth’s concept of vocation will be the subject of the next chapter. What we have established thus far, however, is that Barth understands Jesus Christ to be the mediator and revealer (subjectively), of the reconciliation accomplished in him (objectively), and that his self-revelation is, indeed, reconciliation itself. We have seen that Barth bases this position on his view of the resurrection as the second coming of Christ, in which the *parousia*, or “effective presence” of Christ is inaugurated, such that in the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ now declares that his life and being have significance for all of humanity and reality. We have indicated that Barth understands this ongoing reconciliation as renewing and transformative in human life, and gestured towards the involvement of human participation in this renewal and transformation.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 152.

⁸¹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2, bk. 28: 225.

⁸² Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.1: 40.

Chapter 2

2 Karl Barth's Concept of the Christian As Witness

This chapter aims to describe and analyse Karl Barth's concept of the individual Christian person as witness. As noted, the scope of this project does not allow for an examination of Barth's view of the Church as the community of witness because of the vast amount written on this ecclesial dimension in the *Church Dogmatics*. Rather, the analysis will proceed by way of a close reading of *CD IV/3 §71*, titled "The Vocation of Man." The choice to restrict close analysis here to "The Vocation of Man" is admittedly pragmatic but the selected section also contains the fullest explanation in *Church Dogmatics* of the centrality of witness to the life of the Christian individual.⁸³

2.1 Establishing Witness as Central to Christian Life

A first indicator of the importance of Barth's concept of witness to his theology is its situation within his systematic theology. Strikingly, Barth's discussion of the Christian as witness is not articulated within a theology of mission per se but rather is integrated into his doctrine of reconciliation, in the context of a broader discussion of vocation. As discussed in the preceding chapter, vocation is the corresponding effect in human life to Jesus Christ's ongoing act of self-witness, and as such sits alongside justification and sanctification (the corresponding effects to Jesus Christ's work as God turning to humanity and humanity turning to God). Vocation, in Barth's theology, takes on a non-traditional meaning.

"The Vocation of Man" is divided into six subsections, of which "The Christian as Witness" is one. In the preceding subsection, "The Goal of Vocation," Barth asserts that: "The purpose of man's vocation is that he should become a Christian, a *homo christianus*."⁸⁴ In "The Christian as Witness," Barth aims to "show and develop [...]"

⁸³ It ought to be noted that the following section, §72, "The Holy Spirit and the Sending of the Christian Community," describes the communal shape of the witness that Barth establishes as central in §71.

⁸⁴ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2, bk. 28: 148

what the goal of vocation is in detail, namely, what it means *practically and concretely* to become and be a Christian.”⁸⁵ So, as will be discussed in detail, Barth posits that practically and concretely, to be a Christian first and foremost means to be a witness. By framing his discussion of the Christian as witness this way, Barth precludes witness from being understood as a secondary activity to some other primary defining activity or characteristic of the Christian.

Differences in what is considered central or primary to Christian existence have significant implications for how Christian witness and mission are understood. Therefore, in addition to simply acknowledging that Christians must be witnesses and describing this role, Barth demonstrates how witness must actually be central to and definitive of Christian existence. In part, he does so by examining three other possible and common ways of understanding that which differentiates Christian from non-Christian life: 1) life in eschatological tension;⁸⁶ 2) life characterized by a distinctive ethos;⁸⁷ and 3) life in the reception and possession of salvation.⁸⁸

Significantly, Barth does not altogether reject the claim that these elements can be, often are, or even necessarily must be part of the life of the Christian, but he does reject them as controlling principles. Tracing his arguments for rejecting these three commonly asserted controlling principles will help to demonstrate the relationship between that which is considered central to Christian existence and the nature of Christian action (particularly with respect to non-Christians), as well as clarifying Barth’s argument for the centrality of witness to the structure of Christian existence. Barth’s treatment of the latter two common answers will be discussed now, while his treatment of the first fits more naturally into the discussion of Barth’s own concept of witness, which will follow.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 182 (emphasis added).

⁸⁶ Ibid., 185-186.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 186-189.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 189-201.

2.1.1 Christian Ethos: Rejected as Controlling Principle

Barth considers the possibility that the controlling principle of the distinctive structure of Christian existence consists in a specifically Christian ethos. He writes, “[O]n this view, the call of Jesus Christ is decisively an invitation and demand that the men to whom it comes should adopt a particular inward and outward line of action and conduct of which we have the basic form in the twofold command to love God and our neighbours and a normative description in the imperatives of the Sermon on the Mount or the admonitions of the apostolic Epistles.”⁸⁹ In analysing this possibility, Barth first mentions some theological difficulties that result from understanding a Christian ethos as the controlling principle of the structure of Christian existence. These difficulties are not finally the reason Barth provides for his rejection of this possibility. The structure of this argument, which Barth repeats elsewhere, is significant for understanding Barth’s relationship to other types of theology.

The theological difficulties that follow from understanding a Christian ethos as the controlling principle of Christian life, according to Barth, consist in the abstraction of this ethos from its basis “which is anterior to it and which controls and determines it [...]”⁹⁰ Without investigating the basis for adopting such an ethos, the ethos itself may come to be understood as absolute and subsequently it “loses the distinctiveness, originality, and uniqueness which mark it off from the type of ethos common to the rest of the world and humanity.”⁹¹ Barth admits that the “Christian” ethos has much in common with many other moral systems and that often non-Christians are more exemplary in their morality than Christians.⁹² Thus, if the controlling principle of Christianity is an ethos which is not only approximated by others but can also be accomplished more expertly by them, the relative importance of choosing one ethos over another decreases. Furthermore, as an

⁸⁹ Ibid., 186.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 187.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

abstract principle, Christian moralism becomes “self-glorifying,”⁹³ as it points to a purported moral superiority of Christians themselves, rather than to “the meaning and basis of this ethos.”⁹⁴

Despite these theological difficulties, Barth still considers the possibility that the Christian ethos is that which distinguishes Christians from other people. If this were the case, “[w]hat is demanded of the Christian would simply be demanded because it is, and he would have to obey simply because he has. Jesus Christ would thus be his Lord only in virtue of a formal authority to command certain things without any obligation to disclose their purpose.”⁹⁵ Barth’s real objection to understanding the Christian ethos as the controlling principle of the structure of Christian existence is not, finally, that human obedience to a merely formal authority is untenable.

Rather, Barth rejects that Christ’s authority is merely formal because the “unconditional commanding and unconditional obedience,” of Jesus Christ and the Christian, respectively, “both take place with a meaning and basis which are self-revealed and therefore knowable.”⁹⁶ This basis and reason will be explored in greater detail later. According to Barth, then, while God could conceivably exercise a purely formal authority, he has in fact revealed a basis and reason for his authority, “the particular being of Jesus Christ in Christians and of Christians in Jesus Christ.”⁹⁷ Therefore, the Christian ethos cannot be the “first or final word in a relevant definition of the manner of the Christian [...]”⁹⁸

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 188.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 189.

2.1.2 Experience of Salvation: Rejected as Controlling Principle

Using a similar line of reasoning, Barth also examines what he calls the “classic”⁹⁹ answer to the question of the controlling principle of the structure of Christian existence. Although this answer has been elaborated in different ways, the classic answer is that the existence of Christians is to be “distinguished from others by the address, reception, possession, use and enjoyment of the salvation of God given and revealed to the world by God in Jesus Christ.”¹⁰⁰ Thus, the classic answer makes the experience of salvation and its benefits central to that which is distinctively Christian.

As in his consideration of a Christian ethos as the controlling principle, Barth first enumerates a number of theological difficulties that can arise and that have arisen historically when salvation is made the centrally defining characteristic of Christian life. Where those who would make the Christian ethos the controlling principle do not pursue the question of the nature of Christ’s authority far enough, as Barth would have it, neither do those who assert the classic answer provide a sufficient response.

If the human experience of salvation is central to Christian life, the obedience of the Christian to the command of Christ can be construed as a response of gratitude to grace given.¹⁰¹ However, Barth claims that the grace and gratitude or, “the divine gift and the divine task,”¹⁰² “[e]ven at best [...] will seem only as it were to be glued together.”¹⁰³ So, Barth concludes that “the Christian experience of grace and salvation is no more ultimate than the Christian ethos, but both have a common origin in the conjoined being of Jesus Christ and the Christian [...]”¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 192.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

Further theological difficulties that Barth identifies with the classic answer cluster around its anthropocentrism. Barth charges the classic answer with anthropocentrism because it is based on human self-reflection and experience.¹⁰⁵ If what it means to be a Christian is only grounded in human experience, then the subjective state of the Christian becomes of utmost importance, to the extent that one's assurance of whether or not one is a Christian relies on one's constant experience of the benefits of salvation.¹⁰⁶

Furthermore, many non-Christians, “demonstrate [...] that even without the benefit of Jesus Christ, and in a very different language, conceptuality and terminology, they have something analogous to or even identical with [...] Christian being, possession and capacity, namely, [...] they] enjoy [...] something of the same peace and patience and trust and discipline and freedom in and in face of the world[.]”¹⁰⁷ The similarity here between Christian and non-Christian salvific experiences, like the similarity between Christian and non-Christian ethical systems, suggests a certain level of relativism when it comes to how such experiences are achieved. So, somewhat counter-intuitively, if experiencing salvation is the distinctive principle that structures Christian existence, then the necessity of experiencing it through Christianity is diminished.

Lastly, the anthropocentrism of the classic answer, by focusing on personal experience and enjoyment of salvation, risks reducing salvation to a possession of Christians which they might lord over others.¹⁰⁸ Barth expresses the bizarre character of this situation by juxtaposing “the selflessness and self-giving of God and Jesus Christ”¹⁰⁹ with the “sanctioning and cultivating of an egocentricity,”¹¹⁰ which places satisfaction of human desires and needs at the centre of Christian existence. This egocentricity is analogous to the “self-glorifying” nature of an absolutised Christian moralism, discussed above.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 191-195.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 193.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 194.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

Again, using a similar line of reasoning to his assessment of the Christian ethos as controlling principle, Barth does not actually reject the classic answer on the basis of these theological difficulties. Rather, he turns to “the answer which is given in Holy Scripture,” to the question “What kind of goal [...] does the event have which is there described as the calling of specific men?”¹¹¹ Barth’s turn to scripture here is significant in that he seeks to base his rejection of the classic answer in divine revelation, rather than in human reflection, which was the source of the classic answer to begin with. Just as the theological difficulties associated with the Christian ethos, deduced from human reasoning, were not sufficient reason to reject it as controlling principle, neither are those associated with the classic answer.

Where Barth turned to the “self-revealed and therefore knowable,”¹¹² meaning and basis for the Christian ethos, Barth here turns to scripture to find the grounds for rejecting the classic answer as controlling principle. What he finds when he does so is that “[t]he personal history of the called and its happy outcome never become a real theme,”¹¹³ in the biblical passages describing vocation. While “we can glimpse [...] that such a personal experience was directly or indirectly linked with the decisive thing, i.e. with what came upon the called from the hand of God,”¹¹⁴ personal experience was not central to these events, or to the structure of existence of those called, following these events. For this reason, Barth rejects that the classic answer, the personal experience and enjoyment of salvation, can be made the controlling principle of the structure of Christian existence.

2.1.3 Witness as Controlling Principle of Christian Existence

In addition to *denying* the personal experience of salvation as central to the biblical passages describing vocation, Barth *affirms* something else as central: “existence in

¹¹¹ Ibid., 199.

¹¹² Ibid., 188.

¹¹³ Ibid., 199.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

execution of the task which God has laid upon them [the called].”¹¹⁵ This task, as Barth goes on to explain, is that of witnessing,¹¹⁶ and thus “witness” is, for Barth, the controlling principle of the structure of Christian existence.

Barth explains that there is a twofold sense in which the Christian is and acts as a witness. First of all, as scripture shows, God encounters those he calls in such a way that they literally perceive, and so become witnesses of “His being in his past, present and future action in the world and in history, of His being in His acts among and upon men.”¹¹⁷ Secondly, the same God who enables these perceptions of his acts enables the called not to be “idle spectators” but rather to be “witnesses who can and must declare what they have seen and heard like witnesses in a law-suit.”¹¹⁸

This “must” thus becomes the most determinative principle in the life of those called and encountered by God. Our discussion will now turn to an examination of some of the key characteristics of Barth’s concept of witness, throughout which we will frequently return to the problems Barth associated with positing the Christian ethos or salvation as central, in order to see how positing witness as central addresses these problems.

2.2 Features of Barth’s Concept of Witness

2.2.1 Witness as Theocentric

To begin, Barth’s understanding of the controlling principle of the structure of Christian existence is different from the others he has discussed so far, because it is theocentric (including particularly christocentric and particularly pneumatocentric elements), rather than anthropocentric. In addition to seeking the controlling principle through revelation, rather than self-reflection, Barth understands God as solely responsible for determining and creating “Christian existence” in every instance. Whereas the behaviour associated

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 202.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 202-203.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 202.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 203.

with a Christian ethos and the experience associated with salvation may be abstracted from their contexts, one's character as Christian witness cannot be abstracted from an actual encounter with the God of Jesus Christ, because this encounter is the only source and impetus for such a witness. It is *God* who *calls*, and thus divine action always has priority and control over human action in the relationship between the two.

This focus on divine action has implications for the way Christians understand their own role as witnesses. Christian witness, under this view, is primarily a means by which Christ witnesses to himself.¹¹⁹ Given that only an encounter with God can ever truly make a person a witness to God, according to Barth, Christians cannot understand themselves as in possession of a formula or requisite set of beliefs for becoming and being Christian.

Rather than a person becoming convinced of the validity of Christianity as a “self-grounded and self-motivating hypothesis,”¹²⁰ Barth suggests, “we have had to learn anew that the Holy Spirit is the Lord and Master of the Christian spirit and not simply identical with it, and that the Word of God is His Word and therefore cannot be understood merely as the self-declaration of the Christian spirit.”¹²¹ Barth's claim here goes beyond the suggestion that Christian witness can only be “effective” if God wills it, or if God is somehow at work in those to whom the Christian witnesses. Such an understanding still allows for the possibility that the Christian witness has in his or her possession a correct hypothesis or set of rules for “being Christian,” which God confirms. For Barth, the relationship of priority between Christian witness and God's self-witness is reversed: “The Christian is called to be the accompanying and confirming sign of the living Word of God. [...] He never can nor will speak it himself.”¹²²

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 241-242.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 124.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid., 236.

If the Christian can never capture, possess, or perfectly communicate the Word of God in his or her witness, then particular cultural or historical understandings of *the* “Christian message” ought not to be considered ultimate. John Franke sees this relativization of human theological language as important for addressing the problem of “sectarianism in Christian community as different expressions of the church conclude that they have arrived at the one true system of doctrine.”¹²³ Of course, the witness can never escape his or her cultural historical context and so must witness from the standpoint of his or her own particularity. However, Barth’s emphasis on divine action and divine freedom seems to recommend a certain openness on the part of Christians with respect to what “true Christianity” might look like and cautions against making one’s own understanding normative. Franke writes, “No single community, tradition, or perspective can speak for the whole church.”¹²⁴ As noted above, when this happens, Christians often become self-glorifying and egocentric, rather than attesting to Jesus Christ’s lordship.

2.2.2 Witness as Ontological

In addition to being theocentric, Barth’s concept of witness is ontologically grounded. Theocentricity, on its own, does not explain *how* human witness relates to divine self-witness, or how the execution of the task of witnessing determines Christian existence as a whole. Barth’s ontological conception of witness helps to explain these claims. In thinking about the way human witness relates to divine self-witness, in light of Barth’s theocentric approach, we may wonder why, if only God has the capacity to provide proper witness to God’s self, the human need be involved at all. Barth notes this logical difficulty and writes,

If this co-operation of theirs is actually demanded by Christ in their unity with him as the meaning and principle of their existence as Christians, and if it is not ordained in vain, this is to be established and explained only by the fact that the free action of Christ even in this prophetic form, being

¹²³ John Franke, “No Comprehensive Views, No Final Conclusions: Karl Barth, Open-Ended Dogmatics and the Emerging Church,” in *Karl Barth and American Evangelicalism*, 314.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 313.

bound neither to anyone nor to anything, is in a supremely specific sense the action of free divine grace, and as such it does not exclude but includes this human co-operation. [...] In a distinctive overflowing of divine grace it would have it so. He thus calls Christians to Himself, to His side, to His discipleship, to His service, and uses them as His heralds.¹²⁵

Here, we can see that, according to Barth, while God does not require human action, he chooses to include it. If this inclusion were to take the form of an arbitrary command, however, we would be in a similar situation to those who only affirm Christ's formal authority in commanding a Christian ethos. Discipleship and service would not be *necessary* to, and therefore definitive of, Christian existence but rather an outside imposition on, or requirement of, the human being, regardless of its validity or worth.

Because, in Barth's view, God decidedly chooses to include human co-operation in his witness, it cannot be merely an optional element of Christian being but is necessary to it as such. As in the above quoted passage, Christian co-operation "is actually demanded by Christ *in their unity with him* as the meaning and principle of their existence [...]."¹²⁶ It is because Christian being consists in unity with Christ¹²⁷ that divine witness is able to include and require human witness, and that this task of witness is ontologically constitutive of Christian existence.

Rooting witness in ontology prevents witness from being understood as something that the Christian could, theoretically, choose not to do. However, it is also possible to understand the controlling principle of Christian existence as based in ontology, without understanding witness as this controlling principle. Barth, for instance, engages with two other ways of understanding Christianity ontologically.

"Being" plays a significant role in the classic answer – that the experience of salvation is central to Christian existence – which Barth rejects. The classic answer focuses on a

¹²⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2., bk. 28: 235.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, (emphasis added).

¹²⁷ For an in-depth discussion of how this union constitutes Christian being, see *ibid.* 161-182.

perceived change in being; this “personal experience [of salvation] is the most obvious, illuminating and impressive thing to catch the attention of Christians when they consider the great alteration and singularity of their status [...]”¹²⁸ In the classic answer, then, salvation alters the Christian ontologically. Christians “*are* the beloved of God [...] not in their own power but in that which is given them by God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit,”¹²⁹ and this happens to Christians “in distinction from others.”¹³⁰ Therefore, under the classic answer, Christians enjoy an altered ontological status that differentiates them from those who have not undergone the experience of salvation.

Barth also engages a second possible way of understanding what distinguishes Christians from others as primarily ontological. This other possibility is “that Christians are those who, as recipients of the *kerygma* of the eschatological divine act accomplished in the death of Jesus Christ, recognise, affirm and grasp within the world the possibility of their own non-worldly being, and therefore transcend and leave behind the world even as they still exist within it [...]”¹³¹ So, the primary purpose of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, would be to make possible “a being in this antithesis [of worldliness and unworldliness].”¹³² This possibility is the first of the three controlling principles that Barth rejects, before rejecting Christian moralism and the personal experience of salvation.

This possibility differs from the classic answer in the way it construes the relationship between the actions of Jesus Christ and Christian ontology. Personal salvation changes the ontological *status* of the Christian in distinction from others, or at least his or her perception of this status. In this first possibility, however, reception of Christ’s *kerygma* changes the Christian’s perception of human ontology generally. The Christian is one

¹²⁸ Ibid., 191.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 189.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 190.

¹³¹ Ibid., 185.

¹³² Ibid.

who understands that non-worldly being is possible, and lives in the knowledge of this possibility, rather than living with a changed ontological status.

Barth, rather cursorily, dismisses “life in eschatological tension” as the controlling principle of Christian existence for the stated reason that it implies “a lack of proportion between the mountain-moving power of the revelation and knowledge of Jesus Christ and its supposed and relatively trivial result.”¹³³ In what follows, however, I will demonstrate a more complex relationship between the ontology of “life in eschatological tension” and Barth’s own ontological position.

In order to determine whether or not Barth’s concept of witness is helpful, at least in respect of its ontology, it is necessary to look in more detail at the distinctive features of his characterization of ontology. Contemporary scholarship on Barth’s work describes his notion of ontology as covenantal¹³⁴ and actualistic,¹³⁵ and tends to contrast his ontology with substantialistic¹³⁶ and essentialist¹³⁷ approaches.

2.2.2.1 Covenantal Ontology

To clarify what it means to call Barth’s ontology “covenantal,” it is necessary to refer to his doctrine of election, as elaborated in *Church Dogmatics* II/2, although a detailed explanation of this doctrine is outside the scope of this study. Briefly, Barth suggests that God’s election is the election of grace; that is, God has eternally elected to be God with and for, not apart from or against, humanity. God has elected to be “the One who loves in

¹³³ Ibid., 185.

¹³⁴ Kevin Hector, “Ontological Violence and the Covenant of Grace: An Engagement between Karl Barth and Radical Orthodoxy,” in *Karl Barth and American Evangelicalism*; Bruce McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 183-200.

¹³⁵ McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern*, 183-200; Paul Nimmo, *Being in Action: The Theological Shape of Barth’s Ethical Vision*, 2nd ed. (London: T & T Clark, 2011).

¹³⁶ Nimmo, *Being in Action*, 89.

¹³⁷ McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern*, 183-200.

freedom” not only in and of himself, but also for humanity.¹³⁸ This means that God has also elected humanity as his partner in this covenant of love and grace.¹³⁹

Barth suggests that humans are capable of making this assertion about God’s eternal decision to elect because God himself reveals it to humanity in time, in the event of reconciliation. “Dogmatics has no more exalted or profound word [...] than this: that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself (2 Cor. 5¹⁹). As the doctrine of the Word of God it can describe the Christian knowledge of God upon the basis of God’s self-revelation only with a constant and whole-hearted reference to the event which as such is both the source of truth and the truth itself.”¹⁴⁰ Because humans cannot know anything about God through speculation, according to Barth, we must rely on God’s self-revelation, which takes place in Christ’s incarnation and which declares that God chooses to be in fellowship with humanity, to the point that he takes rejection upon himself for humanity’s sake. Humans cannot “go behind” this gracious decision of God, to be God with and for humanity, in order to speculate about God’s character and plans prior to, or aside from, the election of grace.¹⁴¹

By placing election firmly at the beginning of dogmatic reflection then, within the doctrine of God, Barth characterizes all activity of God in history as occurring within this election of grace and thus within the covenant that God has chosen to establish with humanity.¹⁴² Creation itself, then, is not independent of reconciliation and redemption, but rather is eternally determined for it and cannot resist it.¹⁴³

This doctrine of election necessarily has dramatic consequences for Barth’s understanding of Christian ontology. Bruce McCormack describes Barth’s

¹³⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, study ed. eds. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. G.W. Bromiley (1940-1942; London: T&T Clark, 2009), II/2, bk.10: 1.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 96.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 93.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 81.

¹⁴² Ibid., 95-96.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

circumscription of all history by the doctrine of election as “establish[ing] a hermeneutical rule which [...] allow[s] the church to speak authoritatively about what God was doing – and, indeed, who and what God was/is – [...] *without engaging in speculation*.”¹⁴⁴ Given this hermeneutical rule, there is no human ontology that can be considered apart from the covenant of grace; this covenant determines all human being, hence the description of Barth’s ontology as a “covenant” or “covenantal” ontology.

This covenant ontology differs from the ontology associated with the classic answer. Because the covenant of grace is eternal and determines *all* human being, and because this grace is made known through the reconciliation accomplished in Christ, it follows that the reconciliation accomplished in Christ is sufficient and meaningful for all of humanity. Barth writes, “Christ lives indeed in Christians, as He also lives in non-Christians, as the Mediator, Head and Representative of all, as the new and true Adam. He is simply the Son of God and Man in whose life and death the whole world is reconciled with God [...]. [T]here is none who exists wholly without Him, who does not belong to Him [...].”¹⁴⁵ Because all of humanity is already reconciled to God in Christ, a personal experience of salvation does not change or alter one’s status with respect to this reconciliation, as in the classic answer.

It is not the goal, then, of Christian witness to persuade others that the personal experience of salvation is necessary for their reconciliation to God. Consequently, the content of witness is neither “[the Christian] nor the processes by which he has become [a Christian] nor the privileges which he has come to share as such.”¹⁴⁶ In this way, Barth’s covenantal ontology guards against the danger of egocentricity and self-glorification that can result from the ontology associated with the classic answer.

Furthermore, since the subjective or experiential element of salvation is not actually associated with the effectiveness or reality of salvation, and so the personal experience of

¹⁴⁴ McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern*, 183.

¹⁴⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2, bk. 28: 232.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 302.

salvation is not the pin on which the structure of Christian existence hangs, the abstraction of this experience from the specific context of Christian salvation does not threaten the distinctiveness or uniqueness of salvation. Here we are reminded of the theocentricity of Barth's approach. If human ontology is covenant ontology, human perception of a change in status, alteration, or transformation of the self cannot be considered ultimate or primary in defining what the Christian is.¹⁴⁷

While we have seen one way in which Barth's covenant ontology differs from the ontology of the classic answer due to its grounding in his doctrine of election, we must now consider how Barth's covenant ontology shapes his concept of witness. If *all* humans are ontologically constituted by the election of the covenant of grace, why is witness necessary and how do Christians, as witnesses, differ ontologically from others? Barth writes, "There is another form, however, in which Christ lives *in* the Christian. In this form, too, He lives *for* the world and *for* all men, as their Mediator, Head and Representative, as the new and true Adam. But in this form He does not live *in* all men. He lives only *in* those called by Him, *in* Christians."¹⁴⁸ This passage demonstrates that while Christians share a covenant ontology with all humanity, Christ relates to Christians differently than he relates to others in that he lives "in them."

This unity with Christ, which has already been touched upon, is for the Christian "an awakening to active knowledge of the accomplished reconciliation and the alteration of the world and his own situation grounded in this event."¹⁴⁹ In Barth's view, then, the person who becomes a Christian in being called by Christ into unity with him, understands not only herself as reconciled to God, but in fact all of humanity as reconciled to God. The difference is one of awareness about the nature of things in general, not only about her own status in relation to God.

¹⁴⁷ Kevin Hector asserts as much in "Ontological Violence and the Covenant of Grace," writing: "[...] human self-interpretation is not the final word. [...] Because all creation is preceded by the covenant of grace, our words and works stand in an *objective* relationship to God which exceeds whatever we may *take* that relationship to be," 339.

¹⁴⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2, bk. 28: 233, (emphasis added).

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 119.

Consequently, in Barth's view, the purpose of Christian witness is to declare to the world what the Christian already knows to be true about it – that the world is already reconciled to God in Christ and belongs to God in the covenant of grace. One implication of this covenant ontology is that Christians must not understand themselves as the arbiters of “true” Christianity. Any sort of “in-group” or “us-versus-them” mentality is ruled out. Witness takes on a posture of humility rather than superiority or judgment because what is ultimately important about Christian existence, life lived in the covenant of grace, is not true only of Christians, but of all humanity.

Barth writes of non-Christians, “no matter who or what they are or how they live, their vocation is before them no less surely than that Jesus Christ has died and risen again for them. This is something of unconditional significance. [...] Anything we know concerning the fact that they are not called and not Christians can finally be only a matter of more or less well-founded conjecture.”¹⁵⁰ Note that Barth is not suggesting that distinctions between Christians and others are insignificant and meaningless. The real difference between active knowledge of Christ's lordship and ignorance of Christ's lordship requires Christian witnesses to show “genuinely unlimited openness of the called in relation to the uncalled, an unlimited readiness to see in the aliens of today the brothers of tomorrow, and to love them as such.”¹⁵¹

While covenant ontology clearly differs from that which Barth associates with a classic view of salvation, in a way it is similar to the ontology he associates with “life in eschatological tension.” In Barth's view, the world, humans generally, and individuals in particular have always been ontologically constituted by election to the covenant of grace but in becoming a Christian, the individual is awakened to this truth. Similarly, for those who suggest the Christian life is most distinctively one of eschatological tension, the possibility of non-worldly being always exists, but in becoming a Christian, the individual is awakened to *this* truth. Clearly, the content of the truth that a person recognizes upon becoming a Christian is different in the two cases and this in itself may

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 120.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

be enough to justify Barth's quick dismissal of "life in eschatological tension" as a viable contender for the controlling principle of Christian existence. The similarity between the two possibilities, however, draws attention to a feature of Barth's ontology that requires further explication.

2.2.2.2 Actualistic Ontology

Both cases emphasize specific knowledge as definitive of Christian existence but, as has been discussed, Barth refuses to ground the controlling principle of Christian existence in any human capacity or possession. To resolve this apparent contradiction, we must consider what it means for Barth's ontology to be actualistic.

For Barth, Christian unity with Christ means far more than a simple attainment of knowledge, regardless of how important and glorious that knowledge might be. It is knowledge imparted by a specific person, Jesus Christ, and apart from this act of imparting, this self-revelation, it cannot exist, regardless of what a person may think that he or she knows.¹⁵² Barth writes, "[Jesus Christ] is not a figure of the remote past, [...] but from whom we are separate in our own time apart from [...] recollection [...]. He lives, acts and speaks as [our] Contemporary."¹⁵³ If the covenantal character of Barth's ontology were taken on its own, it might be possible to misunderstand God's decision about human being-in-covenant as *only past*, and therefore accessible by the same human means used to attain all other historical knowledge. However, the actualism in Barth's ontology guards against this possible misunderstanding by emphasizing the living Christ's ongoing and present work.

Paul Nimmo writes extensively of Barth's actualistic ontology in *Being in Action: The Theological Shape of Barth's Ethical Vision*. He emphasizes that knowledge of God, from a human perspective is "in the act of revelation in Jesus Christ, [...] exclusively actualized. In this event of revelation, the order of human knowing is brought into

¹⁵² Ibid., 128-9.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 130.

correspondence with the true order of being.”¹⁵⁴ This description helps to clarify the relationship between the eternal election of human being for covenant, which is the “true order of being,” and its actualization in present human life. What has been called actualism in Barth scholarship is more often discussed in Barth’s own work using words such as “event,” “happening,” and “history.”

Actualization complements the covenant character of Barth’s ontology but, in order to understand Barth properly, it is also important to note how the actualistic character of ontology *requires* covenant. Nimmo contrasts actualistic ontology with “substantialistic” ontology.¹⁵⁵ That which defines human existence is not a static substance, but rather who and what humans are in and through the active events of their lives. In itself, then, an actualistic ontology defines existence in relation to that which is acted upon. Taken alone, actualism might be said to imply a certain self-fashioning ontology. However, as clearly indicated by Barth’s theocentrism, this is not the type of human ontology he has in mind. According to Webster, “Barth’s point is more that to be a human person is not simply to produce oneself in a process of self-shaping, but rather to discover oneself within an ordered reality which is governed by God’s dealings with creation in Jesus Christ.”¹⁵⁶ Similarly, McCormack asserts that while actualism is a helpful term philosophically, “[i]t would be even more accurate [...] to express Barth’s ontology *theologically* as a ‘covenant ontology,’ since it is not in ‘relationality’ in general that [...] being is constituted but in a most concrete, particular relation,”¹⁵⁷ that of the divine-human covenant.

Following from these observations, “true” human ontology becomes actualized in the history of each Christian life, in accordance with its foundation in the election of Jesus

¹⁵⁴ Nimmo, *Being in Action*, 6.

¹⁵⁵ Nimmo, *Being in Action*, 88-89.

¹⁵⁶ Webster, *Ethics of Reconciliation*, 223-224.

¹⁵⁷ McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern*, 190. Note that in this quote, McCormack is actually referring to divine and not human ontology. He extends its application to human ontology later, however, on page 199.

Christ,¹⁵⁸ but the human is not self-governing in respect of this actualization; rather, Christ, in the Holy Spirit, actualizes human being. One possible danger here is that the consequences of *human* action might be understood as meaningless and thus human action in itself futile and irrelevant in the overall scheme of God's activity in the world.¹⁵⁹ Clearly, this would prevent any affirmation that the execution of the task of witness is necessary to and definitive of Christian life.

2.2.2.3 Ontology in Union

Barth's ontological grounding of the controlling principle of Christian existence does, however, make room for and necessitate human witness, in that Christ unites his action with that of the Christian, in what Barth calls "a community of action."¹⁶⁰ Barth writes, "[t]heir fellowship would not be complete if their relationship were actualized only from above downwards and not also from below upwards. [...] [Jesus'] action has its correspondence in an action of the Christian."¹⁶¹ In this way, God both allows and commands human witness to truly participate in divine self-witness in a way that is meaningful and necessary.

The actualistic character of Barth's ontology has the consequence that the union of Christ and the Christian is a "community of action" and not a merging of substances, and so Christian life must be characterized by an ongoing active relationship with God.¹⁶² This means, in Barth's words, that the Christian "constantly returns to Him as the One who lives for him and in him in this form, continually looking and moving forward from this place and this place alone."¹⁶³ Because the Christian is not identical with Christ in their

¹⁵⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2, bk. 28: 110.

¹⁵⁹ A number of scholars recognize this difficulty in Barth's thought. See, for example, Hector, "Ontological Violence and the Covenant of Grace," 341; McCormack, "So That He May Be Merciful to All: Karl Barth and the Problem of Universalism," in *Karl Barth and American Evangelicalism*, 244-249; Webster, *Ethics of Reconciliation*, 226.

¹⁶⁰ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2, bk. 28: 225.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 232.

union, the Christian is “always in movement between two states of existence from the subordinate, static, and present of herself, to the superior, dynamic and future in Christ.”¹⁶⁴ This movement indicates, on a practical level, the shape that witness must take.

Witness occurs primarily in faith, obedience and prayer. The movement between the two states of existence, described above, happens in faithful prayer and obedience, which as Nimmo rightly asserts “can never be substantialistically predicated of the ethical agent.” Similarly, McCormack speaks of “the posture of prayer,” in which “true humanity is actualized by faith and in obedience.”¹⁶⁵ Clearly, Christian witness, by virtue of its very character *as witness*, involves an orientation of Christians towards other people, and so cannot consist only in a vertical relationship of prayer. Caroline Schröder describes the interrelatedness of faith, prayer and obedience in Christian life as “the unity of truth and actuality [...]. These characteristics of Christian existence cannot be reduced to each other, but mutually interpret one another.”¹⁶⁶

We can fill out the meaning of this mutual interpretation a bit more by turning to Barth’s subsection “The Liberation of the Christian,” at the end of §71. For Barth, prayer is the practice of confessing “the dynamic lordship of God over all things,”¹⁶⁷ such that Christian witness can take place in the confidence of this lordship, rather than in anxiety [*Angst*]. The Christian will still experience anxiety, as part of the “subordinate, static, and present of herself,”¹⁶⁸ but she is not possessed by it, because in prayer, she is continually reminded of who she is in Christ.¹⁶⁹ Acting continually from this posture of prayer, the Christian may faithfully witness to God without fear or worry about whether or not what

¹⁶⁴ Nimmo, *Being in Action*, 163.

¹⁶⁵ McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern*, 198.

¹⁶⁶ Caroline Schröder, “‘I See Something You Don’t See’: Karl Barth’s Doctrine of Providence,” in *For the Sake of the World: Karl Barth and the Future of Ecclesial Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 131.

¹⁶⁷ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2, bk. 28: 299.

¹⁶⁸ Nimmo, *Being in Action*, 163.

¹⁶⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2, bk. 28: 297-299.

she is doing is “correct,” according to some “theory of life,” which has been imposed upon her by herself or others.¹⁷⁰ Obedience, in this respect, does not consist in compliance with a given morality, but rather, “the most immediate act of obedience is always the step in his service as a witness which is now demanded of him.”¹⁷¹

Additionally, the nature of the union between Christ and Christian further emphasizes the point that Christian witness to others must occur with a sense of openness and humility. Christians do not in any way possess Christ in their being, and so “no man who is called does not also have to see and understand himself as one who has still to be called and therefore as one who stands alongside and in solidarity with the uncalled.”¹⁷² Nimmo also draws this connection between actualistic ontology and Christian witness, noting that all humanity, including Christian humanity, is fragile.¹⁷³ He suggests, furthermore, that actualistic ontology “demands that Christians remain absolutely open to the fact that realization in human action of the will of God is not confined to the Church,” and so Christians must always be prepared to listen and learn from those outside of the Christian community.¹⁷⁴ This humility with respect to others does not contradict the confidence with which Christian witness must also proceed, because both proceed from faith in divine lordship over all things. Christians are not confident by virtue of something which is theirs to possess and lord over others, but because they know that God has reconciled humanity to himself in Christ. Likewise, they are humble because they respect God’s freedom in his lordship over all humanity, not because they are unsure of themselves in relation to others.

With this understanding of Barth’s actualistic covenant ontology in mind, we can now turn to another feature of Barth’s concept of witness – its occurrence in and relationship

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 295-297.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 296.

¹⁷² Ibid., 120.

¹⁷³ Nimmo, *Being in Action*, 189.

¹⁷⁴ Nimmo, *Being in Action*, 190-191. Hector makes a similar assertion in “Ontological Violence and the Covenant of Grace,” 339-340.

to history. The end of the discussion of ontology begins to hint at the way witness – this controlling principle of the structure of Christian existence – actually happens in the course of human lives, through faith, prayer, and obedience. Now we take into consideration how Barth understands these human actions to relate to history and bear witness within it.

2.2.3 Witness Borne in History

Barth's understanding of history is complex and analysis of it could easily be taken in many directions. In order to stay focussed on the concept of witness which is under study here, I will ground the present discussion in this passage from §71:

When this call [to Christian life] comes to man, man's time is fulfilled and a new history begins in his history – an actual time of grace and history of salvation. This history is not merely internal but external; it is not merely spiritual but moral, social and political; it is not merely invisible but also visible. And in the world around him, even though its newness and particularity may not be understood but misunderstood without faith, and even though it may not be noticed, this history will at least call for notice, and [...] will certainly not be without relevance and significance for the history of this world around and for human history generally. It will thus be a history which itself makes history. It will certainly take place in the spiritual sphere, yet not in this alone. [...] As the called or Christians may thus live this part of earthly life among others, not of themselves but by God's eternal election of grace, by the actively known grace of reconciliation and the covenant, by the power of the Word and Spirit of the living Jesus Christ, it is completely ruled out that they either should or could flee from time and history and live properly and essentially in a non-spatial and timeless beyond. In his this-worldly time and history among all

other men, the Christian lives properly and essentially as one who is called.¹⁷⁵

To begin, this passage emphasizes the outward, public, and social character of Christian life. This is not surprising, as “witness” can clearly not take place in a sort of inner monologue or completely private religious life.¹⁷⁶ Yet what can the significance of Christian witness through history be if God has already made the eternal decision of covenant relationship with humanity and fulfilled it through reconciliation in Christ? Indeed, the passage itself says that the newness and particularity of Christian life may not even be noticed, much less understood by others. George Hunsinger writes, “[a]lthough [the saving work of Jesus Christ] indeed continues, it does not go on as a cumulative process [...]”¹⁷⁷ Christians cannot add or take anything away from this saving. If this is the case, what, then can be the “significance and relevance” of Christian witness?

According to the passage, Christian witness occurs “by God’s eternal election of grace, by the actively known grace of reconciliation and the covenant, by the power of the Word and Spirit of the living Jesus Christ.”¹⁷⁸ Christian witness is relevant because the power of the Spirit of the living Christ is relevant and is in this witness, and this is one of the ways in which the saving work of Jesus Christ does continue. Because God chooses to reveal himself through human witness in history, this witness will be noticed according to his eternal will to be humanity’s covenant partner.

An article on Barth’s doctrine of the Holy Spirit by George Hunsinger is particularly helpful in explaining how Christ’s ongoing work in history, including our present time,

¹⁷⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2, bk. 28: 126-127.

¹⁷⁶ In *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2, bk. 28: 195-198, Barth discusses the way in which, even those who attempt to maintain a purely individual, interior faith, tend to express themselves in relation to the world in one form or another, such that this exterior, social dimension of Christian life is almost unavoidable. In this way, it seems, Barth aims to strengthen his point that witness is the controlling principle of Christian life, even for those who may not agree with him on this point.

¹⁷⁷ George Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.2000), 175.

¹⁷⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2, bk. 28: 127.

relates to the eternal election of Christ. Hunsinger writes of the “complex temporality” that relates revelation and reconciliation in Barth’s work: “Revelation and reconciliation each centred inalienably on what had taken place in the life history of Jesus Christ then and there, while yet involving receptive, eucharistic, and participatory moments, continually, here and now.”¹⁷⁹

The tension between past and present, however, need not be an insurmountable obstacle if we understand, along with revelation and reconciliation, the Holy Spirit’s work as redeemer. “Redemption,” writes Hunsinger “as the peculiar and proper work of the Spirit represented the consummation of all things [...], was the absolute future which would at once reveal and impart Jesus Christ in his inexhaustible significance for the whole creation.”¹⁸⁰ Thus, the Holy Spirit, which is always Christ’s spirit, works in human history between the horizons of reconciliation and redemption. The importance of temporality in Barth’s understanding of Christian witness will be developed further in the conclusion of this thesis.

The Holy Spirit, according to Barth, is “the divine power” of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, such that “without ceasing to be the Lord or forfeiting his transcendence, but rather in its exercise, He gives and imparts Himself to [the Christian],” and this “becomes the most truly distinctive feature of [the Christian], the centre and basis of his human existence, [...] the origin of his freest volition and action [...]”¹⁸¹ As we have already discussed in relation to ontology, the Holy Spirit imparts an “active knowledge” to the Christian person. A closer look at this concept of active knowledge is necessary in order to clarify how it can possibly translate into acts of witness that are not merely internal, spiritual, and invisible, but also external, moral, political, social and visible, as witness must be in human history.

¹⁷⁹ Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace*, 149.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2, bk. 28: 164.

The knowledge to which Christians are awakened in their call by Christ, through the Holy Spirit, Barth writes, “is no mere apprehension and understanding of God’s being and action, nor as such a kind of intuitive contemplation. It is the claiming not only of his thinking but also of his willing and work, of the whole man, for God. It is his refashioning to be a theatre, witness and instrument of his acts.”¹⁸² The “active knowledge” of which Barth speaks is therefore not “knowledge,” as we typically understand it, by any means.¹⁸³

While the Holy Spirit unites the Christian to Christ in such a way that makes it possible for the human to bear faithful witness to him, what are the concrete actions by which this witness occurs? This question presents many difficulties. As discussed throughout this chapter, Barth consistently disallows the possibility that humans can pin down or possess any “correct” system of beliefs or rules for moral behaviour. Barth writes, “To be sure, the counsel which [the Christian] is now given [by Jesus Christ] is not a theory of life. It is in his indecision [...], that man constructs and has theories. Delivered from indecision, the Christian is led at once beyond all theory to practice, to action,” and this action consists in “the most immediate act of obedience.”¹⁸⁴ To accept that witness must be borne of the union of Christ with the Christian, that only the power of the Holy Spirit can guarantee the human witness will be faithful to God’s self-witness – all of this is threatening to human self-control. And yet it is only in surrendering this control, Barth suggests, and in fact rejoicing in this lack of control, that real witness is made possible.¹⁸⁵

The idea that the content of human witness will always be provided by the Holy Spirit might, at a superficial glance, appear to suggest that there is no value in developing “Christian” attitudes, participating in “Christian” practices, or even speaking about “Christian” things, because what will or will not be “Christian” in a given moment is

¹⁸² Ibid., 136.

¹⁸³ See also, Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace*, 162; Mangina, *The Christian Life*, 165.

¹⁸⁴ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2, bk. 28: 296.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 295-296.

impossible to ascertain. Speaking of those who would accuse Barth of this “ethical occasionalism,” Joseph Mangina writes, “Just as we cannot ‘have’ grace, so we cannot ‘have’ advance knowledge of what God requires of us.”¹⁸⁶ This criticism of Barth is overstated, as Mangina goes on to discuss, because it does not adequately take into account Barth’s understanding of human history, especially as this history relates to God’s covenant faithfulness.¹⁸⁷

We have spoken of an *active* knowledge, that embodies the whole person and in which Christ is *immediately* present to the Christian in the power of the Holy Spirit. Returning to the passage from §71, however, Barth speaks not of an empty knowledge, or indeterminate presence but rather knowledge of the “grace of reconciliation and the covenant, by the power of the Word and Spirit of the living Jesus Christ.”¹⁸⁸ Indeed, the means by which humans can have any knowledge of who or what God is, is because Jesus Christ entered into human history and revealed God’s character as the God of grace. The “Spirit” who imparts power to Christian witness is not an alien or strange force that comes over a person and compels him to arbitrary behaviours, it is the Spirit of this same Jesus Christ who Christians know as gracious. Hunsinger writes, “[Christ’s] life as lived in the Spirit cannot be separated from his earthly history. [...] As the one who lives in the Spirit, the risen Lord imparts himself to ourselves – and his history to our histories.”¹⁸⁹ In this sense *active* knowledge, though not typical, is still *active knowledge* about a particular and concrete person and event.

Furthermore, the determination of God to be in covenant partnership with humanity applies to real human beings who only exist in history. So, the Spirit of Christ who acts in communion with contemporary Christians is the same Spirit who has always acted through humans to bear witness to himself. Following from these observations, the particularity with which God encounters humans (both in the earthly life of Jesus and

¹⁸⁶ Mangina, *The Christian Life*, 167.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 168-169.

¹⁸⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2, bk. 28: 127, (emphasis added).

¹⁸⁹ Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace*, 177.

continuously in the lives of individuals), according to Barth, is not mystifying but concrete. Even though God cannot be captured by human systems or “theories of life,” he is not beyond reach, because he chooses to reveal himself in history, and chooses to act through human witness as well.

According to Mangina, Barth’s relentless use of “the language of acts and actions,” which Mangina suggests garners the criticism of occasionalism, primarily reflects a use of conceptual tools that does not adequately match his clear grasp of the subject matter at hand (“continuities in our existence”).¹⁹⁰ The relationship between acts and actions, and continuities in existence will be explored in subsequent chapters. For now, we can note that the potential occasionalism in Barth’s view of witness does not entail a lack of concreteness or direction. Barth provides many examples of the particularity with which God calls people to bear witness to himself and how this witness functions in history.

Specifically, Barth embarks on a lengthy analysis of diverse passages of “call to witness” in Scripture, both of “the prophets of *Yahweh* in the Old Testament and the disciples and apostles of Jesus Christ in the New.”¹⁹¹ Barth discusses, for example, Moses’ call to lead his people out of Egypt,¹⁹² Jeremiah’s call to tell the people of Jerusalem’s fall “in flat opposition to all optimistic prognoses,”¹⁹³ and the disciples’ call to follow Jesus, and in a “highly practical” way, to recognize his existence and commit to it.¹⁹⁴ Notably, all of these calls are personal in the sense that they are addressed to a (human) person by a (divine) person, *Yahweh* or Jesus Christ; they all discharge a particular task to the person called; and they all participate in the history of salvation.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁰ Mangina, *The Christian Life*, 168.

¹⁹¹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2, bk. 28: 204-219.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 205.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 208.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 213.

¹⁹⁵ Note, as Hunsinger writes, “Barth does not deny that human freedom ‘cooperates’ with divine grace. He denies that this cooperation in any way effects salvation.” *Disruptive Grace*, 165.

It is significant to note that the contemporaries of these biblical figures may not have recognized or understood their witness. By extension, it is possible to see how witnesses through all of history, up to the present day, may go unrecognized by their contemporaries and yet still have “relevance and significance for the history of this world,” as our passage suggests. It follows for Christian witness today, not only that it cannot be measured according to some human scale of effectiveness, but also that the expectations with which Christians engage in witness should be oriented towards faithfulness to God, rather than human outcomes.

Barth’s scriptural analysis also shows that the ways in which individuals are called to witness and the specific tasks set before them are incredibly varied. Although “witness” is often associated with the linguistic communication of the gospel message, this is only one aspect of witness, and may not be the primary mode by which all Christians are called to bear witness. In fact, Barth writes of the biblical calls to witness, “it is only with them [the prophets in the narrower sense, aside from Moses and Samuel], that word, speech and writing, i.e. declaration in the more literal sense, may be said to stand in the forefront of their task and sending.”¹⁹⁶ Likewise, he writes, “[...] obeying Him, [the Christian] confesses Him, again not just theoretically – *and whether or not in words is only a secondary question* – but quite unequivocally by publicly entertaining the way which is chosen by Him, by irrevocably and bindingly accepting his own relationship to Him [...]”¹⁹⁷

This variability in the way people are called to witness reflects the always personal and particular origin of this call in the ongoing life of Christ in the Spirit. As Hunsinger writes, “[t]he work of the Holy Spirit, as Barth saw it, is [...] diversified in application. Divine activity is so richly diverse that it cannot be captured by any law, but must

¹⁹⁶ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2, bk. 28: 206.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 162 (emphasis added).

continually be sought afresh from one new situation to the next.”¹⁹⁸ This of course, does not mean that words are insignificant.

Repeatedly, Barth refers to Christian witnesses as *Verbi divini ministri*,¹⁹⁹ or ministers of the divine Word. Christians bear witness to the Word – Jesus Christ – and not to a mere symbol of faith,²⁰⁰ or elevated human consciousness,²⁰¹ and so the historical narrative through which humans learn about Christ’s reconciling work does matter. However, proclamation of this narrative is not necessarily the way in which all Christians will be called to bear witness to this Word. Christians are called to be ministers of the divine Word, not necessarily, and certainly not *only* ministers of words. Again, this assertion encourages a shift in the expectations of what witness might look like, from a human perspective. Importantly, I would suggest, it poses a strong challenge to any purely intellectual formulation of Christianity, and demonstrates that those who are not gifted with words, including those who might be disabled, can also serve as Christ’s witnesses. At the same time, Barth is certainly not anti-intellectual in his conception of Christian witness.²⁰²

Not all Christians are called to bear witness to Christ through verbal proclamation of the gospel. Furthermore, according to Barth, reception, understanding, and belief in the biblical narrative do not of themselves make a person into a Christian. No story or person can actually mediate the call of Christ.²⁰³ However, the biblical narrative remains normative for all forms of witness because through it, Christ has chosen to reveal himself as the God of grace for humanity.²⁰⁴ Barth writes:

¹⁹⁸ Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace*, 179.

¹⁹⁹ See, for example, Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2, bk. 28: 108, 142, 204.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 153

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 166.

²⁰² See, for example, Mangina, *The Christian Life*, 38.

²⁰³ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2, bk. 28: 141.

²⁰⁴ Franke explains it this way: “[...] the means used by God in revelation, in this case the medium of human language, continues to bear the inherent limitations of its creaturely and finite character in spite of

It is by [the witness of the prophets and apostles] that the Lord who is normative for all proclaims and makes Himself known [...]. Yet it is not their power which is at work. [...] Even in Holy Scripture as such there is no inherent force. It is wholly and immediately His power and work if, attested by them, He now issues His call to others as once He did to them. The others are normatively taught and instructed concerning Him by them as the first to be called. To that extent they are bound to their witness as the criterion, though not the source, of their knowledge.²⁰⁵

This quote exemplifies how Scriptural narrative relates to the work of Christ up to this day, without Christ's being restricted by it. Because Christ has revealed his character, being, and will through his actions, and the apostles were the first witnesses of these actions, we can and must trust Scriptural witness, though we can never confuse Christ himself with the witness to him attested in Scripture.

The reasoning extends to post-biblical witnesses as well: “[...]if this has to be said in relation to the prophets and apostles as the first to be called, it applies self-evidently to all the secondary witnesses of Jesus Christ who follow them, whether we think of His community as such or of the bearers of special offices of ministry within it.”²⁰⁶ The community that understands Scripture as the normative criterion for their knowledge of Christ, namely the Christian community, will witness according to this criterion, but the living Christ retains ultimate power over his own self-revelation, in the shape this witness may take.

Barth's retention of a clear separation between the “Christian message” and Christ himself has serious implications for Christian witness. This separation means that

the use God makes of it as a bearer of truth in its witness to revelation.” “No Comprehensive Views, No Final Conclusions,” 309.

²⁰⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2, bk. 28: 141.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

Christ's Spirit and work is not constrained to the Christian community, nor, by any means does every Christian action bear faithful witness.²⁰⁷ As mentioned earlier, humility and openness are thus necessary in Christian witness to others. Christ may, indeed, bear witness to Christians through these others!

Furthermore, it is difficult to distinguish between what is Scripturally evident and what is a given community's *interpretation* of Scripture. This is particularly dangerous in communities where Scripture and Christ are confounded, because "witness" risks becoming an attempt to conform others to, or coerce others into accepting, one's own interpretation of what Christianity must "look like." Not only do humans attempt to usurp Christ's lordship in such situations, but it can also lead to devastating forms of cultural oppression.²⁰⁸ On the other hand, as Hunsinger suggests, "[Christ] must continually be seen and appreciated in new light and new aspects. [...] The indivisible wholeness of his work, and in this work his being, is not uniform but multiform in itself."²⁰⁹ Similarly, reflecting on the plurality of witnesses found even in the Bible itself, Franke writes, "the self-revelatory speech-act of God is received among diverse communities over long periods of time and in a plurality of cultural settings. The human reception and response is shaped by the communal and cultural settings in which revelation occurs. This is part of the act of revelation itself that creates its own hearers [...]"²¹⁰ Again, this calls to mind the recurring theme, in Barth's theology, of surrendering human control of witness to Christ, and shifting expectations of what the outcome of witness might be.

2.3 Chapter Conclusion

While much more could be said about Karl Barth's understanding of Christian witness, this chapter has attempted to show that, in Barth's theology, witness is the defining

²⁰⁷ See, for example, Hector, "Ontological Violence and the Covenant of Grace," 340; Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace*, 184.

²⁰⁸ Barth discusses some of the differences between his own position and that of "cultural Christianity," specifically of the Western variety in *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2, bk. 28: 148-150.

²⁰⁹ Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace*, 175.

²¹⁰ Franke, "No Comprehensive Views, No Final Conclusions," 309.

characteristic of Christian life. As the encounter between the living Christ and human beings cannot be systematized, predicted, or controlled, Christians are called only to bear witness to Jesus Christ, the history of whom has taught and continues to teach them not only of their own reconciliation to God, but also of the world's. Humbly, shaped by the scriptural witness to Christ and Christian witness throughout history, and always with prayerful attention to the Holy Spirit, Christians can live, work and speak as those who know Christ as Lord.

Chapter 3

3 A Critical Appraisal of Barth's Concept of Witness

Now that we have explored the christological foundation of Barth's understanding of witness and examined in some detail his unique understanding of the Christian as witness, this study will turn to a critical appraisal of what has been laid out so far, largely through a consideration of major themes in the scholarly reception and criticism of this material. This appraisal cannot be exhaustive; its purpose is to draw attention to some of the difficulties and ambiguities in Barth's understanding of witness.

I will proceed by considering three related issues in Barth's theology: 1) the genuineness or reality of humanity; 2) human possibilities for meaningful witness; and 3) the self-understanding of the Christian witness, particularly as it is related to sin. Again, the analysis of Barth's concept of witness here will be restricted to his treatment of the individual person rather than the church as witness, in view of the immense scope of the latter in the *Church Dogmatics*.

As will become apparent throughout this chapter, the christological foundation (outlined in chapter one), on which Barth bases his understanding of Christian witness (outlined in chapter two), largely shapes the scholarly discussion of the three issues identified above. However, this christological focus is not restricted to Barth's discussion of Christian witness, rather, it permeates the *Church Dogmatics* in such a way that scholarly criticism, appreciation, or understanding of Barth's christological methodology affects the scholarly response to all aspects of his theology.

I raise this point because this chapter will make reference to scholarship that does not specifically discuss Barth's theology of vocation or witness but rather discusses his theological method or his ethics more broadly. Albeit cautiously, deductions can be made about Barth's theology of vocation and witness from these broader assessments because of the methodological consistency and interconnectedness between the range of doctrines

and their ethical implications in *Church Dogmatics*.²¹¹ With this in mind, the analysis of three key issues surrounding Barth's understanding of witness and vocation can proceed.

3.1 The Reality and Genuineness of Humanity

As has been illustrated throughout this thesis, Barth grounds reconciliation, both in its objective basis and subjective basis, in Jesus Christ. Vocation, Barth suggests, is the call of Christ "by which He awakens man to an active knowledge of the truth and thus receives him into the new standing of the Christian [...]"²¹² This call belongs to the reconciling activity of Christ, alongside justification and sanctification. As discussed in chapter 2, the truth, to which the Christian is awakened by this call, is that Jesus Christ has decisively reconciled all of humanity to God through his life, death, and resurrection, in fulfillment of God's eternal election of humanity, in Jesus Christ, to be God's covenant partner. The call to active knowledge of this truth, furthermore, is a call to the task of witnessing to "[Christ's] being in His past, present and future action in the world and in history, of His being in His acts among and upon men."²¹³ Barth's depiction of Christian existence as defined by witness to a certain ontological state of affairs (or 'reality'), established and maintained by and in the person of Jesus Christ, raises questions about how Barth understands the reality of humanity in and of itself;²¹⁴ it seems to create a divide between that which is *really* real and that which only appears to be real.

²¹¹ To support this point see, for example, Webster, *Ethics of Reconciliation*, "... Barth's *Dogmatics* is best approached by bearing in mind three characteristics of his argument, all of which are inter-dependent, and no single one of which can stand on its own without twisting the design of the whole. [...] (1) The *Church Dogmatics* [...] is a lengthy exposition of the statement [...] that 'God is'. [...] (2) Because – and only because – it is an exposition of the statement 'God is'. The *Church Dogmatics* is also all along the line an anthropology. [...] Because the theme of the *Church Dogmatics* is *this* God in covenant with humanity, the *Dogmatics* is intrinsically an ethical dogmatics, and includes description of the human covenant partner as agent."

²¹² Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2, bk. 28: 107.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 203.

²¹⁴ While it would be possible to rehearse harsh criticisms against Barth's treatment of human reality, the purpose here is not to defend Barth against his critics but to contribute to the scholarly understanding and appreciation of his theology of witness. Therefore, I will consider the way that sympathetic scholars of Barth talk about this issue in his theology. In the course of doing so, I will discuss the criticisms in general, but not with the detail I would if my aim were to refute them. For the sake of scope and focus, I will attempt only to sketch the contours of a representative reading of Barth's theology of witness.

To address such concerns, theological supporters of Barth tend to reframe these questions and challenge their underlying assumptions. For instance, the ontologically determinative being-in-act of Jesus Christ, John Webster suggests, only threatens human reality if the contingencies of history are understood to be determinative of the “real” in an exclusive manner.²¹⁵ Webster goes on to say, “Barth is not claiming that God in Christ is ‘the reality’ in an exclusive sense, in a way which amounts to an ontological disenfranchisement of all other ‘realities’. The reality of Jesus Christ as the self-positing of God includes within itself all other realities, and it is in him and from him that they have their inalienable substance.”²¹⁶ By understanding Barth’s ontological prioritizing of Jesus Christ as *inclusive* of “other ‘realities’,” Webster eschews the issue of whether or not Barth treats humanity as real and rather shifts the discussion to the nature of human reality and its relationship to divine reality.

This shift, from understanding reality as defined exclusively by historical contingency to understanding historical contingency as reality encompassed within the truth of the sovereignly determinative reality of God, carves out the space in which Barth’s formulation of Christian existence as witness can logically occur. It does not deny the genuine reality of human existence but at the same time it affirms that the most significant determinant of reality, Jesus Christ, is not simply equal to human existence. Christians, while living and experiencing reality in all their humanness, are encountered by the reality of Jesus Christ in such a way that they recognize its significance for human history and life and bear testimony to it.

Barth’s ontological relativization of historical contingencies is accompanied by the suggestion that human capacities (for example, cognition and emotion) are not an authoritative guide through reality. In chapter 1, I discussed this issue from the christological perspective in terms of Jesus Christ’s self-revelation in his prophetic office and the distinction between “divine facts” as self-demonstrating and “creaturely facts.”

²¹⁵ Webster, *Ethics of Reconciliation*, 17.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

Here, we pick up this issue again in terms of how the content of such self-revelation might be said to relate to human experiences of reality.

If reality was determined by nothing more than the chance happenings of history, then it would make sense to conclude that human capacities are fit to find, create, or interpret the meaning of this reality. However, as George Hunsinger explains, in Barth's view of reality, "[Truth] is essentially a predicate of God's own living reality as the Lord. [...] It is a truth that, at God's own prerogative (and only at this prerogative), makes itself known with power. [...] [O]ur human perception and reception of this truth can only be an ongoing event. [...] God is not knowable as a given entity that can be rationally apprehended and thereby controlled."²¹⁷ Consequently, Barth's theology decentres the role of human subjectivity from the place it held in Enlightenment theology and holds in post-Enlightenment theology.

This decentring does not mean that Barth denies the reality or genuineness of human experience and subjectivity, but rather that he challenges the idea that humans are inherently capable of accessing and understanding the truth about reality – the truth of its reconciliation to God in Christ. As Mangina writes, "What Barth wants to defeat is the abstract subjectivity of human existence considered as an independent quantity [...]"²¹⁸ Indeed, Barth's whole definition of Christians as witnesses relies on the presupposition that humans can, in some sense, know the truth of the objective reality of reconciliation in Christ. Rather than this knowledge being inherently accessible to human perception, however, Barth understands not only the knowledge, but also the capacity to know, as bestowed in the event of divine grace that occurs in vocation.

George Hunsinger describes the centrality of knowledge in Barth's theology of vocation as follows, "The Word of the cross comes from without and reveals itself from within. Knowledge determines the context in which we are engaged to the full. It sets the stage on which all our personal capacities are exercised, not just the cognitive but the affective,

²¹⁷ Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 67.

²¹⁸ Mangina, *The Christian Life*, 67.

volitional, conative, and intuitive as well.”²¹⁹ By giving these personal capacities “a decidedly noetic cast,”²²⁰ Barth safeguards God’s sovereignty over the content and communication of truth such that the primary human relationship to the divinely manifested truth is one of acknowledgement.²²¹ One of the vulnerabilities of understanding the relationship of humanly experienced reality to divinely determined reality as one of human acknowledgment to divine truth is that the contingent events of history, though affirmed as reality in principle, do not actually seem to be affected by the supposedly determinative reality of divine truth.

Such scepticism is represented in the following quote from R.H. Roberts, as cited by Webster, “The triumphalist pursuit of hegemony in [...] Barth’s ‘God’ risks an intellectual absurdity most apparent where the systematic and ontological self-consistency [...] is most complete. Thus [...] the third volume of Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* risks[s] *reductio ad absurdum* as on re-encountering contingency after [its] ontological adventures [Barth] face[s] the charge that [he] represent[s] merely the seamless rhetoric of transformation rather than an actual analysis of the possibility of translation of theory into social reality and practice.”²²² Note here that Roberts tacitly equates real transformation of social reality with the translation of theory into (presumably human) practice.

Barth himself acknowledges that if Jesus Christ’s lordship consisted in the securing of ontological reality (of the “co-existence of the Creator with His Creature”²²³) with no consequences in the world of historical contingencies then his lordship “could not be called good news in face of the bitter reality of the disruption and even destruction and corruption of this co-existence by the pride and sloth of man, and the whole ensuing

²¹⁹ Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 180.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Webster, *Ethics of Reconciliation*, 16. While Roberts here references the third volume of *Church Dogmatics*, Barth’s methodological consistency makes the criticism valid in application to the fourth volume as well.

²²³ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.1: 40.

disorganisation and misery of the human situation.”²²⁴ However, according to Barth, Christ “is the Lord and Servant who lives [...] for the sake of the creaturely world and humanity [...]. Hence He does not merely confirm the co-existence of God and man, but He creates order in place of the disorder which obtains within it.”²²⁵ Notably, in this passage, Barth asserts *Christ’s* ongoing creation of order in the place of disorder.

While Barth emphasizes divine action in the transformation of social reality, the criticism quoted above seeks an articulation of human practices for such transformation.

Admittedly, I have juxtaposed the two passages for the sake of comparison and contrast and so to suggest that the two authors are “talking past one another,” would be a contrived argument. Nevertheless, I suggest the comparison does serve to show that what might be read as only apparent or ‘rhetorical’ transformation of social reality in Barth’s account may actually be more accurately described as Barth’s emphasis on the role of divine action over human action in such transformation.

One cannot reasonably deny that Barth emphasizes and prioritizes divine action over human action both in his theology generally and within his account of Christian witness, in particular, as this thesis has demonstrated to this point. However, Barth also suggests that human action is meaningful and necessary in the covenant partnership between God and humanity, to which all humanity is elected and towards which the actualization of human history is directed. In fact, as established in chapter 2, Barth claims that such human action, in the form of witness, is central to Christian life. Therefore, even if Barth does *primarily* relate true reality and humanly experienced reality to one another by attributing the transformation of human history to divine action, the question of whether or not he adequately articulates the human role in such transformation remains. We now turn to this question.

²²⁴ Ibid., 40-41.

²²⁵ Ibid., 41.

3.2 Human Possibilities for Meaningful Witness

If, as Barth claims, Christian existence is primarily life in execution of the task of witness, the noetic aspect of vocation must be accompanied by action. Without the noetic aspect, witness would not be tethered to the objective reality of the truth communicated by the Word of Jesus Christ. But without the active aspect, it is difficult to see how Christians can be said to truly participate in the ongoing self-witness of Jesus Christ. Hunsinger describes the relationship between the noetic and active aspects of Christian witness this way: “[T]he truth which is being manifested and acknowledged is precisely the truth of one’s personal participation in the salvation wrought by Christ. The truth being acknowledged (by faith and not by sight) is thus the truth of being called to encounter with Christ, and thus to mutual self-involvement and fellowship with him here and now. In this sense, acknowledgment and participation go hand in hand.”²²⁶ According to Barth, it is only in this fellowship with the living Christ that Christian witness can actively participate in Christ’s ongoing reconciling work as it occurs in human history.

A first difficulty with the suggestion that Christian witness can only occur in fellowship with Jesus Christ is whether or not such witness can be considered genuinely human action. If Christ initiates the encounters in which he reveals himself and establishes fellowship with humans and, at the same time, meaningful acts of Christian witness can only occur on the basis of such fellowship, in what sense are these acts of witness properly ‘human’? John Webster notes this difficulty with regard to human moral agency in Barth’s work, suggesting that “when Barth appeals (explicitly or implicitly) to ‘being in Christ’ or to the ‘vicarious nature of Jesus Christ’s humanity, or to Christ’s substitutionary work in our place,” he risks undermining the very “reality of the human subject and agent which it seeks to establish,” by his christological doctrine.²²⁷ Indeed, Barth does not seem to leave a way for the person who is called by Christ to relate to the knowledge of Christ as something outside of him or herself.

²²⁶ Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 180-181.

²²⁷ Webster, *Ethics of Reconciliation*, 53.

By Barth's account, because Jesus Christ is not only the objective but also the subjective basis of the knowledge of reconciliation, those who find themselves called to it have already been transformed by it cognitively, volitionally, emotionally, and in every other capacity. So, one might argue, that even the choice to correspond to this knowledge in one's acts is not a human choice in the sense that a person cannot by his or her own capacities attain this knowledge or act upon it without having already been transformed by it through Christ's uniting of Himself to the Christian through the divine power of the Holy Spirit.

A second problem with respect to genuine human action in witness appears to be created by Barth's suggestion that fellowship with Christ not only makes Christian witness possible, but actually demands it. For instance, Barth writes, "More than [the Christian's] human witness [...] is not demanded of him. But the service of his human witness is demanded."²²⁸ Or, to take another example, "Being called by and to the Christ engaged in the exercise of His prophetic office, [Christians] have no option but to attach themselves to Him with their own action, to tread in His steps [...]."²²⁹ The apparent absence of human choice with respect to participation in Christ's action seems, at least at first glance, to smack of determinism or at least compulsion.

We have so far identified two threats to the genuineness of human action in Barth's account of the Christian as witness, both rooted in his view of Christian "ontology in union," which was introduced in chapter 2; 1) the apparent absence of human choice with regard to whether one engages in encounter with Christ, and 2) the apparent absence of choice with respect to one's action within the context of this encounter. Both of these 'threats,' however, rely on certain assumptions, which differ from Barth's understanding about the nature of genuineness and meaning in human action.

A defense of Barth on these points can be mounted in similar fashion to the defense against the charge that he does not accord reality to the world of historical contingencies.

²²⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2, bk. 28: 237.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 234.

Namely, in order to make sense of Barth, one must first understand how he has redefined terms in his theology – terms that might have a rather different established or common use.

The inability of the Christian to relate to knowledge of Christ as an object outside of him or herself and the Christian's inability to choose to act within and on the basis of an encounter with Christ are threatening to human agency when agency is understood primarily in terms of "deliberative consciousness or spontaneous action," as is typical of modern moral theory.²³⁰ This latter understanding of human agency relies on a view of reality as historical contingency, which requires humans to make meaning, or to determine who and what they will be, in the face of the undirected and not inherently meaningful nature of historical events and circumstances.²³¹ Consequently, anything that could be seen to inhibit a person's ability to make such determinations would be considered detrimental to human agency. In such a context, human agency is basically set in competition with Jesus Christ's agency²³² – where Jesus Christ determines the course of things, the human is deprived of his or her ability to determine them.

Barth, however, understands all reality to be encompassed within the reality of Jesus Christ, and so in Barth's view, human will and choice are not considered "quintessential marks of human dignity whose removal spells the end of serious consideration of the substance of humanity."²³³ On the contrary, because, for Barth, the being-in-act of Christ defines what it means to be truly human, the suggestion that Christians, in union with Christ, "must" act as witnesses alongside Christ's self-witness, does not threaten human agency, but rather establishes it.

This suggestion makes sense within the framework of the covenantal ontology (described in chapter 2), which is the outworking of Barth's doctrine of election. In this framework,

²³⁰ Webster, *Ethics of Reconciliation*, 215.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 215-216.

²³² Nimmo, *Being in Action*, 104.

²³³ Webster, *Ethics of Reconciliation*, 227.

“the basic, original, and immutable determination of the being of the ethical agent [is] that she is with God.”²³⁴ Therefore, for Barth, the exercise of human agency in fellowship with God *is* the exercise of genuine human agency.

Barth’s account of human agency, while redefined, is not entirely dissimilar from other accounts that view autonomous self-determination as central to human agency. Just as Barth’s prioritizing of Jesus Christ as ontologically determinative of reality does not “ontologically disenfranchise”²³⁵ historical contingency as reality, but rather conditions it, neither does Barth’s view of genuine human agency as operative in union with divine agency eliminate human agency.

In order to understand more fully how Barth construes genuine human agency, we can turn to George Hunsinger’s discussion of “‘double agency’ (the coincidence and distinction of divine and human agency in a single event).”²³⁶ Hunsinger suggests that it is critical to understand Barth’s “account of fellowship, [the goal of vocation], in particular and of divine and human agency in general [...] within the terms of the Chalcedonian pattern.”²³⁷ The three formal aspects of the pattern are asymmetry, intimacy, and integrity.²³⁸ All three aspects are demonstrated in the following passage from Barth:

Superfluously, in this glorious sense, [Christians] live only by the fact that Christ permits and commands their ministering co-operation, [...] not denying but granting it His own assistance. And they do in fact live by this as those who are called by Him in fellowship with His life and in the fellowship of their action with His. [...] Nor do they do so in vain, nor without meaning and purpose, even though their action can never match

²³⁴ Nimmo, *Being in Action*, 104.

²³⁵ See p. 56.

²³⁶ Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 189.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 185. See page 187 for how the pattern applies to fellowship as the goal of vocation.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 186.

up to His. [...] Their word can and should reflect the light of His prophetic work. It can and should be the sign which accompanies and confirms His self-revelation – no more, but also no less [...] and for all its dubiety as a human work it is a work which is well pleasing to God in His relation to the world [...].²³⁹

This passage shows that Barth's view of double agency is asymmetrical in that God's action always takes precedence over human action, ruling and determining it.²⁴⁰ Double agency is intimate by virtue of the unity in fellowship between divine and human action, "without separation or division."²⁴¹ Lastly, double agency demonstrates integrity in that, in their coincident operation, both divine agency and human agency operate "without confusion or mixture."²⁴² Barth's redefinition of genuine human agency, according to the Chalcedonian pattern, articulates the role of the Christian witness in transforming reality as it relates to Jesus Christ's role in transforming reality.

I have attempted to show that despite Barth's emphasis on divine action in the transformation of reality or, to put it differently, his emphasis on Christ's ongoing acts of reconciliation, Barth does also articulate a role for the Christian witness in this transformation. He does this through his christological redefinition of human agency. Yet this in itself is not sufficient to show that Barth makes a strong connection between the ontology of reality as it is divinely determined and reality as it is humanly experienced.

While Barth's depiction of double agency describes human capacity for meaningful witness in its relationship to Christ's action, it does not describe this human capacity in terms of how the human subject experiences the exercise of this agency. I posit that the 'event character' of grace as truth, as Barth understands it, prevents such description. The event character of grace as truth prevents a systematic 'mapping' of the objective

²³⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2, bk. 28: 236.

²⁴⁰ Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 186.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Ibid., 186-7.

ontological truth onto reality as humanly experienced and vice versa. Whether this proves fatal to Barth's theology of Christian witness will be explored in the concluding chapter of this thesis but before making any conclusions, I will have to first describe how the event character of grace as truth intersects with human subjectivity and human acts, especially those of the Christian as witness.

3.3 The Self-Understanding of the Christian Witness

By this point in the thesis, it has hopefully been well established that, in Barth's view, the active knowledge to which Christians are called in encounter with Jesus Christ cannot be grounded in any human capacities; rather, this knowledge is divinely self-authenticating. Furthermore, it has been established that this knowledge is self-involving for the person called to it, both in the sense of engaging the person in every way (not just cognitively), and in the sense of communicating information about that person to themselves (the reality of their reconciliation to Christ).

The following, from George Hunsinger, exemplifies both of these points about active knowledge but also highlights that this knowledge, discussed here under the concept of grace, occurs *only as event*: "Grace is [...] an event that defies all ordinary categorization,"²⁴³ and as such, "is the absolute and ongoing miracle in which God bestows the capacity, which must ever be sought anew, to so align human volition with the divine that God may be served in fellowship and loved."²⁴⁴ Not only does the event of grace enable the alignment of human and divine volition but it also discloses to the human agent that this is the case, "Indeed, the knowledge of revelation is itself an extension of the miracle, so that perception of the event in its significance is no less miraculous than the event itself."²⁴⁵ When the source of true self-knowledge is construed as event, discussion of continuities in knowledge across time and action based on that

²⁴³ Ibid., 192.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 194.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 190.

knowledge becomes complicated. I have gestured towards this difficulty in Barth's work already in chapter 2.

The event character of self-knowledge affects continuities in knowledge across time and, by extension, discussions of what constitutes properly Christian practices of witness and attitudes. Mangina, for instance asks how "the self-knowledge entailed in the knowledge of God [...] relates to the world of ordinary experience."²⁴⁶ He writes, "[H]ow does one 'apply' the knowledge of self that Barth has been so careful to ground in encounter with the risen Lord?"²⁴⁷ Mangina here reminds us that the event character of revelation is always the event of an encounter with Jesus Christ, as he lives and works in his prophetic office by the Holy Spirit.

The scope of this study does not allow for the exploration of philosophical and theological theories of subjectivity but presumably, it can be reasonably ventured that individual subjects do not experience their lives as a series of discontinuous and unrelated events, but rather can reflect upon events as they relate to one another in a continuous flow of time.

As we have seen, Barth rejects the suggestion that such self-reflection allows one to understand the truth about reality but he does not reject the suggestion that people, nonetheless, can and do engage in such reflection. In Barth's framework, it might be said that for the Christian, grace interrupts such reflection as a unique event that discloses self-involving knowledge and, in so doing, conditions the Christian's reflection. In Barth's own words, the Holy Spirit who encounters the Christian in this event of grace, "is thus God in His power which enlightens the heart of man, which convicts his conscience, which persuades his understanding, which does not win him physically or metaphysically from without, but 'logically' from within. [...] Far from the Christian being mastered and taken out of himself [...] by the power of the Holy Spirit [...] he

²⁴⁶ Mangina, *The Christian Life*, 85.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

really comes to himself and may be himself.”²⁴⁸ We can see here that, according to the Chalcedonian nature of the union between Christ and Christian discussed above, the integrity of the human person is maintained so that the event of grace does not “force” the Christian’s thought and action. In other words, Christians still have freedom of choice, even if this freedom of choice does not form the basis of genuine human agency.

It follows that Christ’s disclosure of his self-involving truth in grace, does not only allow the Christian to understand her actions as conforming to Christ’s self-witness, but also to understand that her actions at times contradict Christ’s self-witness. Hunsinger writes, “In the absolute miracle of grace, the radical incapacity of the creature [to be self-determining] is at once relentlessly disclosed and mercifully overcome.”²⁴⁹ This truth may condition or inform the Christian’s self-reflection such that she may faithfully learn and change her thoughts and behaviours over time. Nevertheless, the Christian will never possess the truth in such a way that she can master it and thus guarantee that every act will prove to be faithful in its witness to Christ.

Under this interpretation the disjunction between the ontological reality of Christians as active witnesses and the human experience of free choice does not result from Barth’s failure to conceptualize the relationship between ontology and reality as humans experience it. Rather, it results from the material consideration of human sin as a factor in reality.²⁵⁰ Barth himself certainly recognizes the impact of sin (as he understands it) on theology (as he writes it). He says, “[Theology] can never form a system, comprehending and as it were ‘seizing’ the object,” because “the existence, presence, and operation of nothingness [...] are also objectively the break in the relationship between Creator and creature. [...] And this means that theological thought and utterance must always be

²⁴⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2, bk. 29: 254.

²⁴⁹ Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 193.

²⁵⁰ Of course, it would be possible to assess Barth’s account of sin as inadequate and therefore the disjunction between ontology and experience remains a conceptual shortcoming. My point is to demonstrate that Barth himself recognizes the disjunction and accounts for it theologically.

broken.”²⁵¹ As it is well beyond the scope of this project to enter into a detailed discussion of Barth’s doctrine of sin, in what follows, I will simply be sketching some contours of it to further show how, in Barth’s work, sin distorts the relationship between human self-understanding and the truth of human being as it is established in Christ.

A clarification of what Barth means when he writes of “the existence, presence and operation of nothingness”²⁵² will help to introduce the way that Barth thinks about sin. *Church Dogmatics* §50 is titled “God and Nothingness,”²⁵³ and in the thesis at the head of this section, Barth writes, “[...] nothingness is inimical to the will of the Creator and therefore to the nature of His good creature. God has judged nothingness by His mercy as revealed and effective in Jesus Christ.”²⁵⁴ While the word “nothingness” might seem bizarre in this context, if one reads this quote replacing “nothingness” with the word “sin,” one is left with a relatively orthodox sentence about sin.

Indeed, Barth discusses sin under the concept of nothingness and, for the purposes of this project, the two terms are basically interchangeable. For the sake of clarity, I will add that for Barth, the concept of nothingness includes more than what might be signalled by sin as it is commonly understood; for instance it includes, “the whole complex of sin, guilt and punishment, the whole reality of calamity, suffering and death.”²⁵⁵ The word nothingness also indicates Barth’s view of the place sin occupies within the framework of God’s rule and determination of reality. Because sin is against God’s will, it simply does

²⁵¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, study ed. eds. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. G.W. Bromiley et al. (1945-1951; London: T&T Clark, 2009), III/3, bk. 18: 5-6.

²⁵² See p. 66.

²⁵³ The editors of the volume include the following footnote regarding the choice in translation for the title, “Many terms have been considered for *das Nichtige*, including the Latin *nihil* which has sometimes been favoured. Preferring a native term, and finding constructions like ‘the null’ too artificial and ‘the negative’ or ‘non-existent’ not quite exact, we have finally had to make do with ‘nothingness.’ It must be clearly grasped, however, that it is not used in its more common and abstract way, but in the secondary sense, to be filled out from Barth’s own definitions and delimitations, of ‘that which is not,’” Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/3, bk. 18: 1.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 3. For a more detailed explanation of the relationship between “sin” and “nothingness,” as Barth uses the terms, see §50.3 (pp. 13-60).

not “make sense” for it to occur. Mangina puts it tersely; “Sin is absurd.”²⁵⁶ Barth’s doctrine of election and the covenantal ontology stemming from it, which we explored in chapter 2, indicate that God’s sovereign decision to be the covenant partner of humanity cannot be contradicted. The ongoing occurrence of sin in the world, therefore, cannot be explained or accounted for; it has already been judged and overcome as nothingness by the reconciliation accomplished in Christ.

It is possible to suggest that if, from a theological perspective, sin and its effects are still clearly evident in the world then Barth’s view of sin as already judged is at the very least inaccurate, if not dangerous in its failure to take sin seriously. Such a reading of Barth would be mistaken. Barth does not deny sin’s reality; rather, “It ‘is’ not as God and His creation are, but only in its own improper way, as an inherent contradiction, as impossible possibility.”²⁵⁷ The purpose of describing sin this way, instead of starting theological reflection on it from the perspective of sin’s very evident possibility and reality, is because as Barth understands it, there is a Word that speaks louder than sin’s reality – and that is the Word of God in Christ.²⁵⁸ Christ, in his prophetic office, declares that even though sin is real, its ultimate power over humanity has been defeated in reconciliation. In speaking of sin as nothingness, Barth is, therefore, attempting to avoid “an uneasy, bleak and sceptical overestimation of its power in relation to God, or [...] an easy, comfortable and dogmatic underestimation of its power in relation to us.”²⁵⁹

This brief introduction to Barth’s view of sin sets the stage for a closer examination of the way in which sin presents an epistemological problem to the Christian’s self-understanding as witness and, therefore, the apparent disconnect in Barth’s theology between his confident descriptions of reality as it is in Christ and reality as it is experienced.

²⁵⁶ Mangina, *The Christian Life*, 92.

²⁵⁷ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/3, bk. 18: 62.

²⁵⁸ See, for example, Ingolf Dalferth, “Karl Barth’s Eschatological Realism,” in *Karl Barth: Centenary Essays*, ed. S.W. Sykes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 22-23.

²⁵⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/3, bk. 18: 5.

In the first chapter, I represented the triadic structure of Barth's doctrine of reconciliation in table 1. Barth relates each aspect of the doctrine to a specific dimension of human sin: justification to humanity's pride, sanctification to humanity's sloth, and vocation to humanity's falsehood. Of course, just as with the inalienability of the "What" from the "How" of reconciliation, discussed at length in chapter 1, so too are these dimensions of sin intimately connected. For instance, Barth does not suggest that Jesus Christ reconciles humanity in its pride through justification, leaving sloth and falsehood untouched. The "unity and totality" of sin,²⁶⁰ just like the unity and totality of reconciliation, cannot be separated but can be considered from different angles in order to draw a fuller theological picture.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the aspect of sin that most clearly expresses the problem it presents for Christian witness is the aspect associated with Jesus Christ in his prophetic work of vocation – the falsehood of humanity. Falsehood, writes Barth, is "the disguise or mask which the man of sin at once assumes when he is confronted by Jesus Christ the true Witness, and which is torn off again the course of this encounter."²⁶¹ Here again, we see the idea of the event of encounter with Jesus Christ as central. Where truth is disclosed dynamically in event, it might be said that falsehood or "untruth"²⁶² is more static. To continue with Barth's metaphor, falsehood is a mask that truth-as-event must tear off. However, the person wearing the mask does not even recognize that he is wearing it until it has been torn off. That is to say, the only way humans come to see themselves as sinners is within the context of the event of the encounter between God and humanity in Jesus Christ, as both Joseph Mangina and George Hunsinger point out.²⁶³

Therefore, knowledge of the self as sinner can never be systematized such that it can be apprehended and explained outside of this encounter.²⁶⁴ Mangina explains the

²⁶⁰ See, for example, Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, bk. 22: 56.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 64.

²⁶² See, for example, Ibid., 64.

²⁶³ Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 193; Mangina, *The Christian Life*, 91-94.

²⁶⁴ See, for example, Mangina, *The Christian Life*, 95.

vulnerability of Barth's view of sin in terms of its implications for human self-knowledge as follows, "the eventful or 'I-Thou' character of the knowledge of sin might seem to call into question its very character as knowledge."²⁶⁵ This is essentially the same point I made above regarding the event character of grace as truth being problematic for the continuous nature of human self-reflection. Rightly so, as Barth understands "knowledge of sin" to belong to the truth revealed in grace. Why is this problematic?

Mangina draws a comparison between Barth's view of sin and the Kierkegaardian school's view of sin, which will help to answer this question.²⁶⁶ Mangina suggests that the Kierkegaardian school "offers experiential content to the doctrine [of sin]" by discussing it in terms of concepts such as freedom and anxiety. In doing so, it "helps us to locate sin on a map of the self."²⁶⁷ On the other hand, as we have seen, Barth thinks sin is contradictory to true personhood (defined by Christ) and therefore refuses to locate it on the map of the self.²⁶⁸ We can return to the mask metaphor here – the mask of falsehood does not properly belong to the person and so it makes little sense to describe falsehood in terms of what constitutes human being.

However, if one cannot describe falsehood in terms of the self, the question of how one's self can behave in relation to the truth becomes difficult to answer. Mangina frames the question this way, "Can my self-understanding as a sinner be spelled out in such a way that I can make sense of my own experience, behaviour, and situatedness in the world?"²⁶⁹ This is the point at which Barth's christological re-description of reality and human agency as truly reconciled fails to translate clearly into terms of human experience. Again, there is a close relationship between the possibility of an active human response to truth and the possibility of knowing oneself as a sinner. Both

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Note that I am neither accepting or rejecting Mangina's reading of the Kierkegaardian view on sin. The point in citing this comparison is, rather, to use it as a foil to Barth's view.

²⁶⁷ Mangina, *Christian Life*, 95.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

possibilities lie outside the regular apprehension of humans, and so day-to-day life goes on with humans using the knowledge available to them through regular perception and reflection to make decisions and behave in certain ways rather than others. For Barth, one cannot escape one's own falsehood or untruth and therefore one cannot possibly know, through one's regular human capacities, whether or not one is living as a faithful witness.²⁷⁰ Based on this assertion, it is easy to appreciate the criticism that Barth's view of the Christian as witness leads to the interpretation of Christian action as essentially futile.

Yet Barth does not understand regular human capacities as inherently bad.²⁷¹ They belong to the humanity that God has chosen as covenant partner. Barth's refusal to locate the source of falsehood on 'the map of the self,' is not, therefore, a rejection of the map altogether. According to Barth, theologies that do carefully attempt to pin down sin tend also to clearly delineate what is required of the Christian qua Christian. In doing so, they claim power over sin which is not theirs to claim, but which has already been claimed by Christ in his defeat of sin.²⁷² This point is key to understanding the delimitations of Barth's theology of witness, and requires some elaboration.

Barth suggests that while all humans live in the "untruth active in all human belief, superstition and error,"²⁷³ "falsehood is the specifically Christian form of sin."²⁷⁴ In the lives of Christians, falsehood "reache[s] maturity" because as those who have been encountered by Jesus Christ in his prophesy as the Holy Spirit, Christians continue to mount their own beliefs through their own efforts, knowing that these beliefs can never supplant the truth, as much as they might resemble it.²⁷⁵ In this sense, all Christian attempts to speak of the God who has encountered them are but "an image which is

²⁷⁰ See, for example, Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2, bk. 29: 229-230.

²⁷¹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/3, bk. 18: 7-13.

²⁷² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2, bk. 28: 96-97.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 79.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 7

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 79-80.

defaced, distorted and corrupted.”²⁷⁶ In falsehood, Christians attempt to draw boundaries and to provide concrete answers where it is impossible for them to do so. Barth writes, “The image in which the reality of man represents itself in his untrue situation provides no answer but continually leads him astray. In relation both to his fellow-men and to the cosmos it speaks only of a co-existence which is constantly transformed into an empty proximity and even hostility.”²⁷⁷ In chapter 2, we saw some examples of theologies that, in Barth’s estimation, are capable of unintentionally creating hostility on the part of Christians towards others – the privileging of either the Christian ethos or the Christian experience of salvation as structuring principles of Christian existence.

At the same time as Barth claims Christian speech can only be “untruth” by comparison with the truth revealed in and by Jesus Christ, he also claims that the task of Christian witness must continue. This is the paradox inherent in theological speech and existence; what from one angle is the human response of witness demanded by the encounter with Christ is, from another angle, inevitably falsehood.

Barth certainly does not exempt himself from the charge of falsehood.²⁷⁸ However, by the manner in which he makes witness the controlling principle of the structure of Christian life, Barth does aim to constantly defer to the authority and activity of Jesus Christ, rather than claiming such authority himself. He does so based on the conviction that the decision of election, accomplishment of reconciliation, and ongoing prophetic declaration of “Jesus Christ as the true Witness infallibly differentiates falsehood from truth.”²⁷⁹

3.4 Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to critically analyze Barth’s understanding of the Christian as witness in terms of the interpretive difficulties it presents; particularly, the

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 97.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 99.

²⁷⁸ See, for example, *ibid.*, 68.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

seriousness with which Barth takes human reality and the understanding of genuine human agency in light of his christological re-description of reality. I have suggested that the persistent disconnect between ontology and experienced reality in Barth's theology can be traced to his understanding of sin as a human phenomenon and to a particular form of falsehood as the specifically Christian sin.²⁸⁰ Here, I posit that the disconnect can be attributed to what Barth sees as a human reality (i.e., the reality of sin) in need of theological attestation, rather than the disconnect resulting from a conceptual failure on Barth's part.

If we accept Barth's view of sin as affecting the self-knowledge of the Christian, such that it is impossible to apprehend and therefore 'manage' the human witness to the truth of Jesus Christ in practice, the question remains as to how Barth's theology can reasonably be said to justify, encourage, and sustain practices of active Christian witness.

In the next and final chapter, I will suggest that a renewed and distinctive emphasis on the theme of Christian hope in the interpretation of Barth's understanding of the Christian as witness might help to explain how Christians can persist in engaging in acts of witness in spite of the presence of sin in human reality.

²⁸⁰ Note that in calling falsehood "the specifically Christian sin," I am not in any way claiming that Barth sees Christians as innocent of other sins, but rather that sin assumes a certain form in falsehood, which is unique to the *post Christum* era.

Chapter 4

4 Conclusion: Towards a “Hopeful” Reading of Christian Witness in Barth’s Theology

By way of a constructive conclusion to this thesis, in this chapter I will draw out some implications of the theme of hope in Barth’s doctrine of reconciliation for his account of vocation and witness. I will provisionally indicate some of the fruitful directions in which interpretations of this account, oriented by the theme of hope, might lead in future scholarship on this topic.

To introduce the way that Barth’s discussion of hope relates to his treatment of Christian witness, we can refer once again to the triadic structure of Barth’s doctrine of reconciliation, as laid out in table 1 in the first chapter of this thesis. Barth’s section “The Holy Spirit and Christian Hope” corresponds to the last section of each of the other parts of the doctrine of reconciliation. Part one’s corresponding section is “The Holy Spirit and Christian Faith,” and part two’s corresponding section is “The Holy Spirit and Christian Love.” These concluding sections describe, as Webster puts it, “the Spirit’s work in the individual believer”²⁸¹ and they follow descriptions of the Spirit’s work in the Christian community.

These descriptions of both the communal and individual aspects of the Spirit’s work are connected to different effects of the Christ-event on “the renewal of human life”²⁸² – justification, sanctification, and vocation. Although the Christian community’s task as witness is enormously important in Barth’s theology, and clearly more so than the individual’s, this thesis has, for reasons of scope, focused less upon the ecclesial dimension and more upon the individual Christian as witness. Likewise, in emphasizing and developing the theme of hope, which is obviously not irrelevant for the community

²⁸¹ Webster, *Barth*, 117.

²⁸² *Ibid.*

as a whole, our aim is to provide a corrective to readings of Barth's theology of the individual Christian witness that ignore the importance of hope.

4.1 The Human "How" in Relation to the Human "What"

One of the insights it is possible to glean from how the section on hope fits into the broader structure of the doctrine of reconciliation, is its "function" or relationship to the other sections on the Holy Spirit's work in the individual Christian's life. Barth describes Christ's work as mediator (in his prophetic office) as "the How of the event in its inalienable distinction from the What,"²⁸³ the "What" here referring to Christ's work as Son of God (in his priestly office) and Son of Man (in his kingly office).

By analogy, we can see a similar relationship between the Spirit's work of hope and the Spirit's work of faith and love. Barth writes, "The question [at the end of] the third part [of the doctrine of reconciliation] is *how it is actually possible* for the man who is called to be a witness of Jesus Christ in and with His community, [...] to serve the Word of God in the world and in his own small way to exist prophetically in the school and discipleship of the one great Prophet."²⁸⁴

The "how" articulated through this discussion of hope is at once contrasted with and related to the "what" of faith and love. Barth writes,

There can be no doubt as to [the] foundation [of the existence of the Christian], since the Christian derives securely from the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Nor can there be any doubt as to its present constitution and the step which the Christian has to take at the moment, since every action may be performed within the sphere of the lordship of the Holy Spirit. What was and is deeply open to question is *the manner and measure of*

²⁸³ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.1: 6

²⁸⁴ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2, bk. 29: 215 (emphasis added).

faith, obedience and love, in short, of the gratitude with which the Christian has thus far responded and even yet responds to grace.²⁸⁵

This passage reflects, in microcosm, the structure of Barth's whole doctrine of reconciliation. It summarizes the doctrine of reconciliation in such a way that it casts the whole doctrine in the light of the third part-volume, bringing out its implications for the "here and now" in light of the "there and then," particularly for the life of the Christian individual.

In the above-cited passage, the foundation of Christian existence deriving from Christ's resurrection is the objective ground of reconciliation in Christ's reconciling acts, which Barth discusses in the first section of each of the three part-volumes of the doctrine of reconciliation. By referring to the resurrection of Jesus Christ as that from which Christian existence "securely derives," Barth emphasizes how reconciliation is not trapped by its character as past history but rather continues to have impact because Jesus Christ still lives and acts as this one in the present time. This derivation of Christian existence from Jesus Christ's resurrection is out of the grasp of human manipulation. Humans do not have the power to make themselves Christians. Any claim to such power would be "insecure," rather than securely deriving from the resurrection.

The "present constitution" and "the step which the Christian has to take at the moment," can be interpreted as referring to faith, and love or "love and obedience" respectively. Note that it is not my purpose, in making these fine distinctions, to suggest that faith, love, and hope are radically different from one another, nor to become so enmeshed in the details as to forget how Barth's theology works as a whole. Rather, I follow Barth's lead here. He writes, "[H]ope in its distinction from faith and love as resolute look ahead constitutes, a particular dimension of Christian existence without which there can be no solidity in faith and love even though they are not identical with it. Any identification

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 217 (emphasis added).

would entail an impoverishment of the understanding of Christian existence and indeed its christological foundation.”²⁸⁶

Faith is the “present constitution” of Christian existence. With respect to the event character of truth, discussed in chapter 3, faith can be understood as the capacity for human reception of truth, both bestowed and revealed only in this event of encounter with Jesus Christ. Barth writes, “[Faith] constitutes the Christian. In believing, the Christian owes everything to the object of his faith, the incomprehensible fact that he may not only be in relation to this object, but may be active in this being.”²⁸⁷ Love is “the step [of obedience] which the Christian has to take at the moment” as the outworking in Christian life of sanctification, secured in and with justification in Christ’s resurrection. Barth writes, “Love as self-giving stands contrasted with faith as reception. [...] What we have here – in Christian love – is a movement in which a man turns away from himself [...] and] turns wholly to another.”²⁸⁸ As the active response to and of faith, love may be understood as the act of witness.

With respect to faith and love, reception and response, hope gives us a way to talk about the “manner and measure” of these things, the “How” in relation to the “What.” In his discussion of hope, Barth brings up the issues of “possibility” and “reality”²⁸⁹ – two words that were central to the problems in Barth’s depiction of human life and action, discussed in chapter 3. The role of hope in clarifying the reality and possibility of faith and love might be summarized as giving them a temporal orientation, and thus orienting Christian life in witness by eschatology.

4.2 Eschatology and the Future-Orientation of Hope

In chapter 3, we saw how in Barth’s theology the reality of sin impedes Christian witness. We asked why Barth would not start theological reflection from the clear presence of sin

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 225.

²⁸⁷ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, bk. 23: 231.

²⁸⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, bk. 26: 121-123.

²⁸⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2, bk. 29: 216-217.

in the world and we concluded that Barth understands the Word of God to speak louder than sin's reality. This Word, spoken by the risen Jesus Christ, relegates sin's power to "nothingness." In his discussion of hope, Barth does allow his focus to shift momentarily to the lived experience of sin relative to the lived experience of the already accomplished reconciliation in Christ. He writes, "[...] the prophetic action of Jesus Christ, [...] while it is complete in itself, is only moving towards its fulfillment [...]. For He has not yet spoken universally of Himself and the act of reconciliation accomplished in him. [...] And *it is this Not Yet which is at a first glance the most striking determination of the time in which the Christian now exists* on the basis of his vocation to be a witness of Jesus Christ in the context of the sending of His community."²⁹⁰ Importantly, in the passage above, the Not Yet of the fulfillment of Christ's prophetic action does not signal the Not Yet of reconciliation's accomplishment. This was explained in Chapter 1's discussion of *parousia* and the different forms of Christ's coming again. Barth's suggestion that the Not Yet of Jesus Christ's universal self-declaration is the most obvious characteristic of the time in which we live has several implications, and the relationship of hope to these implications is what, I suggest, might orient future readings of Barth's theology of witness.

The first and most important implication of the Christian's living primarily under the determination of this Not Yet is that, secondarily, the Christian lives under the determination of an Already, and therefore in the expectation of a complete fulfillment of Christ's Word in the future. Barth writes, "It is not really true, of course, that this time of ours is primarily and decisively determined by this Not Yet [...]. Primarily and decisively it is positively determined by that which Jesus Christ already is and means in it."²⁹¹ In Barth's view, the Christian can assert that the Word of God in Christ is louder than its relatively unapparent inoperativeness in the world.²⁹²

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 216 (emphasis added).

²⁹¹ Ibid., 216-217.

²⁹² Dalferth, "Karl Barth's Eschatological Realism," 22.

The Christian can make this assertion, however, only on the basis of the ways in which Christ *is* actively working in the world. Thus, Barth's theology of witness and, in fact, his theology more generally, is characterized by a certain stripe of realism. As John Webster explains, "Barth's realism is of a very distinct kind, because of the reality to which it is oriented, the self-revealing God. [He insists] Christian faith and theology is rooted in a conviction that the reality by which they are encountered and to which they are a response [...] – *is reality*."²⁹³ Furthermore, Barth expects that it is the world in which humans are now living that is both encountered by this reality, and in which the declaration of Christ's reconciliation is to be fully and concretely realized.

In this expectation, Barth distinguishes himself, on the one hand, from those whose hope lies in an ultimate sphere, disconnected from this penultimate sphere,²⁹⁴ and on the other hand, from those who would "flatten out" the meaning of eschatology to "cover and explain the transcendent character of all subjects and contents of theological discussion,"²⁹⁵ thus eliminating the important dimension of time. Barth understands the latter as a relatively useless development that, more importantly, does not reflect the Biblical understanding of eschatology.²⁹⁶ With respect to the former, Barth agrees that we are living in the penultimate time but rejects the view that this penultimate time is void of manifestations of Jesus Christ's truth and, therefore, Christian witness to it.²⁹⁷ For, "[If] Jesus Christ is the goal and end of time, then necessarily this time as such with all its contents, thought it is not yet the day of redemption, is at least partly determined by the fact that it moves towards this as its end and goal."²⁹⁸ Resignation in face of this world and this time, in favour of hope only in the next, Barth says, risks leading to the

²⁹³ Webster, *Ethics of Reconciliation*, 28.

²⁹⁴ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2, bk. 29: 247-251.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 225.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 247-251.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 249.

belief that Christian action is meaningless.²⁹⁹ Barth's identification of this risk indicates, against some of his critics, that Barth himself sees Christian action as meaningful.

The event character of truth, discussed at length in chapter 3, and its relationship to the continuity experienced in human subjectivity, are a result of Barth's understanding of eschatology as already occurring but not yet fulfilled, and also as "real" in the sense described above. Because Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit does *really* encounter people, calling them to an active knowledge of himself, the event of grace as truth does *really* interrupt the Christian's subjective experience.

However, Jesus Christ "has not yet spoken universally of Himself and the act of reconciliation accomplished in Him [...] in such away that even those who are awakened by Him to faith and love can hear His voice [...] to the exclusion of every conceivable contradiction and opposition and above all participation in human falsehood."³⁰⁰ From the subjective side, therefore, one's certainty of one's own witness is discontinuous; it is "a twofold, ambivalent, equivocal future dominated by [...] a future which is both bright and dark and which he can await either with calm and confidence or with uncertainty, doubt, anxiety, depression and even despair[.]"³⁰¹

Without the added dimension of hope, which suggests this subjective vacillation will come to an end in the fulfillment of Christ's revelation, the uncertainty of Christian experience cannot undergird sustained Christian witness. Barth suggests real Christian hope "forbids" this twofold, ambivalent expectation of the future.³⁰² Yet, given the purported ubiquity of falsehood, and especially its tendency to masquerade as truth in Christian life, it would make little sense for Barth to suggest that hope somehow manages to evade falsehood's corruption.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 248.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 216.

³⁰¹ Ibid., 219.

³⁰² Ibid., 220.

Indeed, Barth does not suggest that hope is somehow immune to human falsehood; rather, “it is in all the dubiety and frailty of his existence [...] that [the Christian] has to hope as well as to believe and love. The veil is not taken away.”³⁰³ To make sense of the apparent contradiction between the Christian hope that forbids uncertainty and the Christian falsehood that guarantees it, we must understand how Barth’s continued contrast between objectively determined reality and subjectively experienced reality plays out in this dimension of hope.

In chapter 3, I suggested that scholars of Barth work tend to defend his portrayal of human reality and human agency by showing that he redefines the use of such terms by his understanding of Christ’s ontologically determinative reality. This redefinition does not eclipse “reality” or “agency” as they are commonly understood, but rather views them as taken up into the supreme reality of Jesus Christ and given their proper definition. The same idea can be applied to Barth’s concept of hope.

Barth contrasts human hope as “a matter of expecting that things will turn out better”³⁰⁴ with real Christian hope as “unambiguous, uninterrupted, unilateral and therefore absolutely positive expectation of the future, because expectation of Jesus Christ and therefore hope in God and His salvation.”³⁰⁵ It is not, therefore, hope in general or hope as it is commonly understood that allows the Christian to witness confidently in face of the human situation; it is hope redefined by reference to its ontological reality in Jesus Christ.

By defining real Christian hope with reference to Christ, Barth is not suggesting that Christians will always only ever experience this type of hope. As emphasized, in Barth’s view, all human experience occurs under the veil of falsehood. Here, an appreciation for Barth’s realism is critical to understanding his point. For Barth, “*real* Christian hope” is the objective hope already secured in Christ that – in the event of grace as truth – meets

³⁰³ Ibid., 229.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 232.

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 230.

the Christian in his subjectivity, and at once discloses itself and the falsehood of the Christian's attempts at hope. In his own words, Barth says "As Jesus Christ Himself is objectively his hope, it is infallibly guaranteed that his witness to Him as witness of subjective hope in Him will actually be possible and real tomorrow no less than today [...]."³⁰⁶ Therefore, because the unsteady subjective hope of the Christian participates in the objective hope of Christ, Christian witness can proceed without the type of guarantees and clear outlines that falsehood seeks.

Subjective hope that is conditioned by and participates in objective hope, according to Barth, is active hope – and not just because it ought to be, but moreover because it *can* be, in its freedom. Where Christians in their falsehood try to get a hold on what witness is 'supposed' to be, they are wrested by "idle contemplation."³⁰⁷ They try to look for guarantees and answers where they cannot be found. By contrast, real hope "takes place in the act of taking the next step. Hope is action, and as such it is genuine hope."³⁰⁸ Real hope can only be hope in action because it is only in real events that Jesus Christ transforms the world already reconciled to God in Him, and does so in fellowship with humanity. These hopeful acts of Christian witness proceed in spite of the falsehood inherent to the subjectivity of the human agents from whom they proceed.

In light of Christian faith in the reality of world reconciled in Christ, and in hopeful anticipation of its full revelation in real time, Christians can and must venture to act as witnesses to this revelation. Barth writes, "The great and critical moments [in history...] were and are those in which there may be [...] in the power of the Holy Spirit, certain provisional discoveries – preceding and intimating the final revelation of Jesus Christ – of the glorious, unsettling yet deeply consoling fact that even in its supreme form falsehood is only falsehood, and that its deceptive appearance of truth is very far from speaking the truth."³⁰⁹ These provisional intimations are "discoveries," not because they

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 229.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 251.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2, bk. 28: 69.

were brought about by the Holy Spirit in abstraction from human acts, but because there are no guarantees in human action itself. It is only in the Holy Spirit's ongoing eventful revelation that human acts are shown to correspond with Christ's self-witness, and are thus "discovered" as provisional intimations.

Barth is reluctant to outline in any detail the form these provisional intimations might take. This is unsurprising given that the entire thrust of his theology of witness relies on the freedom and sovereignty of God's action, and human action as responsive to God's action. Nevertheless, Barth does sketch out "certain elements which generally characterize Christian life and action,"³¹⁰ even though he does not spell out the details of this life and action. First, Barth suggests that Christian life and action is not geared towards "private ends," given that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the reconciliation of the whole world and not just the reconciliation of the person whom he encounters. Consequently, the individual Christian witnesses in and with the witness of the whole Christian community, in the service of the public at large.³¹¹ Secondly, and this was mentioned above, the Christian witness acts in expectation that reconciliation of the whole world is not only future but is also present, and so the Christian cannot be resigned in the face of the present time.³¹² Lastly, Barth suggests that Christians must surrender their acts of witness to the will of God. Barth writes that because witness "derives from God," rather than oneself, "[the Christian] need not care whether or not he is worthy of such a life or able to achieve it. It means he need not care whether or not [...] he might slip back into all kinds of non-Christian, ambivalent and therefore despairing, self-seeking, abstractly other-worldly or this-worldly expectations of the future."³¹³ The Christian, rather, can act in hope based on the confidence that the God who called him to this life will continue to do so.³¹⁴

³¹⁰ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2, bk. 29: 242.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, 242-246.

³¹² *Ibid.*, 246-250.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, 251-253.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 253.

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Curriculum Vitae

Name: Emily Wilton

Post-secondary Education and Degrees:

The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada
2005-2009 B.A. in English and Psychology

The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada
2009-2010 Non-degree Student in Psychology

Huron University College at The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada
2010-2012, 2014 M.T.S.

The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada
2011-present M.A. Candidate

Honours and Awards:

The University of Western Ontario
Western Scholarship of Excellence
2005

The University of Western Ontario
Dean's Honour List
2005, 2008, 2010-2011

Faculty of Theology, Huron University College
The Very Reverend Leslie B. Jenkins Prize in Systematic
Theology
2011

Faculty of Theology, Huron University College
The Brotherhood of Anglican Churchmen Scholarship in Old
Testament Studies
2012

Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)
Canada Graduate Scholarship, Master's
2012

Canadian Society of Biblical Studies

Founders Prize for student essay
2013

Faculty of Theology, Huron University of College
Award of Academic Distinction
2014

**Related Work
Experience:**

Research Assistant
Huron University College at The University of Western Ontario
2012-2013

Teaching Assistant
King's University College at The University of Western Ontario
2011-2014