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The Threefold Word of God and the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit, at least according to the Western understanding of the divine Triunity, cannot be separated from the Word, and his power is not a power different from that of the Word but the power that lives in and by the Word.

—Karl Barth, *CD I/1:150*

KARL BARTH'S CONCEPT OF THE THREEFOLD WORD OF GOD HAS A CHRISTOLOGICAL emphasis, but also a pneumatological dimension. It is the Holy Spirit that is the bond of union in the event of proclamation, dynamically uniting the voice of God to the voices and ears of the Christian community, and it is the Holy Spirit that confirms as God's own work "the work of faith which is proclaimed in words of human thought and expression on the lips of the preacher and in the ears of the here and now, thus turning the preached promise into the event of real promise that is given to the Church."¹ It is the Holy Spirit who enables the voice of Christ to traverse time and space to speak in the present life of the Christian community and it is the Holy Spirit whose eschatological reality breaks into the present enabling human words of hope and expectation to become God's Word.

This chapter examines the activity of the Holy Spirit in relation to the threefold Word of God, especially in regard to the church's proclamation, drawing from Karl Barth's early theological writings in the 1920s and in his more mature presentation in *CD I/1* and *I/2* in the 1930s. This chapter argues that the work of the Holy Spirit is integral to the threefold Word of God, as the contemporaneous form of Christ, the "real presence" of Christ in Scripture and proclamation and the Christian community. In conversation

1. Barth, *CD I/1: 60*.

with contemporary scholarship, this chapter engages some of the problems with Barth's eschatological emphasis on the coming event and the coming Spirit as opposed to present possession of the Word of God. Finally, this chapter argues that the Holy Spirit is the bond of union between the divine voice and the human voice in the event of the Word of God.

The Holy Spirit and Proclamation

Just as things were calming down after World War II, legend has it that Karl Barth got himself involved in a dispute over the stained glass windows in the Basel Münster. At the onset of World War II, the windows were removed for fear of destruction, and after the war when the attempt was made to restore the windows to their former positions, Barth resisted the effort.² Barth resisted the restoration of the stained glass windows because of his insistence that "the gospel came to the church only through the Word proclaimed," and needed no crutches or assistance even in the form of vivid depictions of the gospel story in stained glass.³ Later in his life, Barth again articulated these themes in an article on church architecture. Other than an ordinary communion table, a simple pulpit, and a baptismal font all located at the center of the church building, Barth argued that all images and symbols had no place in a Protestant church building, as they would only distract and create confusion from the central focus of the church's life and activity: "the preaching of the Word of God and the prayers of the assembled congregation."⁴ Ostentation, decoration, and ornamentation, even the choir and organ, could all be distractions for a congregation whose primary duty in worship should be to hear the Word proclaimed and respond in prayer, praise, and faithful witness.⁵

Barth was not just displaying an allergy to high church liturgy. Rather his vision of the ecclesial community was underscored by his very Reformed insistence that the essence of Christian faith is more an aural faith than a visual faith. The gospel of Jesus Christ is transformative as it is heard and received in the life of faith. The church lives and walks by faith, not by sight,⁶ and thus can only see as it hears and is transformed by the voice of Christ. Even Jesus Christ's own life was not self-evidently revelatory except through the power of the Holy Spirit and the eyes and ears of faith, so too in the con-

2. Achtemeier, "Relevant Remembering," 109.

3. Ibid.

4. Barth, "Protestantism and Architecture," 272.

5. Ibid.

6. 2 Cor 5:7.

text of the particular worshipping community, grace is not simply mediated by hands or by ingesting it by the mouth or even through delightful visual images. Rather by the work of the Spirit, grace reaches human beings through the ears. For Karl Barth, perhaps the ultimate sacramental medium was not an inanimate object, but the human ear. The Word proclaimed must also be heard, and it is the Holy Spirit that unites human speaking and hearing with the living God and makes them one in the event of proclamation.⁷

In his 1925 “Church and Theology” address given in response to Erich Peterson, Barth described the Spirit as the “Spirit of the Word,” which works equally along with the Word, “neither of the two is greater or lesser,” to speak and mediate Christ’s authority in the life of the church.⁸ Though there seems to be an equal division of labor between the revelation of Jesus Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, or objective revelation and subjective revelation, Barth would later interpret the work, role, and power of the Spirit in light of the *filioque* clause of the Nicene Creed pointing out that the Spirit is the Spirit of the Father and the Son, “not a spirit side by side with the Word, but the Spirit of the Word itself who brings to our ears the Word and nothing but the Word.”⁹ In other words, the Spirit does not work independently from Jesus Christ. Far from being a second revelation, the Spirit is the creative power of the one Word of God, Jesus Christ, that becomes present through Scripture and proclamation in the life and activity of the Christian community.¹⁰

7. Barth, *GD*, 271.

8. Barth, “Church and Theology,” in *Theology and Church*, 296. Though Barth speaks in terms of Word and Spirit together working equally, the pneumatocentric to christocentric shift McCormack describes may have been taking place earlier than Barth’s adjustment to the doctrine of election.

9. Barth, *CD I/2*:239.

10. McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 328. McCormack characterizes the period of Barth’s thought, roughly 1924–1937, as pneumatocentric. Though the centrality of God’s self-revelation was in Jesus Christ, his focus was on the here and now of God’s self-revelation rather than the there and then of Christ’s own life history in the first century. According to McCormack, Barth then seeks to read his doctrines from the starting point of the revelatory event in the present making it a christologically grounded pneumatocentric theology. After his deeper articulation of the doctrine of election, McCormack argues that Barth would read all doctrines off the self-revelation of Christ in history making it a christologically grounded, christocentric theology. Though Barth speaks in terms of Word and Spirit together working equally, the pneumatocentric to christocentric shift may have been taking place earlier than Barth’s adjustment to the doctrine of election. As we see in *CD I/2*, Barth is already describing the Spirit not as a Spirit “side by side” with the Word, but as the power that emanates from the Word, the “Spirit of the Word.” See *CD I/2*:239.

As the Spirit of the Word, the creative power that brings to human ears nothing but the Word,¹¹ the Holy Spirit is the distinct power within God that makes the ontologically distinct, wholly other, sovereign and incomprehensible God knowable, recognizable, and capable of being loved and acknowledged in the life of the Christian community. How is this activity of the Holy Spirit and this event of revelation specifically related to the third form of the Word of God? In relation to proclamation in particular, Barth describes the Spirit's ability and activity uniting human proclamation of the gospel to Christ's own voice. Reflecting on the significance and work of the Spirit in the New Testament, Barth describes the Spirit as God's ability to empower humanity to evoke an affirmative response to the gospel, God's ability to guide and instruct human beings in ways they could never do for themselves, and most central to proclamation, the Spirit empowers human beings to "speak of Christ in such a way that what they say is witness and that God's revelation in Christ thus achieves new actuality through it."¹² Here Barth clearly articulates the unity and continuity of the third form of God's Word with the first form through the activity of the Spirit. The Spirit not only establishes human witnesses and a faithful response to God's Word within humanity, but the Spirit empowers human witness and speech about Christ to be annexed by God's own self-revelation in Jesus Christ so that "revelation now is not only Jesus Christ," but extends to and is actualized in the here and now, among and through particular human beings.¹³

Even as God makes human beings active participants in revelation, Barth cautions that humanity always remains humanity, the sinner always remains the sinner, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit always remains God.¹⁴ In this revelatory event and union, the creature does not lose her nature and become transformed into the Holy Spirit, nor does the Spirit dissolve into the creature. God remains God, Barth maintains, "even and precisely when He Himself comes into our hearts as His own gift, even and precisely when He 'fills' us."¹⁵ And yet, God is able, through this activity of the Spirit, to enable finite human beings in the proclamation of the Word, to become "enclosed in the act of God."¹⁶

11. Barth, *CD* I/2:239.

12. Barth, *CD* I/1:453–54.

13. Barth, *CD* I/2:235–36.

14. Barth, *CD* I/1:462.

15. Barth, *CD* I/1:465.

16. *Ibid.*, 462. See also, Barth, *CD* I/2:245–47. Barth writes that in the Holy Spirit "we know the real togetherness of God and man," but from the side of man there is no freedom or capacity or human possibility that attains revelation. Rather the Word

Real Presence

Bruce McCormack's study of Barth's early theological development presents Barth's theology of the Word, articulated in Göttingen, Münster, Bonn, and Basel, as christocentrically grounded, but argues that the basic orientation or focus was chiefly on the revelation event as it happens in the present through God's self-revelation.¹⁷ Instead of reading all doctrine in light of the event of election and its actualization in Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection, which McCormack believes represents Barth's later view, in this period, Barth sought to read doctrines in light of the event of Christ's self-revelation in the contemporary life of the Christian community.¹⁸ McCormack refers to this period of Barth's development as a christologically grounded, pneumatocentric theology.¹⁹ Perhaps a more practical outcome of Barth's earlier christologically grounded pneumatocentrism is exhibited in Barth's confidence in theology's ability to identify the presence of the Holy Spirit in and through Scripture, proclamation, and the church's life together. Where in his later theological work Barth might draw clearer distinctions, Gabriel Fackre argues that "his earlier language was sometimes interpreted as a fusion" of the historical event of reception with the "moment of its reception."²⁰ Thus the Word of God is not only Jesus Christ, but by the present power and activity of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian community, Scripture and proclamation become God's Word, so that "the one who proclaims the gospel, preacher or theologian, proclaims

of God reaches human beings as the outpouring of the Holy Spirit brings the Word of God to human hearing. See also, *CD*, I/1:186. As Barth replies earlier to the question of how the Word of God is the same Word of God in three forms: "It is on our lips and in our hearts as the mystery of the Spirit who is the Lord."

17. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 328.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.* After modifying the doctrine of election, McCormack argues that Barth's theology would become a "Christologically, grounded, christocentric theology." Others also argue that Barth shifted from a concern with and a present focus on existential realization (the Word of God becoming the Word of God in the present through the dynamic activity of the Holy Spirit), to an eschatological theology of expectation (we pray and call on God to become present and unite his life and speech to our human speech and action), but Barth will exhibit a much greater wariness of any claims of the "present possession" of God in any form. What we possess is the hope that God will speak and become present through Scripture and proclamation. See also, Wood, *The Comedy of Redemption*, 49; and Fackre, "Revelation," 11–12. Jenson hints that this shift from pneumatocentrism leads to a binatarianism in Barth that subordinates or dissolves the independent person and work of the Spirit from the word and work of Christ. See Jenson, "You Wonder Where the Spirit Went," 296–304; and Jenson, *America's Theologian*, 187.

20. Fackre, "Revelation," 9.

what God in person is saying presently to the church and to the world” in the particularity and dynamic reality of the present moment.²¹

Though Barth does not specifically refer to the unity of the threefold Word of God in terms of “real presence,” the Word of God in its three forms, Jesus Christ, Scripture, and proclamation, does seem to indicate a “real presence” of God in Christ that also extends provisionally, temporarily, and dynamically to Scripture and proclamation in the life of the Christian community. Barth discusses this mysterious presence of God through the Holy Spirit in relation to the event of faith on and in humanity (I/1), through an extended discussion of divine sign-giving (I/2), and through an extended excursus on the secondary objectivity of Israel and the church’s life (II/1). Indeed, Barth believes that the possibility of faith itself is the sign within humanity of the real presence of Christ which opens up humanity from above, but “remains just as hidden for us as the event itself or God Himself.”²² The event of faith, the event of Christ’s presence opening up the ears and heart of the hearer through the Word, reveals the divine ability to enclose humanity in an act of God.²³ This event occurs in the present and the particularities of the Christian community, where in the event of faith, “the event of the presence of the believed Word in man, (and) the union of man with it,” the Holy Spirit enables the inadequacy of human possibility to “become the adequate divine possibility.”²⁴

The work and the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian and in the life of the Christian community, is the life and activity of God, “after He has become man in Christ for us,” in which God also adopts particular human beings “in such a way that He Himself makes us ready to listen to the Word, that He Himself intercedes with us for Himself, that He Himself makes the speaking and hearing of His Word possible among us.”²⁵ The Word of God is actualized in its reception by the Christian community and particular hearers within the community by the power of the Holy Spirit.²⁶ Not only do Scripture and proclamation become the Word of God as the

21. Richardson, “*Christus Praesens*,” 141.

22. Barth, *CD I/1*:243.

23. *Ibid.*, 462.

24. *Ibid.*, 243.

25. Barth, *CD I/2*:221.

26. Fackre, “Revelation,” 9. Again, Fackre makes the point that fulfilment or actualization is more of an existential reality than an eschatological one as the Word of God is actualized as it is received by the believer in the community by the Holy Spirit, which makes it possible for the Bible and proclamation of Scripture to become God’s Word in the present as the Spirit enables God’s voice and presence to be revealed in and through the speech and reception of the Christian community.

Spirit makes Christ's voice contemporaneously present as the Scriptures are read and proclaimed, but Barth also describes the movement of the Spirit as mediating the present reality of Christ, and as imparting the knowledge of Christ into the life of the Christian.²⁷ Barth illustrates this dual activity of the Holy Spirit in a quotation he takes directly from Eduard Thurneysen: "The statement of revelation that God speaks is identical with the statement that man hears."²⁸

As we have already seen, Barth describes the work of the Holy Spirit in the life and activity of the Christian community, by way of an extended discussion on divine sign-giving, the way Jesus Christ reaches man²⁹ and the way "real revelation puts man in God's presence."³⁰ The work and role of the Holy Spirit, works in and through divine sign-giving to address human beings and to take them up into the event of revelation in which they are made to see themselves not only as sinful creatures but as children of God, as those who are in Christ by Christ, whose lives are hid with Christ in God, those who have become hearers and doers of the Word of God.³¹ Without the Holy Spirit, without the Spirit's life and activity of making Christ present and known in and through Scripture and the church's proclamation, without the Holy Spirit's ongoing activity, there would be no threefold Word of God, and Scripture and proclamation could not become the Word of God.³² In and through the secondary forms of the Word of God, the Spirit is the source of union and the bond that unites the presence and voice of Christ to the life and activity of particular human beings in the Christian community. The Spirit enables God's revelation to penetrate humanity in the present; the Spirit enables finite and broken human beings to be instruments and receptors of God's revelation in and through Scripture and proclamation.³³

27. Richardson, "*Christus Praesens*," 142.

28. Barth, *CD I/1*:242. See also Thurneysen, *Das Wort Gottes und die Kirche*, 222.

29. Barth, *CD I/2*:232.

30. *Ibid.*, 237.

31. *Ibid.*, 236–40.

32. *Ibid.*, 241. Barth writes that just because the Spirit belongs to Jesus Christ, "the work of Christ is never done without Him. Nor is it done except by Him. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ does not exist except in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 13:14), and the love of God is not poured out into our hearts except by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5)."

33. Even so, that God's speaks in and through the witness and proclamation of the Christian community is never less than a miracle. "To receive the Holy Spirit means an exposure of our spiritual helplessness, a recognition that we do not possess the Holy Spirit. For that reason the subjective reality of revelation has the distinctive character of a miracle, i.e., it is a reality to be grounded only in itself." Barth, *CD I/2*:244. See also, Webster, *Barth*, 56.

Bruce McCormack's description of Barth's christological pneumatocentrism appears to be an accurate depiction, especially when focusing on the here and now of Barth's theological work. Though Barth describes the Holy Spirit in various ways as the Spirit of the Father and the Son, as the Spirit of Jesus Christ, the present activity of Jesus Christ, the contemporaneous presence of Christ Himself, the activity of the Spirit is perhaps the primary mode of divine revelation and activity in the here and now, and seems to function as the particular divine capacity to become the Word of God in and through Scripture and proclamation.³⁴ According to Barth, it is the power and bond of the Spirit that is able to overcome the infinite qualitative distinction between divinity and humanity, to unite finite sinful human beings to Jesus Christ³⁵ and to enable God's speech to be received by human beings through human speaking. In the present, it is the Holy Spirit that mediates Christ's presence and enables human beings to proclaim and to hear what God is saying in the here and now to the Christian community and to the world.

The Holy Spirit and the Second Form of the Word of God

As Scripture is the foundation and content of the church's proclamation, the Holy Spirit plays an integral role uniting God's self-revelation with the biblical account of Israel's life and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. While this study is focused primarily on the third form of the Word of God and its importance in the formation and identity of the Christian community, the third form of the Word of God derives from and does not come without the second form of the Word of God. Barth does not maintain a doctrine of scriptural infallibility, but the concept of the threefold Word of God serves to illustrate how the one infallible Word of God, the living Jesus Christ, incorporates fallible witnesses into his own self-revelation through the biblical witnesses primarily, but also secondarily through the church's particular attempts to proclaim and live out the gospel for the sake of the larger world.

In relation to Scripture, the Holy Spirit has a multiform role to play as God speaks through the written word. First, in terms of inspiration, Scripture is the account of Israel's life with and before God, from the patriarchs to Moses to Israel's worship and prayers to Israel's prophets, a written record of God's past encounter with this people and their response and witness to the presence of the Lord in their midst. While the inspiration of the Holy Spirit

34. Barth, *CD* I/2:239–42.

35. *Ibid.*, 241–42.

led to the recording of this written word in the first place, Barth interprets the inspiration of Scripture “as a divine decision continually made in the life of the Church and in the life of its members.”³⁶ Scripture therefore serves as a record of God’s past faithfulness and inspiration, past evidence of the Holy Spirit at work in the history of Israel and the church. Yet in the contemporary life of the Christian community, Scripture can only again become the Word of God, something more than a record of God’s past history with Israel and its fulfilment in Jesus Christ, by the present power of the Holy Spirit.

As the church returns to these eyewitnesses, who are not self-evidently revelatory even in their written form, the Holy Spirit enables these witnesses of Christ’s humanity to speak and to again become witnesses of divine revelation in the present.³⁷ Such past accounts of inspiration are apprehended as revelatory in the present life of the Christian community as the Holy Spirit enables the revelation that was apprehended by Israel and the early church to also be apprehended as revelation by the contemporary church.³⁸ This happens not by human processes or determination or by right interpretation of Scripture alone, but as “the work of God is done through” the text and a “miracle of God takes place in this text formed of human words.”³⁹ While Scripture serves as a record of God’s past inspiration, Barth declares that “we are not bound to imagine the Word of God is present,” nor is the Christian community called upon to make it present, but in thankfulness and hope, the church trusts that God will take up this text and use it and speak through it in spite of its human infallibility.⁴⁰ In so doing, the divine Word does not stop by speaking again through the biblical witness, but seeks to speak in the particular context of the Christian community through the gospel proclamation, as the mystery of God manifests itself in the contemporary words and witness of the Christian community.⁴¹

Proclamation, Illumination, and Union

In an address given in 1922 titled “The Word of God and the Task of the Ministry,” Barth makes the point that ministers of the gospel are tasked to preach the Word of God. That being the case however, Barth’s second point

36. Barth, *CD* I/2:534–35.

37. *Ibid.*, 537.

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*, 532.

40. *Ibid.*, 533.

41. *Ibid.*, 532.

is that it is impossible for human beings to speak the Word of God, and so if the third form of the Word of God ever becomes the Word of God it can only become so by an act of God. All the proclaimers and hearers can do is acknowledge that we should speak and hear the Word of God, yet finite human beings who are infinitely qualitatively distinct from God are incapable of doing just that, and so human beings can only acknowledge this impossibility before God and “by that very recognition give God the glory.”⁴² And yet, while humanity may not be able to offer more than an acknowledgement of human frailty and the mortal incapacity to contain the Word of God on the lip or heart, Barth argues that from the side of God, God’s transcendent sovereignty does not exclude but includes God’s fellowship with humanity.

The divine and human relation is not ultimately defined and lived out in infinite distance and qualitative distinction, God is not a prisoner of his deity, Barth often remarks, but the Holy Spirit unites divinity and humanity without creating a permanent fusion or synthesis. Barth acknowledges that the sharp line that separates humanity from divinity is never “expunged or removed,” but through “the Holy Spirit we know the real togetherness of God and man.”⁴³ Echoing his address given more than a decade earlier, Barth acknowledges that everything one can say about humanity from the standpoint of revelation refutes the possibility that God can be made known to human beings, “but the work of the Holy Spirit is in favor of that possibility.”⁴⁴ The only reason proclamation can become something other than human talk and human talk about God, the only reason gathered humanity in the life of the Christian community hear anything besides human talk and human talk about God, is because the Word of God is brought to humanity’s hearing in the Holy Spirit.⁴⁵ The Word of God creates the possibility that human beings proclaim and hear the Word of God.⁴⁶

To receive the Holy Spirit is never to possess the Holy Spirit or to have the Word of God on humanity’s terms or to engineer the event of human proclamation becoming the Word of God. That such an event and miracle may ever occur is only possible as humanity’s own spiritual helplessness and utter dependence are exposed. That exposure and acknowledgment of human emptiness of the Spirit, Barth indicates, is perhaps the very way the Holy Spirit makes it possible to place the Word of God on humanity’s lips

42. Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, 186.

43. Barth, CD I/2:245–46.

44. *Ibid.*, 246.

45. *Ibid.*, 247.

46. *Ibid.*

and hearts.⁴⁷ Part of the Spirit's work renders human beings lacking in self-sufficiency, completely helpless, and fully dependent on God's grace. In the midst of such circumstances, does the work of the Holy Spirit make the impossible possible, enabling the Word of God to be spoken and heard in the life of the Christian community. Only as the Holy Spirit cuts away from human beings all other possibilities and means of possessing and speaking for God, only as human beings are exposed as completely dependent and spiritually helpless to help themselves, only when there is no other possible way for God's Word to be on human lips and in human hearts, only then is the Holy Spirit able to complete God's work and bring Christ, the Word of God to human hearing and Christian life together.⁴⁸

Before the Scriptures are read and proclaimed, the minister and the community together pray for illumination, *Veni Creator Spiritus*. Barth is bold enough to say that one cannot proclaim the gospel without praying.⁴⁹ Even humanity's calling on God can only take it so far; there is a limit to what human beings can say and "the Spirit himself must represent us with sighing that cannot be uttered."⁵⁰ Though the presence of the Holy Spirit does not come because humanity asks, though the proclamation of the Word of God does not become the Word of God because of prayers for illumination, Barth cautions that it is "impossible to abstract the divine reality of the Holy Spirit from the prayer for the Holy Spirit in which it is acknowledged and accepted as a divine reality."⁵¹ Here too divine and human distinction and togetherness are held together and enclosed in an act of God.⁵² Here too the Holy Spirit creates both the distinction between the free grace of God and the adoration of humanity as well as their union and unity, as the free grace of God, the Word of God, Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, encloses humanity's adoration and petition.⁵³

In and of itself, humanity does not possess nor is it capable of bearing the Word of God; rather it is the activity of Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit who determines and makes it possible for God to speak in and through human speaking and hearing. God's speaking in the life of the Christian community, Kurt Anders Richardson writes of Barth, "is the miraculous and continuous activity of God by his Spirit to actualize

47. Ibid., 244.

48. Ibid., 246–49.

49. Barth, *Homiletics*, 86.

50. Ibid.

51. Barth, *CD I/2*:768.

52. Barth, *CD I/1*:462.

53. Barth, *CD I/2*:245.

the words of Scripture as his own.”⁵⁴ Such actualization does not end with Scripture, but extends to the third form of God’s Word as the Spirit actualizes proclamation and the gospel message in the particular hearts and lives of the Christian community. It is the Word of God, by the power of the Holy Spirit that dynamically and provisionally contains, embraces, and exalts humanity’s own words, so that God may again and again speak in the present particularity of the Christian community, and so that human words and proclamation in the life of the church are never assumed to be the Word of God, but must always seek and hope to become God’s Word.⁵⁵

It is the Holy Spirit that is the source of unity between the one Word of God and its secondary forms. Without the presence and work of the Holy Spirit, human words, whether in Scripture or proclaimed in the life of the Christian community, cannot become the one Word of God.⁵⁶ Because this work of the Spirit is dynamic and not static, the Spirit momentarily makes use of these fallible human words and creatures, enabling those words to retain their identity yet to become the way God addresses the community. The unity, illumination, and inspiration the Spirit creates are not permanent. Human words in proclamation, from beginning to end, are human words. They may become something more “when they are inspired and used by God Himself by the Holy Spirit,” but they will still remain quite human words throughout the dynamic activity of the Spirit.⁵⁷ While human words may be shot through with God’s grace or enclosed in an act of God, they are not so permanently.⁵⁸ In the presence of divine activity, Barth argues, humanity is still humanity.⁵⁹ Yet the Holy Spirit enables the Christian community to speak about God in human words and in so doing, to proclaim God’s own words.⁶⁰ The Holy Spirit maintains the differentiation between God and humanity without creating a third thing or synthesis between the two, even as the Holy Spirit unites these two disparate partners in the church’s own speaking and hearing in the event of the Word of God.

54. Richardson, “*Christus Praesens*,” 138.

55. Barth, *CD I/2*:775.

56. *Ibid.*, 768. See also Hart, “The Word, the Words, and the Witness,” 44–45. Hart writes that the event of the Word of God, proclamation, is a miraculous event in which Jesus Christ speaks to human beings through the event; Hart stresses that this event is created by the Word and Spirit together.

57. *Ibid.*, 756.

58. *Ibid.*

59. *Ibid.*, 758.

60. Barth, *CD I/1*:757.

Proclamation and Consummation

After World War II, Karl Barth returned to the University of Bonn where he had been expelled from teaching more than a decade earlier. In this place of reconstruction and rebuilding, not unlike the exiled prophet returning to Israel, Barth referred to the present time, “our time,” as the “time of the Word,” or the time of abandonment, “in which the Church is united with Christ only in faith and by the Holy Spirit.”⁶¹ In this interim time, this time of the Spirit, Barth made clear that God does not seek to transform the Christian community and the Christian into a completed and finished state, but God makes room and leaves room for humanity’s own participation and response to the work of the Spirit.⁶² The work of the Spirit is not complete when Scripture and proclamation become the Word of God, not even as faith is created and gratitude offered. Barth presses forward, making the case that Scripture proclaims the Christ who has already come in the flesh but Scripture likewise proclaims the Christ who will one day come again. Rather than creating a personal possession and static security for the Christian and the Christian community, the work of the Holy Spirit between the first and second Advent creates an expectation and hope that what has been given (actualized) will be given again.⁶³ When human words become the Word of God in the event and life together of Christian community, they do not become the possession of the Christian or Christian community. As the preached word becomes God’s Word, rather than reaching a state of fulfilment or a permanent possession of grace, the work of the Spirit creates a longing to hear the gospel afresh again, a yearning for future redemption and consummation, a movement forward in expectation and hope.⁶⁴

Perhaps the most important and distinctive work of the Holy Spirit in Barth’s account of the threefold Word of God and proclamation, is that the work of the Spirit is not finished or complete even as the words proclaimed become the Word of God. Beyond making the Word of God contemporaneous by revealing it amidst the human words and activities of the Christian community, the Holy Spirit frees the Christian community and Christians to correspond in their own decisions to the decision made about them in Jesus Christ.⁶⁵ While Barth argues that the proclamation of the Word of God and the written Word of God become the Word of God in

61. Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, 128.

62. Ibid.

63. Barth, *Homiletics*, 53–54.

64. Ibid., 54–55.

65. Barth, *CD I*/1:240.

the Christian community, to believe this, he maintains, is not to treat God's Word like capital at one's disposal or to regard the Word of God as one's own possession or the community's ecclesiastical property.⁶⁶ Christ's presence in the church's proclamation, Barth argues, also implies the possibility of absence.⁶⁷ Christ's power is never ceded over to the Christian community to be perpetuated and maintained as a human possession.⁶⁸ Rather the Spirit comes and is at work in Scripture and proclamation as the Christian community looks forward in anticipation of Christ's reign and Christ's return. Only as the Christian community surrenders all human assurances and claims and falls back in dependence on the free grace of God alone, does the Spirit of the Word enable Scripture and proclamation to again become the living Word of God.⁶⁹

Far from making the third form of God's Word into a human possession under the auspices of the Christian community, the role of the Spirit is open-ended, ongoing, future-oriented and eschatological. The gospel after all is not for the Christian community, but for the world. And Christ's presence and action in and through the event of proclamation cannot be guaranteed, assumed, or possessed by human beings, but only prayed for in hopeful expectation. Human talk about God in the context of the church's proclamation fails in its striving to become anything more than prayer and expectation. It can only become the Word of God as the church prays in expectation and hope, "thrown back completely on free grace," and "trembling assurance," that God's Spirit alone will be able to make God's infinite Word heard in the midst of a finite community.⁷⁰ As a result, the church's gospel proclamation can never rest on its laurels or believe that it possesses the kingdom of God by its mere stature and ability and commission. It must always humbly pray, expectedly wait, struggle, and longingly hope, that God will come again, and by the power and activity of the Holy Spirit, speak in and through the words of Scripture and proclamation and make them God's own. Preaching and proclamation that rests secure in its own office or preaching that seeks to represent God's interests to the rest of the world, Barth cautions, is like a "majestic Gothic arch that shelters us from the gaze of heaven, for we are truly sheltered only when we are

66. *Ibid.*, 225.

67. *Ibid.*, 98.

68. *Ibid.*, 225. See also, Barth, *CD* I/1:97–98. Here Barth suggests that Roman Catholic theology too easily transfers or collapses the Lordship and presence of Christ directly into the church where he argues it is simply self-evidently present and is not distinguished from the power exercised by sinful human beings in the same sphere.

69. Barth, *CD* I/1:225.

70. *Ibid.*, 99, 225.

exposed before God.”⁷¹ Triumphalistic confidence in human proclamation and human ecclesial action impede and prevent such a posture before God. Such a view of preaching does not need prayer or the work of the Holy Spirit that comes in asking, but instead trusts in its own rhetorical powers and achievements. Only as preaching finally becomes a prayer for help, “the seeking and invoking of God,” that trusts and hopes expectantly and dependently on God to speak, may it also become God’s own Word in the life of the Christian community.⁷²

In his only seminar held on the topic of preaching, Barth writes that “the proper attitude of preachers does not depend on whether they hold on to the doctrine of inspiration but on whether or not they expect God to speak to them here.”⁷³ Proclamation is never a completed act, but an ongoing submission and active expectation that moves forward with the hope and expectation that God will speak in and through the sinful preacher by the power of the Holy Spirit, and that a Word from the Lord will be heard in the life of the Christian community by the same activity of the Holy Spirit.⁷⁴ In the becoming of the Word of God, the presence of God and God’s speech in the life of the Christian community is never something the church has or possesses. The church is always on the way, from event (Easter) to event (parousia), and never has Jesus Christ on its own. And so while Barth claims that the Word of God becomes Scripture and proclamation in a secondary way, it happens in a dynamic event and encounter in the presence of the Holy Spirit, not through a permanent transaction that infuses human beings with the contents of grace. Scripture and proclamation are not the Word of God in all times, places, and circumstances, but only as Christ appears and speaks in and through them by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Proclamation of the gospel is practiced with expectation, hope, and understanding that its own proclamation and speech must be ever afresh enclosed by an act of God. Therefore, in the present time or interim time or time between the times, the work of the Spirit is never completed nor finished in the act of proclamation, but is always empowering the Christian community to look back in trust and confidence at past revelation, even as the same Spirit beckons the community forward with hope and expectation toward God’s future revelatory event. Scripture and proclamation do not exist statically as the Word of God but by the ongoing work and outpouring of the Holy Spirit, they become the Word of God, dynamically, momentarily,

71. Barth, *Homiletics*, 79, 90.

72. *Ibid.*, 90.

73. *Ibid.*, 78.

74. *Ibid.*, 79.

and ever again in the life and witness of the Christian community. The proper posture of the Christian and the Christian community is one of expectation not possession, one of empty outstretched hands not clutching, controlling fingers, one that does not contain the presence of the One it signifies, but one that expects, hopes, and trusts that it will be embraced and contained by the One it signifies, as the Spirit unites such disparate elements together and encloses them in an act and event of God. As those who live between Christ's Ascension and Christ's return in this interim "time of the Word," time of the Holy Spirit, a time between the times, the Christian community can never have or possess the word completely in this time. Still, even though Scripture and proclamation are not the Word of God in its original form, the Christian community is a field of divine activity where these derivative forms, Scripture and proclamation, become instruments of divine communication by the ongoing activity of the Holy Spirit in which human beings are brought into an encounter with God.⁷⁵ Though proclamation and Scripture are derivative forms of the Word of God, they are nevertheless forms that point to the reality of God's presence and self-revelation in Christ, and in their witness as herald and witness of past revelation, they become part of the one event in which God continues to speak to the world through the life and witness of the Christian community. In spite of his qualifications, in both Scripture and in the church's proclamation of the gospel, Barth believes the Holy Spirit truly gives humanity the Word of God to speak.

Only at the consummation, as the work of the Spirit reaches its goal, will it be self-evident and clear to all that Scripture, proclamation, and the life together and witness of the Christian community were anything more than human talk about God, anything beyond strange self-deferential worship and action. In the interim time, Christ speaks and is made known in and through the Christian community as the Holy Spirit makes Christ present and unites human voices and ears to his voice in the event of Scripture and proclamation in the life of the Christian community. The work of the Holy Spirit in relation to the threefold Word of God makes the present reality of Christ known, enabling human beings to say and to hear what "God in person is saying presently to the church and to the world."⁷⁶

75. Webster, *Barth*, 55–56.

76. Richardson, "*Christus Praesens*," 141.

Critical Reflection and Appraisal

The purpose of this chapter has been to unfold the particular role of the Holy Spirit in relation to the threefold Word of God, specifically as the presence of the Spirit manifests Christ in the church's engagement with the biblical witness and in the church's attempt to proclaim the gospel. In the act and event of proclamation, it is the Holy Spirit that makes Christ present in the contemporary life together of the Christian community, and it is the Holy Spirit that annexes Scripture and proclamation enabling them to become the Word of God. Becoming is never a completed act or static existence though, so it is also the Holy Spirit that creates both presence and absence in the life of the proclaiming and hearing community, giving the Christian community the freedom and desire to move from Advent to the Second Advent, waiting and hoping and praying, for Christ to come again.

Even though proclamation becomes the third form of the Word of God as God speaks to the life of the world through the proclamation event in the Christian community, neither the proclaimer nor the hearer of the Word ever possesses the Word of God. The proclaimer of the Word is always reliant on a new act of the Holy Spirit for the Word of God to come through human speech, and the hearer of the Word continues to pray and call upon the Holy Spirit if the Word of God is ever to become proclamation in the life of the Christian community and the life of the hearer. The gift of the Spirit in relation to the Word of God is not so much the permanent bestowal of the Word of God upon the Christian or Christian community; rather, as the outpouring of the Holy Spirit enables God's Word to be proclaimed and heard in the Christian community, the Spirit creates a deeper longing and greater hunger for God to speak again in and through the life of the Christian community. And so the Christian community is never defined by what it possesses, but is a community that is on the move and always reliant on God. For Barth then, the Christian community lives in hope for the coming Word by the power of the Holy Spirit rather than living in a static confidence and assurance of its ongoing and continuing presence.⁷⁷

While Barth's presentation of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (subjective revelation) and the role of the Holy Spirit in relation to the threefold Word of God is lucid and clear, it is not above critique. Gabriel Fackre offers a few stumbling blocks and challenges in regard to the relationships between proclamation, the Holy Spirit and the threefold Word of God in Barth's thought. Fackre believes Barth at times speaks interchangeably about future revelation as both future reception and actualization of the Word in

77. Fackre, "Revelation," 9.

the Christian community and as the final eschatological consummation.⁷⁸ While Barth does speak in eschatological terms about future revelation as Bible and proclamation become the Word of God in the present life together of the Christian community, even in *Church Dogmatics* I/1 and I/2, Barth has a healthy sense of the distinction between actualization of the Word and final eschatological disclosure. Though Barth speaks in less inhibited language about “future revelation as the actualization of the Word,” he does not do so at the expense of the Second Advent, but maintains that there is some sense of present realization and actualization of the Word of God as it is proclaimed, heard, and lived out in the life of the Christian community. There is some sense of realization in terms of eschatology. Still, there is a danger in Barth’s description of the event of the Word of God, that where God’s Word is actualized in human words, that this point or event in the life of the Christian community is idealized and treated as the termination point and goal of the Christian community’s life and witness in the world rather than as the beginning of the life of discipleship. Barth’s theology of the Word has been read in this way. As a result, existential realization in the present tends to overtake any sense that the event of the Word of God produces a new creation which moves forward in eschatological expectation.

Not unrelated to this theme of the present realization of revelation is the issue of the have-ability and grasp-ability of the Word of God within the life of the Christian community. Here, Fackre compares Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s own exploration of this theme in contrast to Barth. Coming out of the Lutheran tradition, Bonhoeffer was less cautious about equating God’s Word with the Word proclaimed and uttered in the life of the church.⁷⁹ While both Barth and Bonhoeffer believed that in the human form of the church’s proclamation, the Word of God is present,⁸⁰ Barth’s Reformed commitments led him to distrust ecclesial attempts to claim continuity of divine presence in Word, sacrament or any other ecclesial media. Attempts to control and possess the dynamic and divine presence of Jesus Christ only ended in sin and failure, and such claims sought to place human limitations on the sovereignty of God.⁸¹ According to Fackre, Bonhoeffer believed God is always “haveable” and “graspable” in the Word and in its ongoing life in the Christian community. In contrast, though Barth could also refer to the event of the Word of God as the union of the Word of God and the human word, the event in which the Holy Spirit enables human words to become

78. Ibid.

79. Ibid., 19.

80. Barth, *CD* I/1:250.

81. Fackre, “Revelation,” 17–18.

instruments of divine revelation,⁸² Barth still sought to maintain the divine and human distinction. Barth sought to retain and emphasize both the continuity of Christ's presence and activity in and through the activity of proclamation *and* the discontinuity of Christ's distinction from strictly human actions and signs, including proclamation. To Lutherans like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and later Robert Jenson, such *extra Calvinisticum* qualifications risked an unnecessary separation and severing of sign from thing signified.⁸³ And while Barth would agree that the Christian community should hope and trust and pray that we are really given the Word of God to speak, that it is not so un-possessable that it is never received, he nevertheless refuses to directly identify it or automatically equate it with every ecclesial reading of Scripture and every proclamation of the gospel in the life of the Christian community, not only on ontological grounds, but on pneumatological grounds as well. If the gospel proclamation so assuredly contains the Word of God, then why pray for the Holy Spirit at all?

Barth resisted all theological attempts on the church's and Christian's behalf to possess the presence of Christ in Scripture, preaching, or sacrament. Still Gabriel Fackre argues that Barth could have emphasized the once and for all nature of Christ's deity and humanity in union together without denying the "present possession of the glorious presence" of Jesus Christ in the life of the church.⁸⁴ Even so, John Yocum believes Barth's description of the union between the divine Word and human words and their union in differentiation is made most clearly and appropriately in *Church Dogmatics* I/1 and I/2. The event of the Word of God is not separate from or beyond human words, but takes place "in the conjunction of the Word of God and

82. Yocum, *Ecclesial Mediation in Karl Barth*, 7.

83. Fackre, "Revelation," 19. See also, Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, 81, 83, 90–91; Jenson, *God After God*, 189–92. In his study of Jonathan Edwards, Jenson levels a general critique of Reformed theology that I believe nicely summarizes his reservations about Barth's doctrine of the Word of God and the particular work and union the Holy Spirit makes possible between divine and human action. Jenson remarks that while the Holy Spirit may certainly blow where it wills, Scripture witness portrays such "unpredictable dynamism" through the church's life in proclamation and sacraments. Does the gospel/proclamation contain the grace it signifies or does it not? Jenson pointedly asks. At this point in the *CD*, I am not sure Barth would sit comfortably on either of these options, instead arguing that the Word of God contains, embraces, and exalts human words, i.e., the gospel, through the power of the Holy Spirit. While the gospel may not contain the grace it signifies, the Holy Spirit makes it possible for the grace signified to embrace and contain the gospel.

84. Fackre, "Revelation," 18.

the human word,” where the Holy Spirit enables the human word to be enclosed and embraced in an act and word of God.⁸⁵

It is the precise role and identity of the Spirit in this conjunction that is not clear. In his essay the “Mediator of Communion,” George Hunsinger writes that in *Church Dogmatics* IV (Christology), Barth preferred to speak primarily in terms of Christ (the agent) making himself present through the Spirit, whereas one would expect if Barth had gotten to a doctrine of redemption, the agential language for the Spirit, where the Spirit makes Christ present, would figure more prominently.⁸⁶ By a similar pattern, would the unity of the three forms of the Word of God figure differently or more prominently as well? Or perhaps Barth’s later modification to the threefold Word of God sought to offer a greater distinction between a free and authentic human response and the one Word of God. In a theological seminar with English speaking students in the early 1950s, one of the students asked Karl Barth why the Holy Spirit did not appear more explicitly in relation to the “revealed Word.”⁸⁷ Barth responded that his main concern in that period of the dogmatics was the avoidance of subjectivism. If starting today, he remarked “I would speak more of the Holy Spirit.”⁸⁸ And perhaps if we do speak more of the Holy Spirit, Scripture and proclamation can more easily be united with the Word of God in the life of the Christian community.⁸⁹

In the later volumes of the *Church Dogmatics*, it remains to be seen whether Barth’s earlier theology of the threefold Word of God could cohere with a later emphasis on human witness and attestation as the principle purpose of gospel declaration. But perhaps one example of how such a union of divine and human speech happens is found in his account of the Holy Spirit and the threefold Word of God. The preacher and hearer of the Word can do no more than seek to be a human witness. The words and lives of the Christian and the Christian community only seek to signify and bear witness to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yet, through Christ’s ongoing activity and presence in the Holy Spirit, more, it seems, is possible.

85. Yocum, *Ecclesial Mediation in Karl Barth*, 7.

86. Hunsinger, “The Mediator of Communion,” 161n13.

87. Barth, *Karl Barth’s Table Talk*, 27.

88. Ibid.

89. Rosato, *The Spirit as Lord*, 159. In Rosato’s study of Barth’s pneumatology, he writes that, while Barth set out to place the life of the church under the sign of the Spirit, he “so invariably presents the Christian’s life in the Spirit as a reflection of the life of Jesus, that the poignancy of the church’s on-going ‘now’ is severely relativized by the uniqueness of Jesus’ ‘then.’” The question is whether the Spirit acts beyond recognition toward occurrence and completion, not to mention mediating Christ’s presence, in the here and now.

The Holy Spirit is that person of the Trinity and that dimension of God's life that enables God to "be present himself in and in spite of" the human action of proclamation.⁹⁰ God remains God and humanity remains humanity, but in the event of the Word of God, in the event of proclamation, God's own presence is able to make room for and include humanity's words and witness. In the event of the Word of God, God acts in conjunction with human action and humanity's own words and actions are enclosed by God's own words and actions.

Perhaps Barth would later question whether true human response would be negated by such a mode of union and action, but in these early volumes, the threefold Word of God represented the here and now "union of the divine and human possibility," where the divine word and human word were at once distinct and united in the one event of the Word of God.⁹¹ Though Christ remains Christ and stands at the door and knocks, and humanity remains humanity and must open the door, Barth described the union and the work of the Holy Spirit in this way: while it is true that humanity must open the door and it is true that that Christ does not remain outside the door, it is also true that "the risen Christ passes through closed doors."⁹² It is the Holy Spirit that enables the risen Christ to pass through closed doors, to be seen and heard in fallible human words, and to contain and embrace human proclamation in an act of God, in the event of the Word of God.

Summary

The first two chapters of this book offer a detailed depiction of the threefold Word of God, the role of Christ and the Spirit in relation to the church's proclamation and contemporary life together. This chapter in particular has sought to build on these themes and to explore them in a pneumatological context. In the present time, the time between the times, it is the Holy Spirit who enables the Word of God to be spoken through human speech in the event of the Word of God. While the divine and human distinctions remain in the union of this event, it is a union that propels the Christian community toward the next event of the Word of God, and it is an event that sets the Christian community free to correspond to Jesus Christ in the context of their lives. The next chapter will explore the importance of the threefold Word of God as a central feature of Barth's vision of the Christian

90. Barth, *Homiletics*, 69.

91. Barth, *CD I*/1:246.

92. *Ibid.*, 247.

community. The concept of the threefold Word of God is crucial to Barth's understanding of the church and serves a principle role in defining the life of the Christian community. The next chapter explains how Barth's concept of the threefold Word of God serves as a *nota ecclesiae* and a concrete ecclesiological vision for life together in Christian community.

SAMPLE