

Introduction

A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO, WHEN I WAS FIRST EXPLORING THIS TOPIC AND my interest in the Christian community in Karl Barth's theological project, I shared this interest with a prominent contemporary theologian. "Karl Barth had an ecclesiology?" he responded rhetorically, if not a bit sarcastically. In much contemporary theological discussion, Karl Barth's theology of the church is seen either as a useless dead end or as a topic of little interest or import in favor of more interesting themes in Barth's theological corpus. In addition, Barth's concept of the threefold Word of God is all-too familiar terrain that could not possibly be worth any additional detailed engagement and revisitation. The thesis of this book runs counter to these two commonly held assumptions: that Karl Barth had a weak ecclesiology, and that nothing new or significant can be gleaned from a detailed study of the threefold Word of God in Barth's theology. This book explores in detail the features of the threefold Word of God in the theology of Karl Barth, particularly the third form, the gospel event, as it happens in and to the Christian community and shapes its life in the world. This book is also about the church and argues that the threefold Word of God, particularly the tertiary form, is critical to Barth's theological vision of the Christian community. It is in the church's attempt to proclaim and hear the gospel, that the risen Christ comes and comes again, speaking the Word of God through broken human words, freeing the Christian community to get up and follow in discipleship, and sending the Christian community to engage the world in correspondence to the life and activity of Jesus Christ at work in their midst.

This book commences by comprehensively engaging with Karl Barth's early presentation of the threefold Word of God, from Göttingen to its final form in *Church Dogmatics* I/1 and I/2, including its practical import for the Christian community exemplified in the Barmen Declaration. This book also engages in depth with Karl Barth's revisitation of the threefold Word of God in *Church Dogmatics* IV/3. While Barth revised the concept in his later

presentation, I argue that he did not reject the concept or leave it behind. Though Barth admitted that he could not present the concept in exactly the same way, Barth never rejected the claim that God speaks in the life of the Christian community through the gospel declaration nor did Barth reject the conviction that Christ embeds himself in the words and witness of the Christian community.

Beyond engaging and exploring texts within Barth's corpus for theological clarification, I argue for the central role of the threefold Word of God in Karl Barth's vision of the church, something neglected in the accounts that do focus on Barth's ecclesiology. Second, I argue that the gospel proclamation and its impact in the life of the Christian community are integral to Barth's overall vision of the church and the particular characteristics and practices of the Christian community. Throughout this study, I offer a number of examples of how the threefold Word of God is central to Barth's broader ecclesiology and to the particular identity and distinct qualities of the Christian community. Barth's own theology of the threefold Word of God and the Christian community, along with contemporary attempts beyond Barth offering a gospel-centric actualistic ecclesiology, are important ecclesiological alternatives to eucharist-centric ecclesiologies and postliberal practice-based ecclesiologies proliferating in contemporary theology.

While the focus of this book is on the threefold Word of God in the theology of Karl Barth, the second form of the Word of God, Scripture, gets short shrift. This is intentional. While Scripture is the primary witness and foundation for any contemporary proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and while Scripture is engaged at points in this study, a full blown account of Barth's doctrine of Scripture and the role of Scripture in Barth's theology is not possible in the scope of this study. Instead, the focus of this study is on the tertiary form of the Word of God and its own unique and central role in the life of the Christian community. There have been a number of recent studies on the role of Scripture in the theology of Karl Barth, and many recent attempts to establish and maintain the role of Scripture as a secondary form of the Word of God. Such scholarly endeavors have not extended however to the third form of the Word of God, Christian proclamation, which has been largely limited in scope to the category of "response" to the Word of God. This book argues the other way around: that Christ comes in contemporary church proclamation just as he encountered the early Christian prophets and apostles. To deny Christ's divine reality and presence to the church's contemporary proclamation of the gospel risks denying Christ's divine presence to Scripture and to Christ's humanity. For better or for worse, Christ chooses to encounter human beings through the church's flawed attempts to proclaim his gospel—becoming the third form

of the Word of God and shaping the Christian community for distinct discipleship and gospel witness in and for the world.

In the first three chapters of this study, I examine material and draw from sections of the first two volumes of the *Church Dogmatics*. In chapters 4 and 5, I primarily treat materials from the fourth volume. Chapter 1 presents an overview of Karl Barth's early and original use of the threefold Word of God in *Church Dogmatics* I/1 and I/2 and the relationship between the church's proclamation, the gospel event, and the life of the Christian community. Chapter 2 explores the particular role of the Holy Spirit in relation to the threefold Word of God, and traces its activity related to the third form of the Word of God and its activity in the life of the Christian community. Chapter 3 builds on these early themes to argue that the threefold Word of God is a crucial element in Barth's vision of the church and offers the Barmen Declaration as a practical illustration of the threefold Word of God in historical context. Chapter 4 addresses the revision Barth makes to the concept of the threefold Word of God in *Church Dogmatics* IV/3, and explores contemporary scholarly discussion of Barth's use and revision of the threefold Word of God. Chapter 5 argues that the threefold Word of God continues to be relevant today for Barth studies, for Reformed theological expressions of divine and human activity in the life of the Christian community, and for modern ecclesiology. The threefold Word of God serves as a central theological illustration of divine-human encounter and uniting in the church's ongoing life together and witness in the world.

This book is the first of its kind to focus on the role of the threefold Word of God in the larger context of the *Church Dogmatics* and its relation to Karl Barth's vision of the Christian community. This book is also the first of its kind to explore Barth's revisitation and revision of the threefold Word of God and to engage comprehensively with contemporary scholarship related to this revision. Finally, this book seeks to contribute constructively to both the field of Barth studies and to the broader contemporary ecclesiological discussion, all through the lens of the threefold Word of God.