Union Theological Seminary

THE CONTINUING RELEVANCE OF KARL BARTH'S CRITIQUE OF LIBERAL THEOLOGY

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THE CONTINUING RELEVANCE OF KARL BARTH'S CRITIQUE ........................................ 1

Introduction: Karl Barth and the Mainline Church Today .................................................. 1

Modern Protestant Theology and the Early Barth ................................................................. 5

Barth's Disenchantment ........................................................................................................ 10

Barth in Dialogue .................................................................................................................. 13

Rudolph Bultmann .................................................................................................................. 13

Paul Tillich ................................................................................................................................. 18

Moving Beyond Liberalism and Barth ..................................................................................... 21

The Task of Theology: Some Preliminary Thoughts on Ecclesiology ................................. 26

The Failure of Liberal Theology to Become Liberation Theology ........................................ 28

Supernaturalism Revisited ..................................................................................................... 34

Re-Imagining the Church by Building Upon the Three-fold Word of God ...................... 36

Revelation and Mystery Revisited ......................................................................................... 44

Conclusion ............................................................................................................................... 46

APPENDIX I: ON THE ECCLESIOLOGY OF EDWARD SCHILLEBEECKX .................... 48

Schillebeeckx's Early Christology and Ecclesiology ............................................................ 48

Schillebeeckx's Later Christology and Ecclesiology ............................................................ 50

APPENDIX II: “APOLOGETIC” AFTERWORD ............................................................... 54

Bibliography .......................................................................................................................... 55
THE CONTINUING RELEVANCE OF
KARL BARTH'S CRITIQUE OF LIBERAL THEOLOGY

It is the contention of the author that all theology is both practical and incomplete. It is practical, in that it must be of service to the Universal Church and the faithful. It is incomplete in that it is always but a fragment—a small contribution to a long ongoing dialogue. The spirit of this work can be summed up in the words of Karl Barth: “The gospel is not a truth among other truths. Rather, it sets a question-mark against all truths.”¹ In this fragment, I will begin with liberal Protestant theology and Barth, and I will end with the Church today, remembering that the Gospel of Christ holds a question-mark against this and all theological endeavors. The crisis facing the modern Church is undeniable. Many churches are dying. It is my conviction that the Church needs resurrection, not resuscitation.

Introduction: Karl Barth and the Mainline Church Today

The development of Karl Barth's theology – his disenchantment with liberalism and movement towards dogmatism, as well as the dialogue sparked by this development in the 20th century, speaks to the church of the 21st century. The Mainline Protestant denominations in the United States draw their theologies from the traditions established during the Reformation and strongly influenced by the liberal theological tendencies born out of the Enlightenment. The development of liberal theology after Barth has continued while holding him at arm's length. He is someone liberal theologians must wrestle with or go around; they ignore him at their own peril.

¹ Barth, Epistle to the Romans. p. 35.
The work and historic context of Barth should be our cautionary tale. Here I will explore the influence of two great liberal theologians on Barth's early theology, and how German nationalism created in crisis in theology that led Barth to become a dialectical theologian. I will explore the dialogues that developed out of the “Barthian revolt,” in an effort to provide some insight into the shortcomings of liberalism and orthodoxy. I will argue that both liberal theology and Barth's dualistic theology must be transcended to be of relevance to the church today. Since my primary concern is the future of the church, I will conclude by offering the beginnings of an ecclesiology based on this work.

Today's Mainline Protestant denominations in the United States have as their foundation the liberal theology born out of the European “Age of Reason.” The enlightenment movement in philosophy and the liberal movement in theology, from Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schleiermacher onward represents a critically important development in Protestant theology. Martin Luther's doctrine of universal priesthood finds a deeper realization in Kant's enlightenment. The enlightenment signaled humankind's release from “self-incurred tutelage.” As Kant remarked: “Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction of another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another.”

Kant argued that clergy have an obligation to make the sermon “conform to the symbol of the church he serves, for he has been accepted on this condition.” In contrast to the scholar who has “complete freedom, even the calling, to communicate to the public all his carefully tested and well-meaning thoughts on that which is erroneous in the symbol and to make suggestions for

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2 Kant, p. 286.
the better organization of the religious body and church.”3 However, in the Mainline church today, both clergy and laity find the ability to function as a scholar, neither fully confined by the symbol of the church, nor completely abandoning that symbol. While the clergy have a responsibility to both their superiors and their congregation to uphold the traditions of the church, both doctrinal freedom and freedom of the pulpit have liberated them to some degree. The only practical restriction one finds in the pulpit is to speak on those things that will, in fact, “preach.”

The liberation of the preacher comes at a cost. She is no longer bound by the Word of God, but by the context of her congregation. If she is faithful to the gospel, she will preach it faithfully while being mindful of her congregation's context and how they can best receive the message. She is also free (or—in some cases—may find herself pressured) to preach another gospel. She may draw her cues from what her congregation wishes to hear, rather than what they need to hear. She may be pulled to that which corrupts the gospel, such as prosperity theology. The danger of the present situation isn't evident only in the “bad theologies” that manifest in various churches of all denominations today. The cost of rationalizing away faith has created in the Mainline especially the tendency to make the Church solely about engaging the causes of social and economic justice. As important as that work is, it has reduced the church to its social function. These days it's not all that shocking there are ministers like the Rev. John Shuck of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), who claims the identity of both Christian and atheist.4

Sociologist of Religion Robert Bellah, in one of his final addresses before his death, argued that Liberal Protestantism has been eclipsed by its own success. Since the churches have

3 Ibid. p. 288.
managed to infiltrate and transform secular society, they are in decline.\textsuperscript{5} Bellah writes:

The “eclipse” [of liberal Protestantism] may be due to the triumph of liberal Protestantism. By so invading secular humanist culture that it lost its own distinction, it won, after all, by transforming secular humanist culture itself. There is more than a little evidence that most Americans, for example, would assent to unmarked liberal Protestant beliefs more often than to unmarked orthodox alternatives, and that this would be true not only for most mainline Protestants but also for most Catholics and even most Evangelicals.\textsuperscript{6}

It is my contention that modern theological movement has, as a whole, attempted to subsume theology through philosophy of religion. This has caused many within the discipline to forget the humility and reverence in approaching the Divine. How often have we as theologians forgotten, in our zeal to pursue God and to love God with all our mind, that the totality of God is beyond our apprehension? Every theologian of merit acknowledges this limitation, yet in the moment we get caught up in the pietistic experience of doing theology, we find ourselves at risk of forgetting. We substitute the subject of our theology—God—for the form and content which points to that subject. “For now we see in a mirror, dimly…” (1 Cor. 13.12) Barth reminds us of this:

The truth concerning the limiting and dissolving of men by the unknown God, which breaks forth in the resurrection, is a known truth: this is the tragic factor in the story of the passion of the truth. When our limitation is apprehended, and when He is perceived who, in bounding us, is also the dissolution of our limitation, the most primitive as well as the most highly developed forms of human self-consciousness become repeatedly involved in a 'despairing humiliation', in the 'irony of intelligence' (H. Cohen). We know that God is \textbf{He whom we do not know, and that our ignorance is precisely the problem and the source of our knowledge}.\textsuperscript{7}

The task of theology calls us to meditate on the mystery of God, not in the hopes of unraveling it, but with the desire to serve God and to seek God and God's will for us. As we

\textsuperscript{5} Todd, Douglas.
\textsuperscript{6} Bellah, Robert N.
\textsuperscript{7} Barth, Epistle to the Romans. p. 45. Emphasis added. See also “The Word of God and the Task of Ministry” in The Word of God and the Word of Man.
engage this task, we must remember our own finitude, and that the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of the world (1 Cor. 1.25). In short, we must approach our task with proper humility.

**Modern Protestant Theology and the Early Barth**

Liberal theology, like most branches of theology, is not a monolithic entity, and to present it as such would be a disservice to its rich and diverse history. It is, however, far beyond the scope of this work to offer any sense of a comprehensive survey of liberalism. For the purposes of exploring Barth's position and constructing my own, I will focus on two theological giants of the 19th century: Friedrich Schleiermacher and Adolf von Harnack. Barth remarked that 19th century theology begins with Schleiermacher's *On Religion*, and ends with Harnack's *What is Christianity*?

Schleiermacher's life and work represents an important development in religious thinking. His sensitivity and intelligence caused him difficulty in his early life at the Moravian seminary in Barby. His inability to accept traditional atonement theory added to this difficulty, and earned him the repudiation of his father. In spite of these challenges, Schleiermacher's religious development was shaped by Moravian pietism and devotion to Jesus.

Schleiermacher's work *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* was, as the name implies, apologetic in nature. It was addressed to his non-religious friends, who believed that religion belonged to a bygone and unenlightened time. Yet the religion they rebelled against had nothing to do with Schleiermacher's experience of religious piety. Gary Dorrien writes: “Piety – religious feeling – had sustained him through years of loneliness, religious doubt, and intellectual

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8 Barth, “Evangelical Theology in the 19th Century.” *The Humanity of God.* p. 12-14
confusion, making him capable of friendship and love...

In describing this religious experience, Schleiermacher wrote:

If I might at least compare, since I cannot directly describe it, I would say that it is fleeting and transparent like the vapor dew breathes upon fruits and blossoms, modest and tender like a maiden's kiss, sacred and fruitful like a bride's embrace. In fact, it is all these things. For it is the first encounter of universal life with an individual, though it fills no span of time and fashions nothing palpable. It is the holy wedlock of the universe with incarnate reason, direct, superseding all error and misunderstanding, consumed in a creative embrace.

This pietistic notion of feeling as the sentinel of the religious experience is carried throughout his work. In his later dogmatic volume *The Christian Faith*, he writes: “If the feeling of absolute dependence, expressing itself as consciousness of God, is the highest grade of immediate self-consciousness, it is also an essential element of human nature.” That this piety can and is experienced in other religions, and that they share other similarities to Christianity, renders those other religions at least partly true: “For if the religions belonging to the same age as Christianity were entirely false, how could they have so much similarity to Christianity as to make that classification requisite?” In Schleiermacher's assessment, monotheism in general – and Christianity specifically – remains the highest truth.

There is both value and tension in Schleiermacher. The value of Schleiermacher's pietism recognizes the value of the personal encounter with the Divine, both individually and in community. The tension occurs in Schleiermacher's theology when he elevates the personal encounter, human reason, and human experience above (and, implicitly, against) the Word of God as revealed.

10 Ibid. p. 90.
13 Ibid. p. 33.
14 Ibid. p. 34-38.
Barth writes:

“We study Paul and the reformers, but we see with the eyes of Schleiermacher and think along the same lines as he did. This is true even when we criticize or reject the most important of his theologoumena or even all of him. Wittingly and willingly or not, Schleiermacher's method and presuppositions are the typical ferment in almost all theological work; I need only mention the basic principle which is so much taken for granted that it is seldom stated, that the primary theme of this work, both historically and systematically, is religion, piety, Christian self-consciousness. Who is not at one with Schleiermacher in this regard?”

Schleiermacher is a useful conversation partner, as he apprehends how individuals instinctively, initially approach the Divine. If it weren't for that pietistic experience, it is unlikely many would remain religious. Schleiermacher knew well that there is something in the experience of religion that feeds people, that sustains them in their lives. There is both emotional and social benefit to religion, through the invocation of that feeling and through the experiences of fellowship with others in that context. Schleiermacher's apologetic work might then be understood as an attempt to bring his non-religious friends into that feeling and fellowship that has sustained him in his life.

If Schleiermacher is the theologian of the heart, Adolf von Harnack is the theologian of the head. A student of the Ritschlian School, Harnack focused on Christianity as historical and social-ethical. Ritschl and Harnack both found the value of Christianity in the the historic social-historical movement founded in the teachings of Christ and the beliefs of the early Christ-followers in the Kingdom of God. This is evidenced throughout Harnack's voluminous work, including an extensive multi-volume History of Dogmatics, and other works on patristics.

Yet Harnack's best-known and most-accessible work is a series of introductory lectures entitled Das Wesen des Christentums (The Essence of Christianity), although it was published in

15 Barth, The Theology of Schleiermacher, p. xiii. See also Dorrien, Barthian Revolt, p. 43-44.
English under the title *What is Christianity?*). In this work, Harnack attempts to answer the question solely in history. The question of what is Christianity must be asked anew in the context of the modern world. What can a modern-day person reasonably believe about the gospel message? Harnack observes that “Jesus Christ and his disciples were situated in their day just as we are situated in ours; that is to say, their feelings, their thoughts, their judgments and their efforts were bounded by the horizon and the framework in which their own nation was set and by its condition at the time.”17

Harnack set as his task to strip away from the Gospel that which was no longer relevant, those aspects that do not represent the core timeless truth of the Gospel, and reach that which “under differing historical forms, is of permanent validity.”18 Harnack sought to extract the kernel truth of the gospel from the husk of that which is no longer in line with how we view the world.

For that reason, Harnack is dismissive of miracle accounts. The Gospels were written in a time when “the marvellous may be said to have been something of almost daily occurrence. People felt and saw that they were surrounded by wonders, and not by any means only in the religious sphere.” Living in Harnack's day, with a deeper understanding of science and the “inviolable order of Nature,” we know that “there can be no such things as 'miracles.'”19

In that case, the gospel is primarily about the teachings of Jesus, which Harnack categorizes into three groups: (1) The coming kingdom of God, (2) God as Father and the human soul as of “infinite value,” and (3) “higher righteousness and the commandment of love.” The kingdom of God is understood as a spiritual gift from God, our inner connection with God, and

17 Harnack, loc. 240.
18 Ibid. loc. 251.
19 Ibid. loc. 347-379.
something experienced – the forgiveness of sin and the banishment of misery. Every human being is a child of God, and we are taught to pray to God as “Our Father.” Thus every human soul is of infinite value, and the awareness of that value is realized in the teachings of Christ. Finally, Jesus was more concerned with ethics and the imperative to love than with any self-seeking ritual that interferes with that imperative.  

Harnack's representation of the teachings of Christ are beautifully illuminating, and one that is difficult to fault. A common objection to Harnack's work is that he reduces all of Christianity to the teachings of Christ as expressed in the gospels, and not the teachings about Christ as expressed in both the gospels and the New Testament as a whole. Harnack allows for the possibility of healing “miracles” in some way reflecting events around the life of Jesus, but not for any kind of supernatural intervention as such. “That the earth in its course stood still; that a she-ass spoke- that a storm was quieted by a word, we do not believe, and we shall never again believe; but that the lame walked, the blind saw, and the deaf heard, will not be so summarily dismissed as an illusion.”

Nevertheless, the young Barth took the gospel of historical relativity from Harnack, which was good news to the modern enlightened Christian. One could be Christian without having to be superstitious or believing in a God that is a supernatural being intervening in the world. Barth drew from another of his teachers – Wilhelm Herrmann – an individualistic understanding of faith as the experience of God, “an immediate awareness of the presence and efficacy of the power of life.” In this formulation, Christ becomes one with the faithful through their faith, and there is no distinction between the two. Armed with the historical-critical

20 Ibid. loc. 587ff.
21 Ibid. loc. 381.
Barth's Disenchantment

Barth's liberal education would ultimately leave him deeply disillusioned. He would later remark that “One of the best remedies against liberal theology and other kinds of bad theology is to take them in bucketsful. On the other hand, all attempts to withhold them by strategem or force only causes people to fall for them even more strongly, with a kind of persecution complex.” In 1914, at the start of the First World War, the “Manifesto of the Ninety-Three” was signed by nearly all his theological teachers. Barth failed to understand how liberal theology could claim to be Christian if it could be used as a tool for German nationalism. Four years later, Barth would write:

“The historical-critical method of Biblical investigation has its rightful place: it is concerned with the preparation of the intelligence—and this can never be superfluous. But, were I driven to choose between it and the venerable doctrine of Inspiration, I should without hesitation adopt the latter, which has a broader, deeper and more important justification. The doctrine of Inspiration is concerned with the labour of apprehending, without which no technical equipment, however complete, is of any use whatever. Fortunately, I am not compelled to choose between the two.”

This context of Barth's writing highlights both the limitation and danger of relying *solely* on the historical-critical approach. It was the crisis of that context that caused Barth to reach for the New Testament, and read Paul anew. *The Epistle to the Romans* was the result of that reading. Gary Dorrien observes that Barth's life wasn't “a series of dramatic conversions,” but the story of the evolution of Barth's theology is a much more gradual process. Nonetheless, Barth experienced a crisis and conversion in the reality of the war.

This turn in Barth's theology led him to a harsh critical position on Schleiermacher, even while maintaining the brilliance and importance of his work. Barth would later characterize the problem with Schleiermacher – and 19th century evangelical theology as a whole – was that it made the “guiding principle of theology” the engagement with the contemporary world. By doing so, “theologians had their eyes fixed on the world, and their thinking was necessarily conditioned by this outlook. This engagement became the “decisive and primary concern” of theology. This happened both in apologetics – an endeavor Barth rejected (see below) – and in every other aspect of theology.

This openness to the world meant (1) that through the open windows and doors came so much stimulation for thought and discussion that there was hardly time or love or zeal left for the task to be accomplished within the house itself. With all its energies captivated by the world, 19th-century theology achieved surprisingly little in terms of a new and positive understanding of Christian truth and truths in themselves, a primary necessity at all times. The winds were enthusiastically welcomed and allowed to enter freely through the outside doors. This meant (2) that not a few doors inside were slammed which should have been kept open. … Consequently it was forced to make reductions and oversimplifications, to indulge in forgetfulness and carelessness, when it dealt with the exciting and all-important matters of Christian understanding. … This meant (3) that fatal errors blew in, were admitted, and made themselves home. These errs, far from being simply tolerated, enjoyed birthright, even authority.27

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In “The Word of God and the Task of Ministry,” Barth's asserts that Schleiermacher's writings on religion are not a good example of theology, as he makes salvation a human and not a Divine activity. “The very names Kierkegaard, Luther, Calvin, Paul and Jeremiah suggest what Schleiermacher never possessed, a clear and direct apprehension of the truth that man is made to serve God and not God to serve man.”

In Epistle to the Romans, Schleiermacher's work marks the conscious beginning of the attempt to construct a religion from the Gospel of Christ, and “to set it as one human possibility in the midst of others.” According to Barth, doing this “is the betrayal of Christ.”

Schleiermacher's recognition of the importance of pietism and the feeling of utter dependence has value so long as one doesn't stop there. The situation in Germany during the World Wars highlight the dangers of reducing the Gospel to that feeling. Patriotism and religious piety evoke similar feelings in the believer, and without a critical testing of the spirits to see if they are of God, there is a very real danger of being swept up in the path to death.

In Barth's words, “No tension or polarity is possible between grace and sin; there can be no adjustment or equilibrium or even temporary compromise between them. … [W]e cannot admit or allow grace and sin to be two alternative possibilities or necessities, each with its own rights and properties.” The Gospel is a “shattering disturbance … which brings everything into question.” As such, attempts to “construct a religion out of the Gospel, and to set it as one human possibility in the midst of others” is meaningless. According to Barth, nothing is more meaningless.

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29 Barth, Romans, p. 225.
Schleiermacher's focus in *On Religion* was not so much to defend the Gospel, but to defend religion in general and Christianity in particular. It was not an evangelical endeavor, but an engagement in another kind of apologetics. It was addressed to the “cultured despisers” of religion, offering an account of what religion is, and what benefit it serves to those who live into it. In reading Schleiermacher we find that the religious experience is something so thoroughly *human* it is universal to all humanity. Barth's cutting critique of this conception of Christianity is carried throughout the text of his *Epistle to the Romans*, as he consistently insists that the Gospel is *not* religion, not even Christianity. Søren Kierkegaard's influence on Barth is evidenced here. Quoting Kierkegaard, Barth remarks that when the Christian religion loses its ability to shock and becomes “a direct communication,” it is destroyed. “It then becomes a tiny superficial thing, capable neither of inflicting deep wounds nor of healing them; by discovering an unreal and merely human compassion, it forgets the qualitative distinction between man and God.”

This takes us back to Harnack, and by necessity, beyond him. Harnack's efforts to separate the story of the life of Christ from the teachings of Christ, the former as unaccessible to history and the latter as the real heart of the gospel, did a disservice to the gospel. It is a forgetting of the distinction between humanity and God. There is nothing in Harnack's Christ that is by nature unique to Christ. The Christ we find in Harnack is fully human, not fully divine. Both Barth and Paul Tillich took issue with Harnack on this point.

In his introductory essay to Ludwig Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity*, Barth remarked that Harnack's choice of the same title for his lecture series: “Not only did [Harnack] have to use the title in a totally different sense from that intended by Feuerbach; he had to come to terms with the serious question raised perennially by Feuerbach: whether the theologians of the modern

age are not planning on an undercover apotheosis of man.” Barth is left asking if “theology now, sixty years after the appearance of that book, have taken care in good conscious to get out of its corner?”

### Barth in Dialogue

**Rudolf Bultmann**

Modern liberal theology found new life after the Barthian Revolt in the theology of Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich. Both of these theologians took very different approaches to the task of theology, and took a more critical approach to the earlier liberal tradition. Both had significant engagement and disagreement with Barth's theological project.

For Bultmann, the New Testament offers a “mythical world picture” which is irreconcilable to modern scientific understanding of the world. There is God and angels above us, Satan and demons below us. We mere mortals are not our own masters, but subject to the “supernatural powers” that are able to intervene in the physical world.

To accept this mythological worldview today is impossible. Christians cannot expect modern educated persons to acknowledge such a view as true. Therefore, the task of the Christian theologian is to “demythologize” the message:

What is expressed in myth is the faith that the familiar and disposable world in which we live does not have its ground and aim in itself but that its ground and limit lie beyond all that is familiar and disposable and that this is all constantly threatened and controlled by the the uncanny powers that are its ground and limit. In unity with this myth also gives expression to the knowledge that we are not lords of ourselves, that we are not only dependent within the familiar world but that we are especially dependent on the powers that hold sway beyond all that is familiar, and that it is precisely in dependence on them that we can become free from the familiar powers.

The very nature of the New Testament then demands criticism. It must be subject to the

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33 Bultmann, loc. 181.
demythologizing task, as it is self-contradictory and cannot be reconciled by an arbitrary picking-and-choosing of texts and myths. Bultmann writes:

The New Testament already invites criticism because some of its representations are mutually disharmonious and, in fact, contradictory. Thus, the views of Christ's death as a sacrifice and as a cosmic occurrence or the interpretations of his person as the Messiah and as the second Adam simply stand alongside one another. But there is actual contradiction between representing the kenosis of the preexistent one (Phil. 2:6ff.) and reporting the wonders through which he shows himself to be the Messiah. Likewise, representing Jesus as born of a virgin contradicts the idea of his preexistence. So, too, does faith in creation contradict the notion of the world rulers (1 Cor. 2:6ff.), or “the god of this age” (2 Cor. 4:4), or “the elemental spirits of the world”... (Gal. 4:3); and the view of the law as given by God contradicts the view that it comes from angels (Gal. 3:19-20).  

In many respects, Bultmann echoes a similar position to Harnack. Bultmann characterized Harnack's work as an earlier attempt to demythologize. Both Bultmann and Harnack speak of miracles and the conception of the universe as portrayed in the Bible as a reflection of a prior time lacking the benefit of modern natural sciences. Both seek to get to the core of the Gospel. Bultmann, however, seeks to demythologize without eliminating the mythological representations outright. According to Bultmann, Harnack's stripping of the mythological husk from the kernel of Jesus preaching on the reign of God has reduced the kerygma to “certain basic religious and moral ideas.” Thus Harnack's reading loses the sense that we are “dependent on the powers that hold sway beyond all that is familiar.”

Bultmann's approach is rooted in existentialist philosophy, particularly that of his colleague Martin Heidegger. Bultmann traces through the creation narrative, showing “this world” in tension with the world of God's creation as a consequence of Adam's fall. Through God's grace, sin is forgiven, and the believer's relation to the world has changed. Faith is “the

34 Ibid, loc. 184.
35 Ibid, loc. 211.
attitude of genuine humanity.”\textsuperscript{36} The fruits of the Spirit as offered by Paul is an opening of ourselves for others.\textsuperscript{37}

Bultmann's treatment of the Christ event is remarkable:

It seems clear enough that the point of statements about preexistence or virgin birth is indeed to express the significance of the person of Jesus for faith. What he is for us is not exhausted by, in fact, does not even appear in what he seems to be for ordinary observation. We are not to ask about his historical origin, because his real meaning becomes evident only when this way of asking questions is set aside. We are not to ask for the historical reasons for his story, his cross; the significance of his story lies in what God wants to say through it.\textsuperscript{38}

For Bultmann, the project of demythologizing is about recognizing the significance of Christ without necessarily having to accept the “myths” as true. It does not matter whether Christ was actually raised from the dead, only that the significance of Christ and the way God speaks to us through that story. In fact, the resurrection cannot have a corresponding historical event as such, because that is not the way the natural world works. “The event of Easter as the resurrection of Christ is not a historical event; the only thing that can be comprehended as a historical event is the Easter faith of the first disciples.”\textsuperscript{39}

With regards to this Easter event, Bultmann points out Paul's enumerating eyewitness accounts of the risen Christ (1 Cor. 15.3-8), and argues that Barth claims the real point of Paul's statements wasn't to make the resurrection credible historic event, but only to argue that “he [Paul] proclaims Jesus as the risen one in the same way as the earliest community.”\textsuperscript{40} In this account, Bultmann is overlooking a key point: among those eyewitness accounts is Paul's own account of having seen and experienced the risen Christ. It was this account that led him from

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid, loc. 374.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid, loc. 248ff.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid, loc. 497.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid, loc. 591.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid, loc. 558.
persecuting the Church to becoming an apostle.

In the Preface to the Third Edition of Romans, Barth takes up Bultmann's positive yet critical review of the Second Edition. Barth takes issue that Bultmann is under the impression that critical engagement with this subject must lead to criticism of “some of Paul's opinions, because even he fails at times to retain his grip upon what is, in fact, his subject.” Quoting Bultmann: “Other spirits make themselves heard, as well as the Spirit of Christ.” Barth rejects this, as it seems “impossible to set the Spirit of Christ—the veritable subject-matter of the Epistle—over against other spirits,” by picking-and-choosing some passages to praise, others to deprecate. To do so would be disloyal to Paul, to write a commentary on Paul's Epistle rather than with Paul.41 Barth maintains along with Bultmann that “No human word, no word of Paul, is absolute truth.” Barth argues that we must see the ambiguity in discourse, the uncertainty of Paulinism, and “learn to see beyond Paul.”42

Barth was not any sort of biblical literalist. He acknowledged the presence of myth in the bible, but preferred to refer to the biblical “saga” than “myth.” The biblical witness was a non-historical history, “an intuitive and poetic picture of a pre-historical reality of history which is enacted once and for all within the confines of time and space.”43 Barth's use of “saga” sought to distinguish the biblical myth from monist mythologies found in other religions and philosophies. The mythical elements of the biblical witness were not something that could be readily dismissed from theology. According to Barth, “We have every reason to make use of 'mythical' language in certain connections. And there is no need for us to have a guilty conscience about it, for if we went to extremes in demythologizing, it would be quite impossible

41 Barth, Romans. p. 16-7.
42 Ibid. p. 19.
to bear witness to Jesus Christ at all.”

Paul Tillich

Paul Tillich stands as the 20th century's systematic theologian *par excellence*. His lasting influence in theological circles today is unquestionable, and evidenced by the scholarship surrounding him in the current American Academy of Religion, as well as the continuing popularity of his sermons among both clergy and laity. According to Jonathan Z. Smith: “Tillich remains the unacknowledged theoretician of our entire enterprise.”

Tillich once remarked to one of his classes that the way to become a theologian is to thoroughly learn the best available theological system and turn against it. Perhaps it was this in conjunction with Barth's growing popularity that led him to write “What is Wrong with the 'Dialectic' Theology?” His argument against Barth's “dialectic” theology is that it's not dialectic. “A dialectic is one in which 'yes' and 'no' belong inseparably together. In the so-called 'dialectic' theology they are irreconcilably separated … Rather, it is paradoxical, and therein lies its strength; and it is supernatural, which constitutes its weakness.”

Tillich's account of Barth's theology is fairly accurate, albeit a bit simplistic. “Fundamentally, [Barth's] entire theology is contained in the first commandment, 'I am the Lord thy God; thou shalt not have any other gods beside me.' … Any teaching that draws God into the sphere of human possibility is rebellion against the first commandment.” As an example of the paradoxical, and thus non-dialectical nature of Barth's theology, he quotes Barth's “impossible possibility.” These sorts of statements paradoxical, not dialectical. “They do not yield a process

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45 Smith, Jonathan Z. p. 1139.
47 Tillich, “What's Wrong with the 'Dialectic' Theology?” p 104.
48 Ibid. p. 106.
of thought in which 'yes' and 'no' are mutually involved, but they permit only a constant repetition in other words of the idea expressed in the paradox.” Yet this captures the gulf which separates humankind from God in Barth's theology. Barth is speaking of “the impossible possibility of the New World, of God Himself, of the Unknown God! With men this is impossible: with God it is possible.”

Tillich shares some elements of Barth's criticism of liberalism. “In place of the sinner it substitutes the self-developing personality; in place of Christ, the self-developing religious man Jesus; in place of the word of God in Scripture, the self-development religious consciousness of humanity.” In his Systematic Theology, Tillich writes: “It was the desire of the so-called liberal theology to go behind the biblical records of Jesus as the Christ.” Tillich argues that it is impossible to separate the teachings of Jesus from the message about Jesus as the Christ offered in the New Testament. Harnack was wrong to try to do so, as “there is no substantial difference between the message given by the Synoptic Jesus and the message about Jesus given in Paul's Epistles.”

Tillich rests his disagreement with Barth – and the reason Barth's approach shouldn't be considered dialectical – on the matter of supernaturalism: “The liberal interpretation confuses history of religion with revelation; the supernatural interpretation makes them mutually exclusive; the dialectical interpretation finds in the history of religion answers, mistakes, and questions which lead to the ultimate answer and without which the ultimate answer would have to remain something unasked, unintelligible, and alien.” Tillich characterizes the

49 Ibid, p. 106.
50 Barth, Romans. p. 75.
51 Tillich, “Dialectic' Theology” p. 106.
supranaturalistic\textsuperscript{54} method of theology as taking “the Christian message to be a sum of revealed truths which have fallen into the human situation like strange bodies from a strange world.” In this account, “No mediation to the human situation is possible. … Man must become something else than human in order to receive divinity.”\textsuperscript{55}

In Tillich's system, God is that about which we are ultimately concerned – being-itself, or the Ground of Being. Thus Tillich's God is not a supranatural entity or a being among other beings, not even the greatest of beings. Tillich asserts that God is being-itself or the absolute, which is "the most abstract and unsymbolic statement which is possible," that "nothing else can be said about God as God which is not symbolic;" God "is the structure; that is, he has the power of determining the structure of everything that has being."\textsuperscript{56} If he is correct, the symbolic statements about God provide us with always finite, always limited tools for grasping the meaning and end goal of our existence.

God as Ground of Being renders God close to us – God is Being-Itself, and therefore to speak of God as Wholly Other would make God less than God. The unique character of Christianity is the recognition of the uniqueness of the relation of Jesus as the Christ to God that is not found elsewhere. Yet question of the divinity of Jesus as the Christ is not adequately addressed. For Barth, the idea that the Word could be expressed in religious symbolism or ritual practice was a negation of faith. Dorrien writes:

\begin{quote}
“We do not believe in symbols,” [Barth] admonished. Symbolism is a philosophical means of communication, but Christian theology testifies to what God has done. Theology proclaims and repeats the spoken Word offered to the church. Barth explained: “We are told to testify by our lives, to live within the community of the Church, to take part in the work of proclamation. But who is told to light candles?”
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{54} Tillich uses supranaturalistic and supernaturalistic interchangeably.
\textsuperscript{55} Tillich, \textit{Systematic Theology Vol. 1}, p. 64-5.
\textsuperscript{56} Tillich, \textit{Systematic Theology, Vol. 1}, p. 239.
Paul, if he visited modern churches, undoubtedly would find most worship services uninspiring and barren, “but he would not suggest that we light candles!”

It Tillich’s system, there is space for both the symbolic and ritualistic. We can say that Jesus is the Christ through His unique relationship with the Father. It is somewhat more difficult to say that God became human, “incarnate by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.” On the matter of ritual, it is an interesting phenomenon that Barth turned to the Church fathers for the foundation of his theology, yet not for any guidance with regards to what is often called “practical theology.” I will address this in greater detail below.

Moving Beyond Liberalism and Barth

One of Barth's greatest contributions to theology is that he managed to shift the focus away from anthropology and back towards God. In the modern theological movement, the focus is placed on the human rationalizing of human experience. Whether it is the historicized “kernel” gospel of Harnack or the demythologizing of Bultmann, the focus is on how we as human beings can understand not only what God has revealed to us, but how. The attempt to systematize and rationalize the faith created systems that left little room for either faith or mystery.

In Epistle to the Romans, Barth would echo the sentiment of his teacher, Wilhelm Herrmann, on the task of apologetics. For Herrmann, “Faith is a spiritual gift of God’s Spirit. Herrmann told his students that one would have to be secretly ashamed of the Spirit’s gift to defend it with reasons.”

Barth expressed this in stronger language:

“Anxiety concerning the victory of the Gospel—that is, Christian Apologetics—is meaningless, because the Gospel is the victory by which the world is overcome. By the Gospel the whole concrete world is dissolved and established. It does not require

57 Dorrien, Kantian Reason. p. 513.
Barth was reacting to a Christianity that too easily conformed to the wisdom of the age, and as such was transformed into a vulgar nationalism. In early 20th century Germany especially, the modern theological project tied the cultural advancements of the state and society to the coming Kingdom of God. Germany was a Christian nation, and the advancement of the German empire was the advancement of “rational” Christianity (over and against the less-rational, “paganized” forms, i.e. Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism, etc.). That another form of “paganized” Christianity was able to take root in Germany during the Second World War and the fascist-apologetic German Church further proved the dangers of the Church taking its cues from secular society.

Yet Barth's reaction led him to another extreme: a dualistic conception of the relationship between God and humankind. We ought to speak of God, yet we cannot. God is “Wholly Other.” Revelation is the in-breaking of God at the point of history where eternity meets time, as Jesus the Christ is made incarnate, and thus God is made known to the universe. This is the critical moment of revelation in Christian theology.

The question I must pause at is this: if God is wholly other, what does it mean to say that God is made human in Christ, that “a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel … God with us?” (Matt. 1.23) To answer this too quickly as an expression of God's self-revelatory act in the world seems insufficient. God didn't merely...
appear to the world or make Godself known to the world, but was begotten; the Logos became
the very child of humanity. Barth's focus on God as wholly other evolved somewhat in his later
theology. His treatment of Christology in *Dogmatics in Outline* (1947) focused on the foundation
laid by the Nicene fathers with regard to the Trinity, the mystery of the Incarnation miracle.
About this Barth writes that “We do not want to become anxious, but having gone so far on our
way in comparative peace, we want to approach this section also just as peacefully and
objectively, the section 'conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary'.”60 By contrast,
his treatment in “The Humanity of God,” (1956) focused more on Christ's human nature and
called into question the character of God as “wholly other.” Barth did not change his position as
such, but cautioned against how the conception of God as “wholly other” can turn God into an
abstraction. Now that time has passed since Harnack's approach to the subject, Barth felt not only
free to talk about God's humanity, but found it necessary to do so. Yet he set forth his task as to
derive the humanity of God from the knowledge of God's divinity.61

Barth's dualistic conception of God and humanity poses a problem for the modern-day
theologian, liberal or otherwise. “The Word of God and the Task of Ministry” begins to frame
this problem and offer a solution, but the solution is not entirely satisfactory. According to Barth,
the difficulty of ministry is characterized by the fact that: “As ministers we ought to speak of
God. We are human, however, and so cannot speak of God. We ought therefore to recognize both
our obligation and our inability and by that very recognition give God the glory.” To speak of
God in our inability to speak of God calls us to speak God's word, that God becomes man. The
answer we must give is the answer we can never fully give, but the way forward proposed by

60 Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*. loc. 1682ff (p. 94).
Barth is to rely on the Bible and dogma, to engage in self-criticism, and dialectic.\textsuperscript{62}

His discussion of dogmatism is particularly insightful. He recognizes in orthodoxy a “powerful instinct for what is superfluous and what is indispensable. In this it surpasses many of the schools that oppose it.” Furthermore, he regards the “supernaturalistic” as that word which the minister previously despised but is now “slowly but surely becoming reasonable and purposeful.” Furthermore, orthodoxy's weakness “is not in the supernaturalistic element in the Bible and the dogmas. That is its strength.” (It is as though, in 1922, Barth anticipated Tillich's argument of 1936.) The weakness of orthodoxy is that it regards an “objective description of the element … as the element itself.” Put another way, that which dogma and preaching are to point towards is transformed into idolatry.\textsuperscript{63} One finds this especially prevalent in Christian fundamentalism.

And yet, (and here is where we see the vestiges of Barth's early liberal theology):

We have our myths and accept them pragmatically: a working faith! We have all come upon those places in Luther – in his teaching about the trinity, for instance – where we are simply left standing with instructions to give up thinking, lift our hat, and say Yes. We feel in spite of ourselves that it will not do thus to slay the harlot reason, and we remember with dismay how often we who are not Luther have done so, in public and even more often in private. Why will it not do? Because by this kind of answer a man's question about God is simply quashed. He no longer has a question. In place of the question he has an answer. But as long as he remains a man he cannot let the question go. He himself, as a man, is the question. Any answer would have to assume his nature, and become itself a question. To hold the word “God” or anything else before a man, with the demand that he believe it, is not to speak of God. \textbf{The fact is that a man can not believe what is simply held before him. He can believe nothing that is not both within him and before him. He can not believe what does not reveal itself to him, that has not the power to penetrate to him. God by himself is not God. He might be something else. Only the God who reveals himself is God. The God who becomes man is God.} But the dogmatist does not speak of this God.\textsuperscript{64}

\textsuperscript{62} Barth, \textit{The Word of God and the Word of Man}. p. 186ff.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid, p. 200ff.
In spite of his fairly traditional orthodox approach to dogmatics, Barth was not a positivist. His theological work was firmly rooted in his exegetical work; the latter always preceded the former.\footnote{Dorrien, \textit{Kantian Reason}, p. 516.} Barth could not accept the position of Luther with regards to theological mysteries that degraded reason to the status of a whore. Human nature simply will not stand for it, as evidenced by countless horror stories of authoritarian Sunday school teachers! Humankind is insatiably curious about the meaning of existence. We cannot let our question go, because we are the question! Nor can we accept an answer that isn't both before us and within us! God reveals Godself, yet without humanity there is no revelation, because there would be no one to whom revelation is directed.

Yet humankind's response to revelation is only made possible through the grace of God. When Jesus says that “no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father,” (John 6.65) might this be acknowledging that grace is a gift offered by God? People do not choose God; nor do they choose their beliefs. The freedom of humanity enables a critical engagement with belief, a dialogical engagement with others of similar or different beliefs, and those beliefs can evolve through such critical engagements. The freedom of humanity in the state of our finitude and fallenness means that we are free to live and act in ways that are not authentic to our true selves.

Barth's work is valuable for offering a lucid and holistic account of what constitutes Christian theology, both in terms of method and content. However, not all theology is Christian theology. Our world is religiously pluralistic, and the disciplines of comparative theology and inter-religious dialogue have emerged. The freedom of humanity and diversity of spiritual paradigms creates conditions for conversion experiences, both towards Christ and away from Christ. The Christian theologian has historically operated from the position that Christianity
represents the highest form of religious understanding. This is problematic for several reasons discussed below. Here it remains problematic as it fails to account for conversion away from Christianity, especially when that conversion serves to be more authentic or spiritually-fulfilling for the individual.

Given the exposition up to this point, it may be the case that such a conversion only appears to be more fruitful for the individual. It may actually be harmful to them or to others, as was the case in the German Church which supported the National Socialists, in the People's Temple which led to the Jonestown massacre, in Westboro Baptist Church and other cults of hate masquerading as the Christian church. Yet the examples named here are all in alleged “Christian” contexts. From within the Christian context, here we see why the work of dogmatics matters. Beyond the Christian context, we see both examples of people leading spiritually-fulfilling lives, and people falling.

The Task of Theology: Some Preliminary Thoughts on Ecclesiology

Within the Christian context, all theology is practical theology. Its primary subject must be God, and its primary concern must be the faith of the disciple and the mission of the church. It must not ask how of God, but how we as Christians are to live into that faith and mission. By recognizing that task, both Schleiermacher and Barth set as their tasks dogmatics. Barth characterized theology as a function of the Church: “As a theological discipline dogmatics is the scientific self-examination of the Christian Church with respect to the content of its distinctive talk about God.” However, when a Barth or a Schleiermacher—or even an Aquinas or a Calvin—set upon the task of dogmatics, they are always in a context, and thus in a dialogue with their predecessors and their contemporaries. Thus, no theologian is capable of ever speaking for the

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66 Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/1*, p. 3.
Church as a whole, from the Alpha to the Omega, as though the Church is a static and therefore a 
*dead thing*. The church has never been static nor monolithic. Hegel indirectly touched on this 
problem when he responded to the news of Schleiermacher's intent to publish his dogmatics. 
“Hegel … belonged to the Evangelical Church of the Prussian Union, and he was quite certain 
that Schleiermacher did not speak for him. How did Schleiermacher summon the audacity to 
speak for the church as a whole?”

Even in the narrower context of specific manifestations of 
the church (i.e. denominations), those who represent the church cannot possibly represent the 
whole church.

One of Barth's later speeches can be useful in understanding the proper task of the 
theologian and her relationship with the Church. In “The Gift of Freedom,” a speech delivered in 
1953, he speaks of the “ethos of the free theologian” in which he enumerates the characteristics 
of a theologian operating within the gift of freedom offered by God. First, such a theologian is 
“ready, willing and able always to begin his thinking at *the beginning*. This means his 
recognition of the resurrection of Jesus Christ as the directive for his reasoning.” Second, a free 
theologian starts with the Bible. Third, a free theologian owns her indebtedness “to a particular 
philosophy or ontology, to ways of thought or speech.” Fourth, a free theologian “speaks within 
the Church, within the communion of saints whose ordinary members happen to be not just he 
and his closest theological friends.” Fifth, a free theologian *communicates* with other 
theologians, at the very least by reading and listening to them.

There is an emphasis throughout 
on the theologian in relationship to God revealed in Christ through Scripture in the context of the 
Church and in dialogue with other theologians. The ordering is important; the recognition of the 

resurrection as the “directive for reasoning” is paramount. The primary source text must be the Bible, and the theologian must be aware of the ideological lens she is bringing to her work, as no theologian speaks or writes ex nihilo.

She must speak within the context of the church, to and with “ordinary members.” This is a humbling task, and it must come before engagement with “other theologians.” As I remarked in the introduction, the approach to theology must be done with humility, “with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you.” (Phil 3.12-13) In this regard, lay Christians are sometimes better qualified for the task.

The Failure of Liberal Theology to Become Liberation Theology

Liberation theology has given voice to those who have heretofore been voiceless, a doing away with the separation between the fourth and fifth characteristic of the free theologian. There are many who have historically not been invited to the table. Barth's own chauvinism in the defense of patriarchy is but one example of this. This fatal error of Barth was a consequence of his failure to turn his critical eye away from liberal theology and towards orthodoxy. Liberal theology, with all its shortcomings, at least has the benefit of egalitarianism.

Even with its egalitarian bent, liberal theology is often only as right-minded as the social context in which it finds itself. It stands in the center of society, sometimes slightly to the left, sometimes slightly to the right, but always near the center. It does not offer a solid challenge to the structural forms of society. Liberation theology, on the other hand, recognizes the gospel as good news for the poor, proclaiming liberty to those in captivity. It does this by bringing to the forefront the stories and lived theologies of those who are marginalized and oppressed. It recognizes the systemic nature of oppression, and recognizes in the gospel the call for systematic
change.

The historical-critical approach to the Bible often robbed the gospel of both mystery and resurrection by reducing the resurrection to metaphor. We no longer proclaim that Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again. Christ has died. His spirit lives on in the memory of the Church. The hope for Christ's return is reduced to our work to bring about the Kingdom of God on earth. This is where the tension between liberal theology and liberation theology is found. Liberal theology is done from a place of privilege. It attributes to the Christian the ability to bring about the Kingdom. It elevates the political and social perspective of the liberal Christian to the status of Kingdom. In short, it casts God in our image and the Kingdom in our society's image. By elevating our finitude it replaces the God beyond our comprehension with a no-god. In so doing, it turned the Second Reich into a Holy Empire, and enabled the “Manifesto of the Ninety-three.”

In our day, it orients our churches towards political strategizing in the worst possible sense. It says that the Kingdom will be realized if we manage to welcome all. And in welcoming all, we need to welcome not just everyone, but every ideology! If this Sunday's message is “Black Lives Matter,” next Sunday's must be that “Cops' Lives Matter,” because All Lives Matter. While cops' lives do matter, it is not the cops whose lives are being systematically incarcerated and murdered by the state. By virtue of being cops, they are working for the perpetuation and protection of the institutions that oppress. Yet the church is compelled to say both “Black Lives Matter” and “All Lives Matter” in the same breath, because to neglect to do so would make some (white, more privileged) people feel uncomfortable, and we might lose members. This approach takes the view of Church that it must be resuscitated, and the best way

69 Sadly, this account is based on actual experiences at a two liberal Protestant congregations.
to do that is to both shape secular society and conform to it.

If the Church today may be said to ever have had a prophetic voice, it not only loses it in that moment, it forfeits its claim to discipleship. It has lost any comprehension of what it means to be a follower of Christ, to be in the world but not of the world. It is for this reason that liberal theology can never become liberation theology, because liberal theology is done from the place of privilege, and liberation theology from the place of oppression. It is a place of privilege that has the luxury of apprehending the resurrection as myth and metaphor, and by so doing, negates both the resurrection and the gospel. It is a place of privilege that fails to recognize the power of the resurrection in the lives of the oppressed. It is the place of privilege that sees eschatology as brought about by social activism, working to bring the Kingdom of God, as though it is within our power to do so. It fails to recognize the countless eschatological moments throughout history.

I find it strange that people are so quick to point out that the early Christ movement was apocalyptic in nature, believing that the world was going to end shortly. How quickly we forget that the world of both the Judaic people and the early Christ followers did, in fact, end. The conquest of Jerusalem, the desecration and destruction of the temple in 70 CE, the violent oppression by the Roman Empire, the countless number of people crucified, these were apocalyptic events. The world after trauma is not the same world.

I find it equally strange that, in the midst of such unfathomable trauma, a gospel emerges that proclaims the risen Christ. To proclaim the resurrection in the midst of such suffering seems incredible. This is why I cannot accept resurrection as metaphor: to place oneself within that story and context, to have witnessed crucifixion and decimation to such a degree that one no longer has the strength to weep – and then to hear resurrection as metaphor, as a hope that “it
gets better” in some future time and for some future humanity that will somehow survive this madness, would be to take comfort in an abstraction. If, on the other hand, the gospel message is that Jesus the Christ is Lord – meaning that Caesar is not Lord, and that the power of Rome is undermined because, for all the death and destruction they have inflicted, they do not have *dominion* over life and death, therein lies real hope and comfort.

No discussion of Christian ecclesiology can happen without Christology. Most relevant to this discussion are two points raised in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians: (1.) Church is the Body of Christ in the world; and (2.) that Body is broken. Paul connects the observance of the Lord's Supper to the oneness and brokenness of God and the Church: “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.” (10.17) “[Jesus] broke [the bread] and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’” (11.24) Finally, “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of the one Spirit.” (12.12-3)

The work of Catholic theologian Edward Schillebeeckx can shed some light on this matter. Schillebeeckx believed that the Church as the Body of Christ was, by its existence, a universally saving presence in the world. By carrying the Christian tradition and message in the world, it bridges the gulf “between the past tradition of faith and our existence as Christians now.”

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70 I offer a more detailed account of the Ecclesiology and Christology of Schillebeeckx – and my own thoughts on the application of his theology – in the appendix.
Schillebeeckx writes:

The fundamental identity of meaning between the successive periods of Christian understanding of the offer of revelation is not to be found in corresponding terms (e.g. a parallel between the situation of the Bible and our situation, on the basis of which one could then, for instance, use Jesus' cleansing of the temple to justify the action of squatters in Amsterdam) but on corresponding relationships between all the terms involved (message and situation, then and now). Moreover there is a fundamental unity and identity: this has no relation to the terms of the factors involved, but to the relationship between all these terms.⁷²

Essentially, the relationship between the understanding of the Christian faith then and now is one of equivalent proportions. The understanding of the faith is always in proportion to the broader socio-historical context in which that understanding occurs. Therefore “we never have a direct view of the Christian identity of meaning; … it can never be laid down once and for all.” While it is not an arbitrary identity, it is never complete, but always a proportional identity. Contradictions in the differing interpretations of the one gospel are a consequence of the fact that they “cannot all be harmonized on the same level.”⁷³ Schillebeeckx represents this proportion as a series of equivalent fractions:

\[
\frac{\text{Jesus' Message}}{\text{the socio-historic context of Jesus}} = \frac{\text{the New Testament Message}}{\text{the socio-historic context of the NT}}
\]

This proportion is carried through to the present time:

\[
\frac{\text{the present understanding of faith}}{\text{the present socio-economic context}}
\]

Thus the understanding of faith always exists in a social context. This is not to conflate the Holy Spirit with the Zeitgeist, but to recognize the proclamation of the Gospel is always in a context and outwards towards the world. It must therefore recognize that it speaks to people in the socio-economic context in which it finds itself. Evangelism and theology must use the language

⁷² Ibid. p. 41.
⁷³ Ibid. p. 42.
and concepts of the people.

The Church as the Body of Christ in the world must then establish its message and identity in the context of this world, while maintaining that identity as always always a partial understanding. The proportion is never a whole, because the gospel message and understanding of faith is never identical to the context. Put another way, the gospel message is never the proclamation of the social ethos in which it finds itself. Therefore, when the interior of the church – the congregation of the faithful – begins to resemble society at large, and the proclamation of the church is reduced to merely affirming the values of society at large, the church ceases being Church.

Nonetheless, Schillebeeckx maintains that the Church as the Body of Christ's presence in the world, is a salvific presence for the entire world. Throughout his work, Schillebeeckx maintained the position of universal salvation. The question of human salvation in the next life being definitively settled for him, he was able to focus on this life, and therefore declared that “There is no salvation outside the world.”

That the Church is the Body of Christ in the world is well-established. That the Body of Christ is broken is more than a reflection on the institution of the Lord's Supper, or even a reflection on the crucifixion. It is a reflection of the Church as human. The Church as a human institution stands as the human Body of Christ in the world, freed in the Spirit to live as loving community and witness to the salvific love of God in the world, yet subject to human finitude and human fallibility. The Church as free in the Spirit stands as witness to the workings of that Spirit in the world. The primary workings of the Spirit that the Church witnesses to are those surrounding the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ.
Supernaturalism Revisited

I was once asked, somewhat incredulously, if I really believed in miracles, to which I replied “At least two.” The underlying accusation of the question is that I was superstitious for believing in a supernatural God who intervenes in the world. The liberal Christian approach to Incarnation and Resurrection is to read it as myth, and demythologize it. According to this rationale, we are modern people, and we cannot possibly believe in the resurrection of the body, or virgin birth, nor can we expect others to believe that. Such a belief is inconsistent with what we know through science about how the world functions. Much like exercises in apologetics, this reveals our secret shame in the Gospel as it stands.

Our understanding does not apprehend the omnipotent and omnipresent God, the God Who dwells with us and within us and suffers with us. Since our understanding cannot apprehend God, we are inclined to limit God's power to our understanding. We may rationalize that if something could not have historically happened because it defies the natural order of the universe, it didn't happen.

Demythologizing is another form of apologetics. By attempting to relegate all “supernatural” aspects of the faith to myth, it reduces the faith to something that can be argued for rationally. Yet many of the doctrines of the early Church that have been foundational to our theology do not easily conform to our modes of reason. The term “mystery” may be used in recognition of our inability to apprehend God. It may also be used as a synonym for myth or metaphor. This might explain why neither Schleiermacher nor Harnack nor Bultmann nor Tillich has much of substance or originality to say on the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

The task of demythologizing and the task of apologetics ultimately boils down to the
same thing: *Christian supremacy*. By Christian supremacy, I mean the elevation of the Christian faith above and against other faiths. Feminist theologian Kwok Pui-lan outlines the connection between the historical-critical approach and Western cultural supremacy:

The incursions of Europeans into other parts of the world affected these scholars' conceptualization of both Western civilization and Christianity. The nineteenth-century comparative study of myths and religions proposed an interpretation of 'primitive' peoples as mythical, superstitious and idolatrous. To prove that Christianity was infinitely superior to other religions, all the nonsense of virgin birth, miracles and supernatural happenings surrounding Jesus had to be discarded. This could only be done by a 'critical' or 'scientific' study of the Bible, which would uncover an historical Jesus free of any mythological trappings. The quest for the historical Jesus was far from being value-neutral. The political interests of Europe determined the questions to be asked, the gathering of data, the framework of interpretation and the final outcome.  

Through this lens, Christianity thus becomes the most rational, reasonable, and therefore superior to any religious tradition that clings to outmoded mythologies. The moral teachings of Christ about the kingdom were the core of the Gospel, and can be read in such a way as to reflect the cultural values of Western civilization.

The Church's call to evangelism is incongruous with Christian supremacy. The call to evangelism can be understood as the call to be the Body of Christ in the world, to be Christ's representative in the world. It is the call to live into the Great Commandment: to love God with all one's heart, soul, strength and mind, and to love one's neighbor as oneself. The Gospel message is resurrection and new life. Without incarnation and resurrection, Christ isn't Christ. If the incarnation and resurrection is myth, then the Christ we find in the New Testament is also a myth.

Revisiting Bultmann's attempt then to reconcile Christ's divinity with *kenosis*, we see that it not only robs the Gospel of mystery, but it is the negation of the Gospel itself. It helps to

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74 Kwok, p. 45.
remember that Barth's concept of dialectic isn't dialectic in the Hegelian sense. The mystery of faith cannot be dissolved into a synthesis. One cannot transcend a dogma through its negation. In this regard, Tillich is correct to say that the dialectical theology isn't dialectical. For Barth, since theology was focused on God and oriented around the Church and the content of its talk about God, Barth recognized that Protestant Christian theology could not jump from the New Testament to the Reformation. It had to take seriously the “Catholic” theologians who provided the foundation for theology. At the same time, it cannot get stuck in its earlier manifestations. It must place itself in the socio-economic context in which it finds itself.

Re-imagining the Church by Building Upon the Three-fold Word of God

In the spirit of bringing Barth's doctrine of the Word of God into the present context, I offer the following proposition building upon Barth's dogmatics. Barth begins his *Dogmatics* with the Word of God. For Barth, the Word of God is three-fold: the Word of God as revealed in the person of Jesus the Christ, as written in Holy Scriptures, and as preached. The three-fold nature of the Word of God is analogous to the triune nature of God. Each part is inseparable from the others.  

Barth writes:

The revealed Word of God we know only from the Scripture adopted by Church proclamation or the proclamation of the Church based on Scripture.

The written Word of God we know only through the revelation which fulfills proclamation or through the proclamation fulfilled by revelation.

The preached Word of God we know only through the revelation attested in Scripture or the Scripture which attests revelation.

Barth establishes the foundation of the Word of God in the self-revelation of God through the person of Jesus the Christ. It is witnessed to in the Bible, and proclaimed by the Church in

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75 *Church Dogmatics* I/1 §4. p. 88ff.
76 Ibid. p. 121.
preaching. The basis of scripture is revelation, and the basis of preaching is both scripture and revelation. For Barth, only in preaching is the Word of God ongoing. The Word of God is not ongoing either as revelation, nor as scripture. Thus, Christian preaching is of critical import, as it is how the Word of God is ongoing. According to Dorrien, “The Word becomes present as preaching in the same way that the Holy Spirit makes God present. Just as the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, the Word as preaching proceeds from revelation and scripture.”

This three-fold conception of the Word of God helps illuminate how, in Barth's theology, God can be understood as still speaking today. However, the restrictions placed on the nature of both revelation and scripture require further examination. With regards to revelation, there is a necessity to consider the plausibility and authenticity of reports of prophecy and private revelation. If a Julian of Norwich or a Hildegard of Bingen found herself in the modern church, any pastoral support she would receive would likely be accompanied with a strong suggestion to seek psychiatric treatment. There is little or no room for mysticism in modern Western Christianity, especially in the post-Enlightenment Protestant church.

Other encounters with the Divine that do not conform to the modern Christian understanding of God are often rejected by modern Christians. They are often tolerated when they fall into the context of the established “world religions,” but toleration and acceptance are not the same thing. When these encounters take the form of a “non-traditional,” “alternative,” or “New Age” spiritual framework, there is a tendency of those within more “respected” religions to be dismissive if not outright mocking. Yet, there is much to be said in this regard about those who identify as “spiritual but not religious” (hereafter referred to as SBNR). There has been

77 Dorrien, Kantian Reason. p. 481.
vitriolic reaction by those who identify as religious (myself included) to those who identify themselves as SBNR. Many religious types hear in this identity an implicit judgment of religion, often as outmoded, too judgmental, or too “dogmatic.”

The popularity of such an identity can be attributed to two factors. First, we live in an individualistic capitalist society that monetizes alternative approaches to the spiritual life. People who turn to these alternatives often find something they are able to connect with more directly and authentically. Second, and more importantly, the church has on some level failed in meeting the spiritual needs of those who have sought out those other practices. No institution can be all things to all people, and there is need to acknowledge our own brokenness as the Church. We do a disservice to both the Church and the lived spiritual experiences of others when we belittle the exploration of such alternatives. A classic example of this is the controversial work by United Church of Christ minister Lillian Daniel, entitled *When “Spiritual but Not Religious” is Not Enough: Seeing God in Surprising Places, Even the Church.* This title begs the question—if others are not seeing God in Church, does the fault lie with them or with the Church? Even the phrase “Seeing God” is problematic in this regard. Does anyone “see” God? Scripture gives us mixed answers on this. Johannine texts seem to answer with a resounding “No!” (John 1.18, 1 John 4.12) Yet we read that Jacob saw God face to face and lived (Gen. 32.30), that Abraham had visions of the Lord (Gen. 15.1), and that the Lord spoke to Moses face to face, “as one speaks to a friend.” (Exodus 33.11) Our modern sensibilities will allow is for us to see God in the face of another, and even then, we are speaking in metaphor. Humankind is created in God's image and likeness, and as such may be thought of as “living icons.” Seeing God as such is not acceptable. We might experience God, we might even feel the Spirit of God, or we might “hear” the voice of
God (always qualifying the “hearing” as something mental and not actually auditory, lest we are thought to be crazy).

We need to acknowledge that people who identify as SBNR may be looking for God in these alternatives because they have not experienced God in the Church. If this is the case, then we need to critically examine our own practices as Church, as worship communities and as communities of fellowship, service, and evangelism in the world. With regards to non-traditional spiritual practices, churches in general and ministers especially should create safe spaces for such exploration. To dismiss such practices as superstitious or nonsense is to orient oneself to the same attitude the so-called “New Atheists” take towards all spiritual endeavors, including our own. They are not people we should be emulating in any sense.

With regards to scripture, there are two urgent needs for the Church today. First, there is a need for encouraging the active study of scripture beyond the Sunday lessons. This is the place for the teaching of the historical-critical approach to the Bible, along with post-colonial, empire-critical, and other critical and liberatory approaches to the Bible. The Church should foster a love for scripture by encouraging a deeper engagement and understanding of scripture. Bible studies are not an unusual occurrence in Protestant congregations. However, the presence of good Bible studies that encourage critical thought are not always the standard. Furthermore, public access to translations that do not have a socially-conservative agenda is limited. The most popular mobile bible app (LifeChurch.tv) and website (BibleGateway.com) almost exclusively feature conservative-evangelical translations (KJV, NIV, NASB, etc.). The availability of the New Revised Standard Version on digital devices is very limited, as the National Council of the Churches, which holds the copyright, has not made it easily publicly available. While many

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Mainline Protestant Churches use the NRSV and make copies available for use in the church, they are often not in the form of study bibles.

The second need is to consider the significance of texts that have surfaced in recent archaeological discoveries, especially the one at Nag Hammadi in 1945. These texts have in many cases offered a different perspective on the early Christ movement, and offer new insight into how those movements functioned, and provides a clearer context for the biblical witness. This discovery calls for nothing short of a re-opening of the canonical question. There is a common attitude towards the Bible, even among more modern and educated Christians, to treat the book as something that was handed down from Heaven, when it was in fact the product of much contentious debate, involving questions that were never definitively settled in the Church universal. The traditional Protestant canon of 66 books excludes the Apocrypha, which is considered canonical in the Roman Catholic tradition.

This may seem like a dangerous endeavor, as an opening of the doors to the lost heresies of a bygone time. However, we cannot ignore the chance discovery of these texts, when they by all probability should have been lost to the ages. Because of these two factors, and because I believe in a God that is present and active in this world, I believe God was active in the rediscovery of those works. Furthermore, these texts have spoken to the hearts of many faithful, in some cases re-affirming the more egalitarian convictions the modern Church. A growing number of bible scholars and church leaders have been actively studying these texts. Several of them came together to form the Council for *A New New Testament*, a recently published text that places the newly discovered texts alongside the traditional canonical books of the New Testament. This publication has been critical in my own spiritual and theological development.
Although the nature of what I propose here is different to that which was proposed by liberal theologians, Barth would object to this on similar grounds of his objection to the historical-critical work. That works that were rejected by the Christian patristics should be considered scripture is not a possibility for Barth, as it would open the door for heresy. Yet much of what constitutes acceptable ecclesiastical practice today would once have been considered heretical. Practices such as the ordination of women, the ordination and general acceptance of LGBTQ individuals, the practice of open communion, etc., are all relatively new practices that once would have been considered the work of the Devil, and any “church” that would engage in those practices cannot be of God.

And while we shouldn't get caught up in any apologetic defense, we should be prepared to give an account for the hope we have (1 Peter 3.15), and remember that the call to discipleship is a call to love one another (John 13.34-5), and that by loving one another and acknowledging Jesus as the Christ we witness to the Spirit that is of God (1 John 4). The entirety of the law is summed up in the command to love one's neighbor as oneself (Gal. 5.14). All theology and all ecclesiology must hold itself accountable to this mission – to love God, to witness to and proclaim the gospel, to love others, to serve them in their needs. So long as the church lives into this mission, any fears of straying are unfounded.

Throughout the history of the church, how often have the accusations of heresy been out of a need for control? This seems especially true in the case of any admonishments against women speaking in the assembly (1 Timothy 2.11). Many of these admonishments cannot be defended in either our modern social context or in a holistic approach to scripture. Those points in scripture where the Spirit of the Lord speaks more clearly, more definitively, and perhaps even
more loudly than others. Acknowledging the limitations of the scriptural witness while at the same time remaining faithful to how the text witnesses to God, gives us a way forward.

When doing theology, the danger of getting it “wrong” in the examples cited above wasn't in the misapprehension of God, although that was arguably the case. As finite beings reflecting on the Infinite, all theologies will find some way to misapprehend God. The sometimes lack of humility on the part of the theologian, and the sometimes lack of understanding on the social consequences of those positions, fostered very dangerous formulations like the ones mentioned above.

With regards to proclamation, the Church in the Mainline Protestant tradition has often neglected important, yet difficult, topics that have hurt our understanding of our own nature as human beings. We are often afraid to talk about evil or sin. This is an understandable fear, as discussion of these topics in the context of the history of the Church, and in many conservative evangelical churches today, is often very unhealthy. Yet by avoiding the topic, we are engaged in two very harmful acts: (1.) we are not providing ourselves with opportunities to find healthy ways of having these conversations, and (2.) we are engaged in denial of the reality they express about the human condition, thereby giving them further power over our condition, like allowing a chronic illness to remain undiagnosed and untreated.

The Mainline church seems quick to see social and institutional evil and name it as such; reluctant to see personal sin; and completely averse to acknowledging the reality of spiritual evil. This final point is an important one. We acknowledge the reality of God and the presence of God's Holy Spirit. We acknowledge that not every spirit comes from God (1 John 4.1), *yet we never speak of it.* We've demythologized evil, so that nothing is left, and we are left with evil
incognito, which is able to do more damage to our hearts and minds because we are caught with our guards down. When we are able to recognize and name the influences of spiritual evil, the inexplicable sorrow, depression, rage, confusion, compulsion, etc., that which we experience without any prompting, we may be falling victim to something that isn't internal. If we associate the experience of the presence of God to a positive feeling within ourselves, why should we treat the more painful feelings as either non-spiritual or an indication of the perceived absence of God?

Church proclamation should not merely take place in Christian preaching, although that may be its primary function. It should recognize the value of ritual in worship. It should give God the glory, and engage in those practices that aide in helping the Christian do so. Worship is more than preaching, and God speaks one message in many voices; voices that profess, chant, and sing. In this regard, those within the Church should not be afraid of experimentation.

The most profound experiences of Church I've had of late grew out of such experimentation. Through meditating, reading, chanting, and improvised song, I and a group of other students explored exegesis through creative and non-academic approaches. The two exercises that resonated most with me, and lend themselves to use in worship, were the use of improvisational singing/chanting, and the creation of soundscapes. Improvisational singing starts with a simple baseline melody or chant which the group maintains, onto which the text is read, sung, or chanted in turn. Everyone has a copy of the text, and individuals participate as little or as much as they are moved to do so. The experience is somewhat comparable to a Taizé chant, and harmonies naturally happen in the singing. If someone is “struck” by a word or phrase, they may spontaneously chant or sing the phrase, providing another layer underneath the song. The
group participation somehow forces one to focus on the experience of the text.

The creation of soundscapes is a similar exercise, but more free-form. The text is read beforehand, there is no base melody, and the text is not in front of us while we sing. Someone will get started, usually humming or chanting a note, and from there a “song” is created by spontaneously singing, chanting, speaking, or making other noises. As chaotic as this may seem, the experience itself creates something beautiful in the moment. In this exercise, we would find that we would lose track of time, usually singing and chanting for up to 20 minutes. Many of us experienced a moment of euphoria just after doing this, sometimes breaking out into laughter.

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The Greek word “liturgy” (λειτουργία) literally means “the work of the people.” However, most churches celebrate liturgy in such a way that the people as a whole do little or no work. Participation is both limited and scripted. Most churches have restricted themselves to the liturgical confines of the Revised Common Lectionary, creating a “canon within the canon” of the Bible, and seldom if ever venturing into the more troubling and difficult passages of Scripture. This past semester has shown me the liturgical value of non-canonical texts and free-form worship. I believe it's time to set these scripts aside for the sake of our spiritual well-being.

Revelation and Mystery Revisited

God is present and self-revealing. Yet God's revelation is always a veiling and an unveiling. The secular form and divine content of revelation stand in antithesis to one another. “we really hear the 'God with us' that is spoken to us but we hear it only in the secular form in which it is said to us.' Synthesis of this veiling and unveiling of God, the antithesis of form and
content, cannot be achieved:

To hear the full and true Word of God does not mean perceiving the unity of veiling and unveiling, or form and content, and thus achieving Christian thought by the detour of faith. No, the thinking of faith will always be quite honestly a realistic or idealistic thinking, i.e., a thinking that in and of itself is most unchristian. As such, and without becoming any different in itself and as such, the thinking of faith is justified and sanctified thinking. But justification and sanctification in faith mean justification and sanctification by the object of faith, by God, through the believer, and therefore his thinking, does not cease to be less needy on this account. And since we cannot give ourselves faith, we ourselves cannot fashion the justification and sanctification of our thinking, nor can we make our thinking Christian, nor even affirm that it is so in ourselves or others. We can only believe this as God's grace even in the face of the fact that our thinking either on the one side or the other is confronted by a wall which we can neither overthrow nor make transparent, namely, in face of the fact that considered in and of itself our thinking is irrefutably non-christian. Hence believing means either hearing the divine content of God's Word even though nothing but the secular form is discernible by us or it means hearing the secular form of God's Word even though only its divine content is discernible by us.\footnote{Barth, Church Dogmatics I/1. §5. p. 175-6.}

This is a call to humbly reconnect with the mystery of faith, to see the Christ revealed to us through the practice of exegesis and theology. By reclaiming Christ, we come back to experiencing Christ, to mysticism and mystery and piety rooted in the gospel and experienced by the believer. We come full circle, and return to Schleiermacher with the wisdom of two centuries of experience. We pull Christianity back from the brink of unitarianism, we resuscitate theology after the Death of God and Feuerbach, the logical outcomes of liberal theology.
Conclusion

As I said from the onset, the Church needs resurrection, not resuscitation. The resurrection the Church needs is the resurrection of Christ, for the reasons I've mentioned. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, and the freedom of new life experienced in Christ, constitutes the Gospel. For the Church to omit or downplay any component of that Gospel is to preach another gospel, and thus the Church ceases being Church.

The Church needs to experience its own resurrection. Through resurrection, the Body of Christ is transfigured, and is not always immediately recognizable. The Church may need a second Reformation, a radically transformative event that will find new ways to address the spiritual needs of the people. In this regard, those within the Church should not be afraid of exploration and critical engagement with those both within and outside the Church.

It is difficult to explain in the liberal Protestant context that the God I believe in, the God that sustains my spiritual life, is a God that is present and active in the world. It raises questions about my own capacity to reason, and questions around theodicy and the problem of evil. Looking back at my time at Union Theological Seminary, my engagement with much liberal theology has been apophatic in nature. Delving into various theologies, I find conceptions of God I can never fully accept. I see the God revealed to us in the Gospels, and I see the God of Schleiermacher, the God of Harnack, the God of Tillich. In spite of sharing a common heritage and a common scripture, I must ask if we believe in the same God. They provide a context where they may help shape my own understanding of God, as my own work hopefully does the same for others.
Turning the critical lens back on myself, I must ask of my own theological and spiritual development if I can authentically maintain my own identity as a Christian. If I cannot identify with the God of liberalism or the God of orthodoxy; if, in my commitment to the service of God and to the Church invisible, I find I must distance myself from every church community; if I find myself too superstitious for the liberal church and too heterodox and progressive for the conservative church, in what sense can I call myself a Christian? These are the questions that I must continue to return to in my own faith journey.

There is much work left in developing further the ideas presented here. First, further development of this work would engage in this task of theodicy, not as apologetics, but as a deeper understanding of both God and the call of the Church in the world. Second, it would be beneficial to explore deeper the space for dialogue between Karl Barth and Edward Schillebeeckx. Schillebeeckx's developmental movement went from dogmatics to existential theology and pluralism, while Barth's movement was from liberal theology to dogmatics, and left no space for substantive inter-religious engagement. In the case of Schillebeeckx, there was a radical consistency carried throughout, to the point where the shift in approach from his earlier method to his later works are harmonious, not discordant. To that end, I've included an appendix exploring the development of Schillebeeckx's work.
Schillebeeckx's Early Christology and Ecclesiology

Schillebeeckx's approach to both christology and ecclesiology began “from above,” taking the doctrines and traditions of the Church as *a priori*. As his audience was primarily those within the Roman Church, this approach was the most sensible one. *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter With God* is written as a devotional christology, where Schillebeeckx employs an almost poetic “love language” in his discussion of Christ.

Christ is understood as the “primordial sacrament.” In Christ “there was a visible realization of both sides of faith in the covenant.” Christ was the “perfect human respondent; in the same person there was achieved the perfection both of the divine invitation and of the human response in faith form the man who by his resurrection is the Christ.”

There is in Christ the movement from above, God's redemptive act expressed “Christ's love for [humanity] thus manifests God's love for [humans] by actually bestowing it; it is the redeeming mercy of God … coming to meet us from a human heart.”

In Christ there is also the movement from below, “from the human heart of Jesus, the Son, to the Father.”

In this account, the redemptive mystery of Christ is realized in four phases: (1.) the incarnation of God realized in Christ, (2.) the obedience of Christ on behalf of humankind to the divine will, even to the point of *kenosis*, humiliation, and death (3.) the divine response to this obedience revealed in the resurrection, and (4.) the encounter with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

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79 Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament*. loc. 211.
80 Ibid. loc. 247.
81 Ibid. loc. 254.
The relationship of Christ to both the Church and the world, and the relationship of the Church itself to the world, could be understood as a sacramental universalism. The Church acts *ex officio* in the administration of sacraments.

A sacrament, that is an act of the primordial sacrament which is the Church, is a visible action proceeding from the Church as redemptive institution, an official ecclesial act performed in virtue either of the character of the priesthood or of the characters of baptism or confirmation. … A sacrament is primarily and fundamentally a personal act of Christ himself, which reaches and involves us in the form of an institutional act performed by a person in the Church who, in virtue of a sacramental character, is empowered to do so by Christ himself … 

Christ is understood to be the church, “as invisible communion in grace with the living God … manifest in visible human form.” The Church then *is* the Body of Christ, and the sacraments administered by the Church are outward and visible manifestations of the redemptive grace of God for the whole world.

As the Body of Christ, the salvation of humankind is realized in and through the Church. The unity of humankind is the unity of a community of persons. This community is “the immanent echo in the history of our transcendental community with the living God.” The unity of humankind is therefore willed by God and is nothing less than the communion of saints. This provides the foundation for Schillebeeckx's argument for the doctrine of universal salvation.

The time between Christ's ascension and the *eschaton* is a time in which “there will always be a … difference and dialectical tension between the church and [humankind] (which has in principle (but really) been redeemed).” In the wake of the ascension, Christ dwells in the Church as his body, through the Holy Spirit. “The source of the grace of Christ is not human solidarity in itself but human solidarity with Christ who has, however, disappeared from our

82 Ibid. loc. 263.
83 Ibid. loc. 211.
empirical horizon since his death, but who wishes to remain present among us post-paschally, by virtue of the Spirit of God, in his body, the church.”

The definition of church in Schillebeeckx's early work is a subtle one. It is “the triumphant grace of Christ the Lord visible present among us. Wherever this grace becomes visible among us in any way, we are confronted with the presence of the church.” The church, therefore, is present wherever one encounters the salvific grace of God becoming visible. Given Schillebeeckx's very broad understanding of sacrament as found in the opening pages of Christ the Sacrament, I suspect that his early universalism informed his later pluralism. This seems particularly evident when he writes that “the distance between church and [humankind] … [is weakened] – the church is … actively present even where she is not visibly present in her full ecclesial form.”

**Schillebeeckx's Later Christology and Ecclesiology**

The later works of Schillebeeckx represent a more phenomenological, historical-critical approach to the experience of God through Christ and the Church. There is a shift in the focus of his christology from the “redemptive mystery” to the Christian experience of Christ as salvation. While the early Schillebeeckx utilizes a “christology from above,” taking as its starting point the doctrines of Trinity, incarnation, and the dual nature of Christ, his later work begins with the phenomenon of religious experience. Christian theology must draw from two sources: “tradition of the experience of the great Jewish-Christian movement, and … the contemporary, new human experiences of both Christians and non-Christians.”

The priority given to human experience is critical, because “there is no revelation without

85 Ibid. p. 119ff.
86 Ibid. p. 140.
87 Ibid. p. 125.
experience.” The experience of the disciples' faith in Jesus is not what makes Jesus God's decisive revelation, yet that experience “is an essential part of the concept of revelation.” Put another way, without that experience, there is no revelation. Revelation as such is not merely God's initiative. Since it must be received, the experience of the faithful is a critical component. “The self-revelation of God does not manifest itself from our experiences but in them. … In the experience of a response in faith, being addressed by God becomes infinitely transparent, albeit in terms of our humanity.”

Schillebeeckx affirms that “Belief in God is impossible without belief in humanity.” Belief in Jesus as God's definitive salvation is a witnessing to “a God who takes the side of humanity, unconditionally and without our deserving it...”

The shift from doctrine to experience is evident in Schillebeeckx’s later ecclesiology as well. The Christ-movement, started by Jesus and continued through the disciples throughout history, becomes the primary focus. Here, he still makes the case for universal salvation through his engagement with Scripture. However, in his later work he is more engaged with the socio-historical dimensions of the church as well as the theological. This approach may be seen as a concretization of his earlier work.

The New Testament bears witness to the “normative or essential relationship” of Jesus to the Reign of God for all humankind. This witness is constituted in confessional language or statements of faith. The language is an expression of devotion, but is not merely hyperbolic “love language,” or the expression of dedication to a loved one. In the case of the Christian, “in Jesus of Nazareth God has revealed [God's self] in such a form as to manifest [God's] will for the salvation of all humankind in a decisive and definitive way.”

89 Ibid. p. 12-3.
90 Ibid. p. 25ff.
91 Schillebeeckx, Church: The Human Story of God. p. 144-5.
92 Ibid.
While the early work focused nearly exclusively on Biblical witness and the Church operating in the world today, here he traces through the early church, up to and including the Jewish roots of Christianity, understood in Jesus' own identity as a Jew. Through reflecting on Paul's mission to the Gentiles, Schillebeeckx deals also with the development and evolution of Church authority, “The authoritative models for Christian behavior are said in [Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians] to be Christ, the apostles and other groups of Christians.”

The Harmony of the Early and Late Schillebeeckx – and the Future of the Church

There is still the relational, covenantal elements that comprised his early christology, as well as creedal doctrine that underlies his work. The early and later approaches are perhaps best held together as harmony; the former being devotional and the latter guiding us on the journey of human experience of faith in the secular world. The same seems true of his ecclesiology. The church remains the Body of Christ, the visible presence of God's grace in the world. Yet the focus shifts from the underlying doctrine to the lived experience of the believer and the interpretation of those experiences throughout the history of the Church.

Thinking of the body of Schillebeeckx's work as a harmony can help us to see both the beauty of the tradition and how the church relates to the broader world. The account of the human experiences of faith provides a common language for speaking about faith in the secular and pluralistic world. Yet this later account doesn't supersede the earlier work. If, for example, I wished to share an understanding of my faith with someone who isn't theistic, my approach may be informed by the experiential account of faith in Church. However, if I wanted to share the poetic beauty of the tradition, with either a former Christian or a recent convert, I would be more

93 Ibid.
94 Schillebeeckx, Church with a Human Face. p. 53.
likely to share *Christ the Sacrament*.

Schillebeeckx's combination of universalism and experience shows Christianity to be universally accessible. This approach recasts the task of evangelism from a focus on fear of damnation and the need for redemption to a more historically-grounded understanding of a desire to share the gospel or good news of Christ. The focus shifts from salvation from hell in the next world to salvation in this world. For Schillebeeckx, “there is no salvation outside the world.” The task of the Christian Church is to continue to work in the hope of the Reign of God being realized on earth.

Church, then, might be understood as that which shares and continues the tradition in the context of the current age, while *ministering to the current age*. Church leaders must recognize that the needs of humanity are often going unmet in our churches. The question for today, then, is: *How is Christ calling us to minister to the world today?* Without engaging with the experiences of the faithful and of the secular, the spiritual-but-not-religious, the pagan, etc., church will become irrelevant.

Finally, the church is not the Reign of God itself, but the witness to that reign. The church, “in its praxis effectively anticipates the kingdom. It does so by doing for men and women here and now, in new situations … what Jesus did in his time: raising them up for the coming of the kingdom of God, opening up communication among them, caring for the poor and outcast, establishing communal ties with the household of faith and serving all men and women in solidarity.”

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APPENDIX II
“APOLOGETIC” AFTERWORD

This project was originally conceived at a very different moment in my life. When I settled upon this topic, it was with the intention of continuing on for a doctorate in theology. Since then, I've experienced a rather sudden shift in my calling and my spiritual life, and the ground of my previous theological understanding seems to have dissolved beneath my feet. I've endeavored to the best of my ability to provide an authentic account of my theological beliefs, in spite of the transition.

I still believe in That Which Is Greater Than Myself. I still believe in the Divine I've encountered in Scripture and elsewhere. I still believe that theology is a worthwhile endeavor, when the question-mark of the Gospel is held up against any truth it professes. For the reasons I've alluded to here, and for other reasons, I still maintain that I must ask myself if I can still authentically self-identify as Christian.

I am aware of the sometimes harsh and sometimes underdeveloped nature of my critique of the Church as it stands today. There is much more work to do along these lines. At this point, I can only conclude with a prayer attributed to Martin Luther. Whether or not he actually said it is irrelevant; they will forever remain his words: Hier stehe ich, ich kann nicht anders, Gott helfe mir, Amen!
Bibliography


