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Karl Barth's ecclesiology reconsidered

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Abstract

The essay begins by noting some of the things Karl Barth might have said to defend himself against Stanley Hauerwas's criticisms, in the otherwise largely appreciative discussion in *With the Grain of the Universe*, of Barth's anthropology and pneumatology and the consequent problems in his ecclesiology. I then discuss some issues that Barth himself might have wanted to raise with regard to Hauerwas's own ecclesiology, especially in reference to its comparative lack of emphasis upon divine action and the difference that makes to an account of the church's witness. I argue that Barth and Hauerwas differ to some degree in their understanding of the gospel and of Christianity, with Hauerwas emphasizing rather more than Barth the necessity and centrality of the church's work in the economy of salvation. Barth, on the other hand, sees the need rather more than Hauerwas of situating the church's activity within a well-rounded account of the work of the Word and the Spirit. I offer some concluding remarks to suggest that this particular aspect of Barth's ecclesiology is worth preserving as an effective way of responding to modernity.

In his Gifford lectures, entitled *With the Grain of the Universe*,[1] Stanley Hauerwas presents a wonderfully nuanced and largely favorable picture of Barth's ecclesiology. He contends that he and Barth reject modern forms of natural theology because they are both convinced that 'to understand what the church believes is to know what the world is like if these beliefs are true' (*WGU*, p. 214). Barth knows that 'the only truthful way to make Christianity attractive is through witness' (*WGU*, p. 215). He and Hauerwas agree, then, that witness is the primary function of the church.

As he develops his own constructive proposal, however, Hauerwas makes some significant criticisms of Barth. Barth's ecclesiology, it seems, does not consistently follow through the logic of Christian witness. 'It remains an open question whether or not Barth's ecclesiology is sufficient to sustain the witness that he thought was intrinsic to Christianity' (*WGU*, p. 39). Barth 'does not deny that the church is constituted by the proclamation of the

[1] Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology, Being the Gifford Lectures Delivered at the University of St. Andrews in 2001* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2001). Cited henceforth in parentheses in the text as *WGU*.

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gospel. What Barth cannot acknowledge is that the community called the church is constitutive of the gospel proclamation' (*WGU*, p. 145). Moreover, it is not simply the church as such that is constitutive, but the church as a 'configuration of human practices', as a community the shape of which makes a difference to its task (*WGU*, p. 192). For the concrete church, Hauerwas insists, citing Joseph Mangina, is 'the binding medium in which faith takes place' (*WGU*, p. 145).[2]

Hauerwas argues that the problem with Barth's ecclesiology can be traced to his inadequate theological anthropology and pneumatology, and, more specifically, to his conception of human action and divine action and the relation between the two. The set of practices that constitute the church is essential for our knowledge of the world, for how we should live, and thus for our witness. The trouble with Barth is that he cannot say how this is so (*WGU*, p. 193). He 'never quite brings himself to explain how our human agency is involved in the Spirit's work' (*WGU*, p. 145). In consequence, Barth has 'an overly cautious account of the role of the church in the economy of God's salvation' (*WGU*, p. 202). He found it 'difficult' 'to acknowledge that, through the work of the Holy Spirit, we are made part of God's care of the world through the church' (*WGU*, p. 145).

Hauerwas's own proposal, as I understand it, replaces liberal apologetics with a post-liberal form of ecclesiological apologetics. He argues that the role of Christians is to show that what they proclaim is true (*WGU*, p. 214). Christianity is a 'habitable world' – a livable configuration of practices and doctrines – that should be 'exemplified in the life of the Christian community' (*WGU*, p. 214). Does this mean that 'the truth of Christian convictions depend[s] upon the faithfulness of the church'? The answer is a forceful affirmative (*WGU*, p. 231), though in a more recent piece Hauerwas indicates that he does not mean that the truth of our claims stands or falls with our faithfulness, such that if we were unfaithful our claims would be proven false.[3] Rather, because Christians claim that Christianity can be lived, and lived well, the church must show that it is able to produce faithful Christians. 'Christianity is unintelligible without witnesses, that is, without people whose practices exhibit their committed assent to a particular way of structuring the whole' (*WGU*, p. 214). He gives three examples of faithfulness

[2] Mangina's phrase is from his 'Bearing the Marks of Jesus: The Church in the Economy of Salvation in Barth and Hauerwas', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 52/3 (1999), pp. 294–5.

[3] See Hauerwas's 'Hooks: Random Thoughts by Way of a Response to Griffiths and Ochs', a reply to a review of the lectures by Paul Griffiths entitled 'Witness and Conviction in *With the Grain of the Universe*', both in *Modern Theology* 19/1 (Jan. 2003), pp. 89–101, 67–75 respectively. The clarification is made on pp. 91f.

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and habitability: Pope John Paul II, John Howard Yoder and Dorothy Day. Each shows that the church is not just an ideal but 'an undeniable reality' (*WGU*, p. 230). The church's faithfulness is reflected in their lives, for it is the church's configuration of practices that produces them.

In my view, Hauerwas and those who raise similar concerns about Barth have not necessarily misread or misunderstood Barth, or if they have, that is not the most interesting issue between them.[4] Rather, they disagree with him in significant ways, and any misreading of Barth on their part seems to be more of a consequence than the premise of their disagreement. Furthermore, as I will argue here, Hauerwas and other critics disagree with Barth as fundamentally over the doctrine of the church as they disagree with his anthropology and pneumatology. That is, their disagreement over the church is 'fundamental' in the logical sense that their disagreement over anthropology and pneumatology need not be the basis of their disagreement over the church. Indeed, it may be that their disagreement over the latter is the basis of their disagreement over the former.[5]

Putting the matter a bit more concretely: Hauerwas exemplifies, in his own distinctive way, an increasingly dominant trend in contemporary ecclesiology, one that may be characterized as a move away from the kind of ecclesiology which Barth exemplifies, in his own distinctive way. The divergence can be described in terms of different answers to three questions: first, how should we construe what is sometimes called 'the Christian thing', or what is the fundamental meaning of the gospel? Second, which agents in the church should be the focus of our attention? And third, where should we place the doctrine of the church in relation to the other doctrines of Christian theology? These questions can be stated more briefly, with apologies to Alasdair MacIntyre: Which Christianity? Whose church? Where ecclesiology?[6]

One might argue, with some justification in some cases, that different responses to these questions are more a matter of emphasis than substantive disagreement. I argue here, though, that the disagreement between Barth

[4] Besides Mangina, perhaps the most influential recent challenge comes from Reinhard Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice*, trans. Doug Stott (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000).

[5] To be sure, any theological *locus* may be used to warrant proposals in another, so the question of what is most basic may be as irresolvable as the conundrum of the chicken and the egg. My point is that even if one modified Barth's anthropology and pneumatology so that they became consistent with Hauerwas's, it might still be possible to maintain a similar difference in ecclesiology.

[6] I refer, of course, to the often appropriated formula of the title of MacIntyre's *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1988).

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and Hauerwas, at least,[7] is more than a matter of emphasis, though I confess I am not sure quite how much more. I begin by noting some of the things Barth has written that address Hauerwas's criticisms. The aim, though, is not to defend Barth so much as to see how he answers the three questions. I then raise some concerns Barth might have had about Hauerwas's own proposals insofar as they reflect the latter's answers to these questions.

According to Barth, 'the catholic, the ecumenical, the universal church [is] a community which is destined to be a shining light to the whole cosmos, knowing what the world does not know, and looking forward to the culminating revelation of the king and therefore to the end of all his ways' (*CD* 3/3, p. 181).[8] This might suggest that, other than waiting, the church's 'ways' are limited to merely knowing the way things really are and leaving everything else up to God, whose 'ways' alone achieve everything. And indeed, Barth comes close to saying something like that at times (e.g. *CD* 4/1, p. 727). But the key word here, 'knowledge', is heavily freighted for Barth, for whom it necessarily involves acknowledgement, confession, and therefore obedient action (*CD* 4/1, pp. 765f.), action in contrast to 'ignorance', which is active or passive rejection of God (*ChrL*, pp. 136, 146). It is Christian 'knowledge', in this sense, that is the basis of what he calls the church's 'active function' in the economy of salvation (*CD* 3/3, p. 64).

The condition of the possibility of our active function, of our 'hallowing of God's name' (*ChrL*, p. 146), by our 'knowledge' in this active sense, is grace. Through the 'gifts and operation of the Holy Spirit' (*CD* 3/3, p. 261) our 'direct participation in Jesus Christ' (*CD* 3/3, p. 257) is brought about so that we live within the life of God (cf. *CD* 4/1, p. 15; 3/3, p. 8), as Barth says, sounding for all the world like Thomas Aquinas. I become a 'friend of God' (*CD* 3/3, p. 286) only in Christ, and therefore only as I am called into his body (*CD* 3/3, p. 287; 4/3, p. 681), so there can be 'no legitimate private Christianity' (*CD* 4/1, p. 689). The church is thus constituted by the work of the Word and the Holy Spirit. It is the 'earthly-historical form of existence of Jesus Christ himself' (*CD* 4/3:2, p. 661), without whom it would be merely a 'dead body', merely a natural society (*CD* 4/1, p. 664). And it is 'the historical form of the work of the Holy Spirit', too, and as such, and only as such, is it 'the historical form of the faith' (*CD* 2/1, p.160).

[7] Others include Hütter (see n. 4 above), whose focus on Barth's perceived pneumatological inadequacies masks, in my view, a more fundamental and perhaps more significant disagreement over the doctrine of the church.

[8] References in parentheses are to the *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936–77) as *CD* and to *The Christian Life. Church Dogmatics IV.4: Lecture Fragments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981) as *ChrL*.

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If we take into account the effect of grace – of God's action upon our action – then in spite of the feebleness of our efforts, we can say that the church and its membership actually 'co-operate' with the 'divine work' (*CD* 3/3, pp. 92, 254), and join God as God's 'partners' (*CD* 3/3, p. 280). Our partnership is confirmed by the gospels' descriptions of Jesus Christ, according to which the appointment, calling and commissioning or sending of the apostles is integral to the identity of Jesus Christ himself as narrated in the Gospels.[9] The relation between Christ and the apostles is thus the Gospel narrative version of the Pauline concept of the body of Christ. And while Barth rules out any notion of a continuing incarnation in the church, the church's action is not to be understood merely as a response to a 'legacy or endowment' set up by Jesus 2,000 years ago. It is a genuine and ongoing history of action in and for the world 'in correspondence' to Christ's own 'hidden being' (*CD* 4/2, p. 696).

The church's partnership with God takes form in faith, obedience and prayer. 'By the Spirit of his Word' God calls us 'to faith in him, and by faith to obedience to him' (*CD* 3/3, p. 271). The fundamental practice of the church is invocation, 'calling upon God' in 'gratitude, praise and above all petition' (*ChrL*, p. 43). Our prayer establishes in us the fundamental Christian disposition, for prayer, especially the Lord's Prayer, teaches us what 'we have to know about shaping our lives as Christians' (*ChrL*, p. 44). Indeed, the Christian life is concretely 'a life in the vocative' (*ChrL*, p. 54). Invocation informs the foundation of the Christian life in baptism and our life's renewal in the eucharist, where we are sustained in fellowship with God (*ChrL*, p. 45). Our 'schooling in active righteousness' is achieved by means of these and other practices, principles and institutions. Twelve such practices or tasks are discussed in *CD* 4/3 (pp. 865ff.), among which, not incidentally, is number nine, 'the production and existence of definite personal examples of Christian life and action' (*CD* 4/3, p. 887), of 'special Christians' (*CD* 4/3, p. 889). Through the church, then, which, though more than a school, is indeed a school (*CD* 4/3, p. 870), we are taught to 'accustom' ourselves to obedience (*CD* 3/3, p. 257), to 'the doing of the Word of God' (*CD* 3/3, p. 253), and are sanctified.

Sanctification Barth defines in one place as 'the separation, claiming, commandeering and preparation of a people' in view of the 'higher purpose destined for them' (*ChrL*, p. 157). The Word 'induces' our obedience by the Spirit and the 'Spirit rules the Christian, in a conflict in which the Christian's own spirit must always give in and be beaten' (*CD* 3/3, p. 255).

[9] David Demson, *Hans Frei and Karl Barth: Different Ways of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), p. ix. See *CD* 4/2, pp. 131–54 and 4/2, pp. 250–64.

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Christian obedience is necessarily 'the submission of the individual Christian, as a member, to the directions given by Jesus Christ to his community' (*CD* 3/3, p. 256). In and through our obedient and grateful activity, we are drawn further into the body of Christ so as to participate not only in Christ's prophetic office, as we do by our witness, but also in 'his high priestly office and work' (*CD* 3/3, p. 279). We join in Christ's prayer and give 'voice and expression to the groaning of creation' (*CD* 3/3, p. 279). We participate as genuine and free subjects in God's providential rule, acquiring a 'share in the universal lordship of God' (*CD* 3/3, p. 285), 'living and ruling and reigning with him' (*CD* 3/3, p. 286), so that God's lordship is 'actualized' not only in heaven but also here and now, in 'the attitude of the Christian' (*CD* 3/3, p. 285). Barth is not talking about an occasionally realized ideal here, a kind of punctilear obedience. We really are obedient, if only a little bit (*CD* 3/3, p. 258), and only a little bit is enough. So 'in faith' one can see in the church's 'history something persistent and persisting – a continuity' (*CD* 3/3, p. 208; see 4/1, p. 691).

Occasionally, Barth puts the church's function within the economy of salvation remarkably forcefully, as for example when he says that our conduct as Christians justifies 'the decision which was made in the death of Jesus Christ' (*CD* 3/3, p. 256). It is in our sanctification that 'the divine majesty, truth and power' of God's command are 'revealed' (*CD* 3/4, p. 5). We present to the world 'a modest but clear analogue' to God's actions (*ChrL*, p. 173) and so participate actively in the hallowing of God's name (*ChrL*, p. 170).

Our active cooperation with God's redemptive work clearly depends upon the prevenient and accompanying action of the Holy Spirit. Barth's pneumatology is less exhaustively elaborated than his Christology, in part because of his concern to counter what he called the 'massive theological structures' of the modern period (*CD* 4/1, p. 740). By their confusion of Christian faith with those aspects of Christianity which can be talked about non-theologically, apart from language drawn from the scriptural witness to Jesus Christ, and thus apart from talk of divine action, these 'structures' more or less reduce the Spirit to a function of human religious consciousness (*CD* 4/1, pp. 741f.). In direct and forceful contrast, Barth's doctrine of the Holy Spirit and its role in the church is governed by the principle that if the Spirit is described as bound to created things it cannot be divine – it must be only a created spirit. 'The Holy Spirit is holy in the fact that he does not come from us but to us, and that he does not come to us from our own environment but from above' (*CD* 3/3, p. 264). The role of the Spirit is thus 'to bring and to hold together that which is different' (*CD* 4/3, p. 761). The Spirit is free, 'moving where he himself will, demanding of each individual his own individual obedience, demanding of each individual an obedience

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which is always new, and leading the community as such into new situations and laying upon it new tasks' (*CD* 3/3, p. 255).[10]

Thus although the church remains under the 'special care of [God's] free grace', grace has not been committed 'into the hand of his community' (*CD* 4/1, p. 694). To be sure, the church is to teach us and direct our thought and action, and it is the task of special ethics to point out 'certain lines' and 'directives' that the church must instill in us (*ChrL*, p. 7). But neither the Word nor the Spirit is bound to the church (*CD* 4/3, p. 790); the church, and thus the Christian, are bound to them. On this account of Christian obedience, then, while it is true that we are schooled in obedience by means of the rules, principles and practices established by the church, these cannot themselves be 'the Holy Spirit in the Word of God' (*CD* 3/3, p. 257). It would thus be a 'terrible misunderstanding' of Christianity if the 'Christian ethos' – the configuration of social practices and beliefs – became 'an end in itself' (*ChrL*, p. 96). That would be to fail to understand that Christians are not guaranteed to be truly such by their baptism, nor by the display of certain behavior patterns that are more or less distinctively Christian, nor even by their distinctively Christian intentions. They are true Christians if and only if they are 'elected by the Lord, called by his Word and constituted by his Spirit' (*CD* 4/1, p. 696).

So although Barth might agree that there is a sense in which we 'show' the truth in our witness, what we show is God justifying God's actions in Christ by sanctifying us in the Spirit. This is substantially different from producing people whose success as Christians demonstrates the habitability of the Christian way of life. Nothing much, Barth says, can be shown from 'the soundness of the majority of Christians, or from particularly Christ-like personalities, or from the dogmas and institutions of Christianity, or from the Christian cultus'. Such things are only 'equivocal' (*CD* 3/3, p. 208). To focus on them is to misplace the center of theology and the heart of the gospel, which is 'the activity of God to and in and of Jesus Christ' (*CD* 3/3, p. 185). Accordingly, the witness of the church is truthful witness just to the extent that it points to the truth that is not itself, or not in the first place at least. Christians are to live 'ec-centrically' (*ChrL*, p. 94), looking beyond themselves (*CD* 4/3, p. 854). The church is ec-centric, too, in that it 'exists for the world' (*CD* 4/3, p. 768) in visible form (*CD* 4/3, p. 772).

[10] Gene Rogers draws upon Florensky and others to suggest that criticisms of Barth for not sufficiently developing his doctrine of the Holy Spirit may ride on a (mistaken) desire to know too much about the Spirit. See Eugene F. Rogers, Jr, 'The Mystery of the Spirit. Three Traditions: Calvin, Rahner, Florensky, or, You *Keep* Wondering Where the Spirit Went', *Modern Theology* 19/2 (2003), pp. 243–60.

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It is centrally important for world history, but it is not itself the center. Its 'existence is not an end in itself' (*CD* 3/3, p. 196).

Which Christianity? Whose church? Where ecclesiology? Evidently, for Barth, these questions are logically linked. The answer to the first restricts the range of answers to the second, and both do likewise for the third. Barth understands the gospel to be 'the good, glad tidings of Jesus Christ', 'the unconditional Yes of the eternal goodness of God' (*CD* 4/3, pp. 800, 805). Christianity is thus fundamentally about God's actions for us in Word and Spirit. Only consequently is it about our necessary response and 'co-operation' as God's 'partners'. It follows that the answer to 'Whose church?' is that it is God's church, the work of Word and Spirit; all else is secondary, though indeed vital, both consequently and in itself. The church is primarily constituted by God's actions, through which our actions are also enabled to be constitutive at their level. The church 'exists for the world' (*CD* 4/3, p. 787), its task to witness there to the 'great Yes' achieved in Jesus Christ (*CD* 4/3, p. 800).

The placement of ecclesiology within theological inquiry – the 'Where ecclesiology?' issue – should therefore parallel the logical and structural form of theological ethics. 'General ethics' comes first as a discussion of how God's action makes possible our own action. Only then, in a 'special ethics', does one consider the general lines and directives of our action as such.[11] In ecclesiology, similarly, first must come what, just to make the point, can be called the 'general ecclesiology', that is, those aspects of the doctrines of the trinity, creation and Christology and pneumatology which are the condition of the possibility for the being-in-action of the church. Only then comes the 'special ecclesiology', the discussion of our ecclesial life and action that is logically and materially consequent upon the central doctrines.[12]

When viewed in light of his answers to the three questions, I would want to say that Barth has at least an adequate notion of the way Christians are enabled by grace to 'see things differently in practice, and participate in world history very differently in [both] attitude and action' (*CD* 4/3, p. 716). Our participation in Christ's body and God's work is by faith and prayerful obedience as these are embodied in the many practices and institutions of the church, including church theology.

However, Hauerwas and other critics know the material I've just traversed, and evidently Barth does not go far enough for them. They may or may not

[11] See, e.g., *CD* 3/4, pp. 3–32.

[12] Barth himself, of course, does not explicitly draw the analogy between ecclesiology and the two forms of ethics.

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be right in their criticisms of Barth's anthropology and pneumatology.[13] But ecclesiology is the primary issue here, not these other doctrines. And my aim, to repeat, is not to defend Barth or to decide whether or where Barth gets his anthropology or pneumatology wrong; it is to see where he and his critics diverge in their answers to the three ecclesiological questions. So now I turn the tables a bit and consider from Barth's perspective Hauerwas's response to the same questions.

One gets the impression from *With the Grain of the Universe* as well as from his other writings that for Hauerwas, Christianity is fundamentally about living within a particular narrative, about being trained and formed so that one acquires Christian dispositions and thus a character that conforms to that narrative, all with a view to embodying the politics of Jesus, a politics that counters the liberal democratic politics of the USA.[14] Hauerwas focuses his attention on the concrete church because it is there that the gospel is displayed in the lives of Christians. The church is discussed in terms of its practices and doctrines, in terms, that is, of human action and thought. And the church is at the center of Hauerwas's theology. He spends far less time on the doctrines of the Word and the Spirit that make our witness and politics possible, though, to be sure, it is always clear that the person and work of Jesus Christ and the activity of the Holy Spirit are presupposed.

This (relative) lack of attention to God's action in our midst might well have been something that Barth would have brought up in his response to Hauerwas. For as Barth understood the matter, a Christian theological description of anything requires at some point a well-rounded account of the difference the activity of God makes, in both Word and Spirit. Hauerwas's appropriation of social philosophies like those of Wittgenstein and MacIntyre over against Kant and his theological followers has been extraordinarily fruitful, making his work a truly prophetic force within the contemporary church. I suspect, though, that while Barth might have approved, he would say that the difference God makes to the church needs to be made clearer. It remains unclear what difference the Word and the Spirit's active presence might make to descriptions of the church's being

[13] I made similar criticisms myself in my 'The Logic of Karl Barth's Ecclesiology', *Modern Theology* 10/1 (1994), pp. 253–70. I am less sure now, and understand more clearly Barth's ecclesiological strengths; hence the 'reconsidered' in the title of the present article.

[14] One of the best ways to get a sense of Hauerwas's work as a whole is through *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael G. Cartwright (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

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and life that are couched in social-philosophical categories like 'virtue' and 'narrative'.[15]

To be sure, Barth himself notes an example or two of special ethics done very successfully without the initial general ethics (*CD* 3/4, p. 4), and the same point surely applies to ecclesiology. But accounts of the concrete church and the activities of its members developed in varying degrees of independence from well-rounded accounts of more central doctrines seem in recent years have come to be more the rule than the exception.[16] Barth might ask of Hauerwas and of those who follow his lead whether in their laudable – and quite reasonable – effort to recover an ecclesial politics, they have not veered a bit too far towards presenting – and, in some cases, maybe even thinking of? – the church, the Christian life and its forms and institutions, as an 'end in itself'? And is this question, however it be answered, not made possible by what amount to largely theologically neutral accounts of the church and of human action within it? And when one writes of the church and human action with little or no reference to divine action, is it not all too easy to end up supporting a view of the church that will be reductive and thereby in some aspects in effect anti-Christian, in spite of good intentions to the contrary? For to omit or de-emphasize the primary constitutive element of the church – God's action in Word and Spirit – is, Barth would say, to construct an abstract ecclesiology. It is to talk about the *Scheinkirche*, the church in its non-theological appearance, rather than what is truly the church (*KD* 4/2, p. 698; *CD* 4/2, p. 617).

Barth's understanding of Christianity and the church's task of witness is, I think, more different from Hauerwas's than may at first appear, and requires a substantially different kind of ecclesiology. For Barth, witness is the 'declaration, explication and application of the Gospel' which is Jesus Christ (*CD* 4/3, p. 843). It is not, or not in the first instance, a particular kind of life. It is as it points away from itself to the 'divine Nevertheless' amid the confusions of history – the church's history as well as the world's – that the

[15] In an essay in *Sanctify Them in the Truth: Holiness Exemplified* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998),under the subheading 'The Difference that God Makes' (pp. 214–17), Hauerwas writes of the 'conceptual resources' that differentiate Christianity from the modern university. Nothing is said there of divine action.

[16] See, e.g., the otherwise exemplary discussions of human action by Charles R. Pinches, *Theology and Action: After Theory in Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), and John Bowlin, *Contingency and Fortune in Aquinas's Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); or L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), and the various collections of essays on practices, most evidently *The Church as Counterculture*, ed. Michael L. Budde and Robert W. Brimlow (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2000).

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church is truly a 'sign and witness' (*CD* 3/3, p. 199), not, or not in the first instance, as it embodies a particular configuration of practices.

Stanley Hauerwas once called the Christian life an adventure, and so does Barth in *CD* 3/3 (p. 243).[17] My guess is that Barth would say that the kind of ecclesiology that Hauerwas has so well and rightly promoted has been – with some exceptions, often his own – a bit less adventurous than it should be or could be; less theologically adventurous, anyway. Much contemporary ecclesiology and ecclesial ethics is earnest, methodical and educational in tone. The church is described as if it must have a priestly or pedagogical character, rather than the 'prophetic character' Barth thinks is more appropriate (*CD* 4/3, p. 794), and this pedagogical character often persists even when theologians go on the offensive against the evils of the age.

The prevailing earnestness and the focus on the church may be symptoms of anxiety. I don't mean that any theologians *feel* anxious, of course, Stanley Hauerwas least of all. I mean rather that the church may embody a kind of cultural anxiety as it faces the seeming triumph of modernity. From contemporary ecclesiology one gets the impression that the church needs to be especially concerned these days about itself and its self-preservation, rather more perhaps than it need be about the task and cause of God (two things that, though closely related, should not be conflated). It is rather as if the church must put itself in good order before it can preach the gospel. Much contemporary ecclesiology and ecclesial ethics is geared towards thwarting what are seen as the detrimental effects upon the church of individualism in its various forms, including theological constructivism, doctrinal and practical consumerism and the pervasive failure to obey the church authorities. The concern to distinguish and separate, protect and defend, is widespread. It surfaces not only in Hauerwas and those he has influenced, but in Radical Orthodoxy, communion ecclesiology, and in some forms of postliberalism, too.[18]

Barth himself was well aware of this kind of anxiety and its deleterious consequences for theology. The concern for self-preservation is nothing other than conformity to the world (*CD* 4/3, p. 775), for in the world, self-preservation is the ultimate value. 'The world exists in self-orientation', he said, 'the church in visible contrast cannot do so' (*CD* 4/3, p. 780). As

[17] See Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), pp. 49–53.

[18] See, e.g., the ecclesiology of Reinhard Hütter (n. 4 above). I discuss the issue in regard to communion ecclesiology in my 'Ecclesiology and Communion', *Perspectives in Religious Studies* (forthcoming).

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part of our witness, we must show that we have no need to be anxious about the church, as Barth evidently was not. Nor should we fret ourselves about the ungodly, whether they come in the form of liberalism or individualism or any other work of the demonic but silly powers that persist in the world already saved by Jesus Christ. Barth could readily admit and deal theologically with our sinfulness and confusion. The church lives fully within the world, rather than in a sphere separate from it, so when it does consider itself, it must engage in 'constant self-criticism' (*CD* 4/3, p. 779).

For Barth, the fundamental problem is not that the church tries to appease modernity or to preserve itself against it, though that is certainly part of it. Nor is the greatest threat today individualism, Constantianism, constructivist theology, nominalism or secularism. The greatest danger, I think Barth would say, is that the church will fail to be the church, that it will fail to be faithful and, above all, to hope and trust in God as it calls upon the Spirit in prayerful obedience to the Word. The church's faithfulness is displayed as it breaks down any and all theological barriers to our full acknowledgement, in all our thinking and practices, of the absolute necessity and sufficiency of the work of the Spirit and the Word, both in our midst and outside our churches' walls.

Perhaps if we retrieve something like Barth's approach to the doctrine of the church, we, too, might be able to retrain ourselves to overcome some of our cultural anxiety about the church, improve our witness, and still talk about the configurations of practices that make us who we are. Barth says that we can worry less about error within the church once we acknowledge that God works there, in our actions, so that the 'prophets and apostles' become 'living subjects speaking something new' in our midst (*CD* 3/3, p. 209). And if we recall that the world as well as the church is under God's providential rule, and that the church lives in, with and for the world, we can acknowledge with him that sometimes the 'world actually understands [the church] better than [the church] does itself' (*CD* 4/3, p. 817).

Archbishop Rowan Williams wrote recently of the pressing need to make better sense of dissension within the church.[19] If our theology begins and ends with God's actions rather than with our practices and institutions, and if we recall that the church is primarily God's church, then we may come to see that dissension within the church may on occasion be a good thing rather than something we have to explain as, say, the intrusion of alien principles, practices or beliefs into the established Christian configuration. A change in a practice may need to be discerned as a movement of the Holy Spirit

[19] Rowan Williams, review of Eugene F. Rogers's *Sexuality and the Christian Body*, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 56/1 (2003), pp. 82–8.

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rather than as a distortion of that practice through lack of skill in inhabiting Christianity. That a dissident group of church people is inadequately trained or has not acquired the requisite virtues may have little direct bearing upon the merits of their cause. Independently of the depth of enculturation and of any other similar criterion, some dissent – not all, of course – may in reality be the Word active in our midst. Even the kind of theological constructivism produced according to Kantian principles may be worth listening to since, according to Barth, there are secular parables of the kingdom (*CD* 4/3, pp. 110ff.). God may speak the Word to the church through anyone, nudging it through their criticism or complaint to reconsider its true basis, cause and task.

If we acknowledge that the church is primarily God's work and serves God's cause, our churches may be more willing to give themselves adequate time to sort out their disagreements over practices and doctrines. Hearing the Word of God and discerning the Spirit may take time, as it has often done in the past. We may need to live together in Christ and with our disagreements for a while, rather than move too quickly and self-confidently to raise up divisions within God's church.

In sum, perhaps Barth's greatest legacy in the area of ecclesiology was his massive awareness of the providential rule of God, and thus of the fundamental joyfulness of the gospel. He understood Christianity to be adventurous, to be about letting God lead us, work in and with us, the church, so that we may enjoy partnership with God. We can trust God to act to preserve the body of Christ in its historical and Spirit-filled form until the eschaton. And this leaves us free to concentrate on the important work assigned to us. It is work that requires us, in faithful and prayerful obedience, to turn cheerfully away from ourselves, away from earnest and anxious attempts at self-preservation, towards the God who alone preserves us. And, as Barth would insist, thereby we turn, too, towards the world which the Father so loved that he sent his only Son to be its Savior, and sent the church, the body of the Son, to be his partner in the Spirit, and witness to that Savior.[20]

[20] An earlier version of this essay was read as a paper to the Karl Barth Society meeting at Atlanta, GA, in November 2003. Many thanks to the members of the Society, especially Kimlyn Bender, John Yocum, George Hunsinger and Paul Molnar, for their comments.

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