

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_sbct-01.php

CONTINGENT AUTHORITY:
KARL BARTH AS A RESOURCE FOR AN
ACCESSIBLE CONCEPT OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

JUSTIN M. ROBERTS

UNIT 14, 299 LIMERIDGE ROAD W., HAMILTON, ON, CANADA L9C 2V4
justin_mendela_roberts@hotmail.com

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. (Hebrews 1:1-3)¹

INTRODUCTION

Articulating a compelling account of biblical authority is difficult in its own right; that difficulty, however, is exacerbated in a time when there is no certainty as to whether a thing called 'authority' exists. By offering a suggestion for biblical authority, this paper will carve a path between two conversations. The first is the broad contrast between Scripture and tradition: while Protestants have been keen to emphasize the centrality of Scripture, its counterparts in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions have wished to point out that Scripture is a part of a history and context which cannot be divorced from an idealistic set of texts. The second regards Barth scholarship in particular: on one end of an extreme continuum Barth is seen as something of a compromised modern who fails to abide by classic evangelical dogma; on the other end, he is regarded as a naïve patron of untenable orthodoxy. That being so, this paper will argue for a concept of biblical authority, developing resources drawn from Barth, that is contingent and public in nature, maintaining the historically conditioned aspect of the text and its unique and trustworthy character. By highlighting the realism underpinning his doctrine of revelation, Barth's theology of the Word will provide the foundation upon which the notion of contingency will remain. The degree to which Scripture is authoritative is exactly commensurate with the degree to which it participates in the truth of God's own Word. Therefore, investigation of Scripture's claims—

1 All Scripture references are cited from the NRSV. This paper was presented at the 15th Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference hosted by Rutherford House, 2-5 September 2013.

be it historical or otherwise—is legitimized by the actuality of God’s revelation, making possible a view of witness that is essentially one of humble stewardship owed fully to the grace of God.

REVELATION, WORD OF GOD, OR SCRIPTURE?

Those with little acquaintance with Karl Barth have perhaps heard—whether quoted favourably or otherwise—that in his thought, the Bible becomes the Word of God. In programmatic form, Barth provides the following thesis in *Church Dogmatics I/2*: ‘Scripture is holy and the Word of God, because by the Holy Spirit it became and will become to the Church a witness to divine revelation.’² This characteristic distinction between the pages of Scripture and the Word of God finds its origin in Barth’s infamous turn from liberal sensitivities to the object with which theology

² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. by G. W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, 4 vols in 13 parts (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956-1975), I/2, p. 457 [hereafter referred to as *CD*, followed by volume/part and page number]. This paper will work primarily from *CD* as it is the most mature statement of Barth’s theology and has been so influential, although *CD* does not represent a singular static perspective. Hans Urs von Balthasar’s important work on Barth’s theology established a long lasting reading that suggested he had two critical transition points: from the theology of his youth towards ‘Dialectical Theology,’ and then again towards a theology of analogy; see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Karl Barth: Darstellung und Deutung seiner Theologie* (Köln: J. Hegner, 1951). Bruce McCormack has challenged the legitimacy of so distinguishing this shift from dialectic to analogy: *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectic Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). For postmodern readings of Barth, see William Stacey Johnson, *The Mystery of God: Karl Barth and the Postmodern Foundations of Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997); Walter Lowe, *Theology and Difference: The Wound of Reason* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1993); Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). For postliberal readings of Barth, see George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984); Hans W. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger, W. C. Placher (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1992). Joseph Mangina makes a sound suggestion when he says, ‘Seeking to bring him into conversation with Kant, Hegel, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, or Derrida is a worthwhile endeavour, and the reader who poses such questions will not go away disappointed. Yet it must be admitted that Barth himself would likely have been frustrated by the whole debate. One can imagine him borrowing a line from St Paul, arguing that neither modernity nor postmodernity matters, but the new creation (Galatians 6:15).’ Joseph L. Mangina, *Karl Barth: Theologian of Christian Witness* (Louisville: John Knox, 2004), p. x.

is rightly concerned. By reading Paul anew in 1916, which would manifest itself in his commentary on Romans (first edition 1919, and a reworked second in 1921), he found that the Bible introduces ‘not how we find the way to him [God], but how he has sought and found the way to us.’³ For Barth, the object of liberal theology was nothing but speech about human speech about God. In contradistinction, ecclesial discourse owes its existence not to epistemic difficulties surmounted but to the acting presence of a free God, namely ‘revelation’.

A Controversial Distinction

This distinction between Scripture and the Word of God by means of a theology of revelation has been subjected to scrutiny, to be sure. The most notable criticism comes from his contemporary Dietrich Bohnhoeffer who suggested Barth’s flight to an impervious realm failed to give a faithful account of earthly human knowing, calling his doctrine ‘positivism of revelation.’⁴ Describing the insistence with which Barth appealed to the centrality of revelation, Tillich suggests his approach is ‘a demonic absolutism which throws the truth like stones at the heads of people, not caring whether they can accept it or not.’⁵ Wolfhart Pannenberg accuses Barth of falling into the vices of that liberal tradition he so vehemently rejected by placing the justification of faith on a distanced idea of revelation, never actually escaping the subjective.⁶ From an evangelical perspective, Donald Bloesch voices concern with the thinkers once known as ‘Neo-Orthodox’: he suggests their distinction between the Word and its forms ‘in which the divine word and the human word are only loosely

³ Karl Barth, from his *Wort Gottes*, as cited by Eberhard Busch, *The Great Passion: An Introduction to Karl Barth’s Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 20. Barth was among others who joined a unified critique of ‘neo-Protestantism’, Thurneysen, Bultmann, Gogarten, Brunner, and Merz, and from this group came the journal *Zwischen den Zeiten*, *ibid.*, p. 23. See also Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. by John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), p. 173.

⁴ This is a translation of the German *Offenbarungspositivismus*. Dietrich Bohnhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. by Eberhard Bethge (New York: MacMillan Company, 1962), pp. 163–4. See also Simon Fisher, *Revelatory Positivism? Barth’s Earliest Theology and the Marburg School* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); William Kuhns, *In Pursuit of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Dayton: Pflaum, 1967), p. 200.

⁵ John Webster, *Barth* (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 14.

⁶ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991–1998), 1, p. 44.

associated and never function in an indissoluble unity' and remains unsubstantiated.⁷

While it would be fruitful to pursue these various issues in their own right, my present concern is to substantiate the perspective that Karl Barth's distinction between Scripture and the Word of God is not a flight into the subjective, nor a manoeuvre to evade historical criticism, nor yet, most importantly, a mere epistemic concern. Rather, Barth's distinction is an attempt to respond faithfully to reality itself, more specifically reality as it has been revealed by God.

As Response to Reality

The decision to distinguish revelation as that which ultimately cannot be contained in Scripture is anything but a self-preserving ploy in the face of biblical fallibility. Rather, if one means by the word 'God' the living, self-contained, and triune God of Jesus of Nazareth, and sustains that meeting him is conditioned upon the act of this God in the present, then one is required to reflect forever that reality in one's speech. As Bruce McCormack elaborates on Barth's articulation of the doctrine of revelation,

Like the Chalcedonian formula, it points out errors on the right hand and on the left without giving positive expression to the truth in the middle. And the reason is quite simply that the truth in the middle can only be expressed by God.⁸

This is not to limit the significance of Scripture by any means; rather it is to establish the ontological precondition of Scripture, a conviction borne from an encounter with God. Barth explains:

If we want to think of the Bible as a real witness of divine revelation, then clearly we have to keep two things constantly before us and give them their due weight: the limitation and the positive element, its distinctiveness from revelation, in so far as it is only a human word about it, and its unity with it, in so far as revelation is the basis, object, and content of this word.⁹

Already, the participatory link between Scripture and its referent is recognized while being anchored in the actuality of God in his act of self-reve-

⁷ Donald G. Bloesch, *Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration, and Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994), p. 31. Bloesch does admit that this criticism is less true of Barth.

⁸ McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectic Theology*, p. 464.

⁹ *CD*, I/2, p. 463.

lation.¹⁰ This implicit tension, the possibility and impossibility of human testimony, comprises the stimulus for a theology that is ‘dialectical’. Joseph Mangina says: ‘To pursue “dialectical theology” is thus to acknowledge the inadequacy of our language, but at the same time to affirm the utter necessity of bearing witness.’¹¹ In this way, Scripture alone, as a deposit, cannot be regarded as revelation as such, for it is required that God act upon the hearer of Scripture to make comprehension—or more specifically, faith—possible: hence an objective and subjective component in the historic appearance of Jesus and the reception of this word respectively.¹² Barth develops the conviction that faith requires an act of God into a trinitarian formula. God the Father reveals himself in his Son Jesus, and the Holy Spirit is that which awakens the life of faith in the believer: in lyrical form, Barth summarizes his account as follows: ‘God reveals himself. He reveals himself through himself. He reveals himself.’¹³ With an additional example, one can appreciate the central concern of Barth’s foundational distinction between Scripture and the Word of God as an attempt to reflect the necessity of God’s free activity in the hearing of the gospel. Regarding the notion of inspiration, Barth confirms that as witness, Scripture is indeed shaped, in form and content, by the Holy Spirit. He says the Spirit ‘is described as the real author of what is stated or written in Scripture’, and speaking of the prophets and apostles he says ‘they speak in the place and under the commission of Him who sent them’.¹⁴ Therefore, in order to sustain his original conviction that God’s action is the presupposition of faith with this more traditional concept of inspiration, Barth uses the term *theopneustia*, a term derived from the verb used

¹⁰ In affirming that Frei did appreciate the dialectic component of Barth, McCormack quotes him on the occasion of Barth’s death: ‘The ground of the actuality of the incarnation, of its ontological possibility, and of our being able to think about it, are one and the same. That God related himself to us means that it was possible, that he must be himself eternally in a way that is congruent with his relating himself to us contingently... The possibility follows from the actuality.’ In *Theology and Narrative*, quoted in Bruce L. McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 160

¹¹ Mangina, *Karl Barth*, p. 16.

¹² McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern*, p. 110. McCormack puts it this way, ‘Thus conceived, revelation is seen to have two moments: an objective moment (God veils himself in a creaturely medium) and a subjective moment (God gives us faith to know and understand what is hidden in the veil). The objective moment is christological; the subjective moment, pneumatological.’

¹³ *CD*, I/1, p. 296

¹⁴ *CD*, I/2, p. 505.

in 2 Timothy 3:16, to account for both emphases.¹⁵ These examples are intended to demonstrate that Barth's doctrine of revelation is first and foremost a response to reality, not a conceptual or existential safeguard.

The Christological Contour of that Reality

Having argued for a thoroughgoing realism, Barth's presentation of this material in *CD I/2* has been recognizably abstract in character.¹⁶ In fact, Reformed theologian Klaas Runia critiques Barth's approach as a

dogmatical construction. First a principle is established, namely, the actualistic conception of revelation, and then all the other data and facts are adapted to this principle. It is noteworthy that Barth gives hardly any attention to the *Bible's own testimony* about itself.¹⁷

In a recently published article entitled 'The Doctrine of Inspiration and the Reliability of Scripture', Katherine Sonderegger addresses this concern in her fine treatment of Barth's later Christology which would support the contours of Barth's earlier cerebral prose. In *CD IV*, Barth attends the significance of the resurrection under the heading 'The Verdict of the Father'. For Barth, the resurrection effectively validated the life and death of Jesus Christ in a juridical act, and therefore this is the Father's declaration that he is the Saviour of the world. The one with whom the radiance of the Father has been shown has at all times condescended to a fallen creation. Sonderegger says this is,

to act when all creaturely actions are impossible. Like the virgin birth, the resurrection of Jesus is a historical event where the initiative and control of creaturely, historical agents are ruled out, and the divine agency manifest.¹⁸

¹⁵ Ibid. Writers of Scripture wrote as *auctores secundarii*.

¹⁶ McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern*, p. 202. McCormack argues that Barth's work here is platonic in character and critically different from the Christology following his decisive work on election.

¹⁷ Klaas Runia, *Karl Barth's Doctrine of Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), p. 109.

¹⁸ Katherine Sonderegger, 'The Doctrine of Inspiration and the Reliability of Scripture', in *Thy Word is Truth: Barth on Scripture*, ed. by George Hunsinger (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), p. 26. In the words of Barth himself: regarding the resurrection, 'it was the very model of a gracious act of God, the Son of God as such being active only as the recipient, God the Father alone mediates His action and revelation. This made the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the very first the sure and unequivocally transcendent place, the true other side here on this side, from which we can look back with enlightened and indisputable assurance on the first act of God.' *CD*, IV/1, p. 356.

The form and content of Barth's earlier concerns are derivative of the coming of the Son of God, who has made eternal life and fellowship with God possible. She notes that 'the earlier categories of revelation are now made ontological and concrete'.¹⁹

Dependence on the 'Power' of God

To recap, this distinction between Scripture and the Word of God, anchored in a recognition of revelation, is a concern to reflect upon reality as it is. The necessity of God's activity in the right hearing of the Word is a theme found in the New Testament itself. In Romans, Paul expresses concern to carry out his obligation to both Greek and barbarian, wise and foolish, yet under the singular condition of proclaiming the gospel. His central orientation for both circumstances is proclamation, a medium congenial to the nature of his subject which is news (Rom. 1:14-15). As he continues, he says 'I am not ashamed of the gospel; for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith' (v. 16).

Moreover, Paul expounds his concerns to the Corinthian community. In response to disputes over reputable leaders, Paul despairs that he should in any way contribute to the church's obsession with persons. He continues that had he spoken in such a way as to make the poignancy of the gospel contingent upon his abilities, namely through 'eloquent wisdom', he would in fact rob his hearers of the power of God and nullify the 'cross of Christ' (1 Cor. 1:17-18). For it is not by the word of Paul that humanity can be saved, nor is it by the word of Paul that the cosmos may be sustained (cf. v. 13); it is the Word of God which makes possible that which with humanity is impossible. As Paul emphasizes, the cross, not to reiterate the resurrection, is a monument to God's thoroughgoing salvific prerogative. Jesus speaking from his resurrected body commissions the apostles to a ministry of witness to the world and says, 'you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth' (Acts 1:8). The mere potentiality of their witnessing ability is legitimated alone by the power of the Holy Spirit, both to bring forth a true word (cf. Eph. 6:19; John 16:13) and make present the Christ of the message (cf. John 3:1-15; 9:1-41).

THUS SAYS WHO?

How then is one to regard the words of Scripture, the human text, as the Word of God and, as pertains to the present concern, therefore authorita-

¹⁹ Sonderegger, 'The Doctrine of Inspiration', p. 26.

tive? Again, many trajectories could be followed in response to this question, but this paper will restrict itself to a singular focus: namely, that the authority and trustworthiness of Scripture is exactly commensurate with the degree to which it participates in the truth.

Barth on Historical Criticism

Barth's concern with historical criticism was in continuity with his understanding of revelation in the preceding argument. Naturally, this would by no means minimize the historical character of the text, and therefore exegesis includes appropriate methods of inquiry commensurate with that discipline.²⁰ The basis of Scripture as witness lies in its historical continuity with the supreme revelation in Jesus. Barth suggests that with regard to Scripture one should maintain,

the true humanity of the person of Jesus Christ as the object of its testimony. What else is the Bible but the proof of the existence of the historical environment of this reality and, to that extent, of the historicity of the reality itself?²¹

Scripture is prioritized due to its unique relationship to the truth to which it refers, both in its historical proximity to a historical reality and its empowered proclamation of a Word that is kerygmatic and called the 'power of God'.²² Barth refers to the apostles as having 'the unique and contingent function of the first witnesses'.²³ In his 1937 Gifford Lectures, Barth addresses the relationship between the historical nature of the text and its reliance upon God for recognition. He says of historical criticism:

One is entitled to expect from it that it will clarify the whole human form of the witness to Christ in the Old and New Testaments, throwing light on its linguistic, literary, historical and religious-historical aspects. But we should not expect it to set before us the object of this testimony, which is God's revelation and therefore Jesus Christ as the Messiah of Israel and the Lord of His Church. How could revelation ever be recognised as the divine content of that testimony except through revelation?²⁴

²⁰ Barth suggests that revelation is the 'content of the biblical word' and that hermeneutics is 'prescribed by this content.' *CD*, I/ 2, p. 472.

²¹ *CD*, I/ 2, p. 485.

²² 'If we have really listened to the biblical words in all their humanity, if we have accepted them as witness, we have obviously not only heard of the lordship of the triune God, but by this means it has become for us an actual presence and event.' *CD*, I/ 2, p. 463.

²³ *CD*, I/1, p. 539.

²⁴ Karl Barth, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God According to the Teaching of the Reformation: Recalling the Scottish Confession of 1560*

Therefore revelation, and all that is entailed therein, owes at every point its existence to God; however, this is not an abstract hypothesis, but the conclusion derived from the concrete happenings of God throughout redemptive history. As John Webster explains in his monograph on Scripture, inspiration is no inaccessible justification for authority; rather inspiration is an *a posteriori* conclusion necessitated by God's revelation.²⁵

Hans Frei, addressing the Karl Barth Society of North America in 1974, gave a lecture entitled 'Scripture as Realistic Narrative: Karl Barth as Critic of Historical Criticism'. In this presentation, Frei argues that Barth upholds both theological exegesis and historical criticism by means of a realist perspective.²⁶ He takes the following passage from Barth's *Church Dogmatics* in order to expound a 'historical-literary'²⁷ account:

The term 'history' is to be understood in its older and naïve significance in which—quite irrespective of the distinctions between that which can be historically proved, that which has the character of saga, and that which has been consciously fashioned, or invented, in a later and synthetic review—it denotes a story which is received and maintained and handed down in a definite kerygmatic sense.²⁸

Frei points out three distinct aspects in this passage: 'that which can be historically proven', 'that which has the character of saga', and 'that which has been consciously fashioned or invented'.²⁹ Though these components represent something of a stratified text, they are nevertheless holistically

(London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1938), p. 67. As Otto Weber suggests, identifying the object of revelation 'is not because a man has laid hold of the Bible, but because the Bible has laid hold of him'. Otto Weber, *Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics: An Introductory Report on Volumes I:I to III:4* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1952), p. 26.

²⁵ John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 32.

²⁶ Hans Frei 'Scripture as Realistic Narrative: Karl Barth as Critic of Historical Criticism' in *Thy Word is Truth*, p. 49. Lecture given by notes and recorded in Toronto for the Karl Barth Society of North America, Spring 1974 (ed. Mark Alan Bowald).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 54. This term was used in Rudolf Smend's important work on Barth's relationship to historical criticism. Rudolf Smend, 'Nachkritische Schriftauslegung', in *Parrhesia: Karl Barth zum 80. Geburtstag am 10. Mai 1966*, ed. Eberhard Busch, Jürgen Fangmeier, and Max Geiger (Zurich: EVZ, 1966), pp. 215-37.

²⁸ The term Barth uses is "*historisch*" ... that for which evidence is relevant.' *Ibid.*, 56. Quoted from *CD*, IV/2, pp. 478-9

²⁹ *Ibid.*

integrated into a singular vision of Scripture as witness. Frei maintains that ‘for Barth, it depicts the one real world in which we all live so that to understand the meaning of it is the same as understanding the truth of it.’³⁰

Authority: The Continuity of Christ and His Witnesses

As first witnesses, the apostles are uniquely qualified to speak on behalf of God for numerous reasons ranging from historical and personal proximity to Jesus to Holy Spirit empowerment in their proclamation. As 2 Peter 1:16-18 says,

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’ We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

The apostles’ qualifications are those means by which they are privileged with special access to God’s revelation. Their speech and wisdom are accepted only and in so far as they remain in continuity with reality, and it is the Christian conviction that by the grace of God they so remain. However, if this is accepted there are implications for the posture with which the idea of authority is appropriated.

In consistently Barthian fashion, the authority of Scripture cannot be attributed to the isolated achievement or privilege of individual persons; instead, the precondition of authority is the decisive act of God. Barth writes,

We now know to what extent it [the Bible] points to a superior authority confronting the proclamation of the Church: obviously to the extent that it is a witness of divine revelation.³¹

There is a presupposed participatory link, a link established through numerous means, that recognizes the genuine relationship between the words of Scripture and the Word of God.³² John Webster also connects the legitimacy of authority with its representation of reality:

³⁰ Ibid., p. 59.

³¹ *CD*, I/ 2, p. 457.

³² ‘Barth thus acknowledges that the church exercises a genuine, mediate authority of its own, embodied in such norms as canon, creeds, and confessions of faith. In this way the church participates indirectly in the authority

True political authority is neither capricious nor arbitrary but lawful and *fitting to reality*. Authority is potent because it bears the truth to and therefore orders our acts, whether intellectual or practical, in accordance with reality. And so authority cannot be conferred; authorisation is not a proposal, but an act of truthful judgment through which authority is acknowledged as that which rightly kindles activity of a specific quality in a specific direction.³³

The Public Nature of Authority

Because authority is in this way not a possession of the few, but rather a conviction of the many, Barth insists that the whole of the ecclesial community is beckoned to share in exegesis; for the nature of Scripture's authority is essentially public. For even the limitations on the inquiry into Scripture are integral to the truths under consideration, and hence are a property of reality itself. To elaborate, there are no secondary mediums which may claim authority on their own terms.³⁴ Moreover, 'public' does not mean that anyone and everyone can read scripture rightly and know God. It does not mean that apostolic witness and teaching are not uniquely prioritized, and it does not mean that anyone can objectify and manipulate that which is supremely dependent upon God. Barth writes:

This means that like all other authoritative powers in the Church it can only represent the divine authority. And if this is the case it is not merely possible but necessary to appeal from Scripture (always recognizing its unique value) to a true and original Word of God which we have to conceive of quite differently.³⁵

On the one hand there is a legitimate and distinguished authority established for Scripture, and on the other there is the conviction that God is the ultimate and in fact only true authority; because the church can sur-

of the Word itself.' Mangina, *Karl Barth*, pp. 46-7. He also articulates the relationship in the following way: 'To say that Scripture and proclamation are forms of the Word is to say that they participate in the event of revelation, without being directly identical with revelation itself.' *Ibid.*, p. 35.

³³ John Webster, *Holy Scripture*, p. 53.

³⁴ In Barth's *Credo* he defines tradition as 'the sum total of the voices of the Fathers' and not a second source of revelation. Robert McAfee Brown 'Scripture and Tradition in the Theology of Karl Barth' in *Thy Word is Truth*, p. 8. In the *CD*, Barth says that Scripture has a 'higher, judicial, decisive authority superior to all the proclamation which takes place in the Church and can claim authority of the Church.' *CD*, I/2, p. 458.

³⁵ *CD*, I/2, p. 541.

render neither of these claims, it is perhaps most aptly called a 'dialectic.' For both are required for a robust consideration of biblical authority.

Barth offers no abstraction of textuality. The temptation is inevitably to garner expectations of Scripture as text according to those texts with which one is most accustomed. Yet Scripture is not formulated by its virtue as text, rather it is fashioned into text by means of its broad and unique contribution to the recipients of God's own activity. In other words, the 'how' and 'what' of its content are not decided in advance. Barth may be of greatest importance in his operative presupposition of God,³⁶ for the difficulty with which theologians are faced in naming the qualitative variable that makes the Bible authoritative is intensified by the desire to account for it by means of theory.³⁷ For there is no concept which holds in unity the whole of Scripture; rather it is the self-sufficient God who has acted throughout it. In speaking of the unifying power of Jesus for Scripture, Hunsinger writes

It was this Name and this Name alone that provided Holy Scripture with its unity. No doctrine or set of doctrines, no system or comprehensive scheme, no ideology or ontology, could perform this important unifying role for Christian hearers of the Word. The unity of the totality of Holy Scripture, and through it ultimately of all things, resided exclusively in the mystery of this Name.³⁸

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Barth's distinction between Scripture and the Word of God is a response to the actuality of God's revelation. The realism that underpins all considerations of the historic and literary character of the text makes possible a claim for authority that is not possessive but contingent. Scripture, the product of those who were both eyewitnesses and empowered by the Spirit, can be regarded as integrally truthful and unique; however, the authority of Scripture is established in the conviction that its

³⁶ Berkouwer suggests that in dealing with Barth the difficulties 'arise not so much out of his form of expression as out of his *mode of thinking*'. G.C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), p. 12 (emphasis original).

³⁷ Speaking to the identification of Scripture as Scripture, Barth says, 'If there is such a witness and the acceptance of such a witness, it can only mean that it has already been constituted and chosen, and that its acceptance is only the discovery and acknowledgement of this fact.' *CD*, I/2, p. 473.

³⁸ George Hunsinger, *Thy Word is Truth*, p. xix.

testimony is accurate and that which is infinitely beyond the achievement or stature of persons.