

Appropriating Karl Barth's Theological Use of Scripture in Contemporary Theology

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I. Introduction

More than any other of the great theologians of the 20th century, Karl Barth was concerned with the interpretation and use of the Bible. This can certainly be said of Barth's *Church Dogmatics*,¹ the work that is my concern in this paper. For the *Church Dogmatics* is concerned with the theological use of the Bible from beginning to end—not simply in its special exegetical excurses.² Scholars are far from reaching consensus on how to characterize Barth's varied and complex engagement with Scripture.³ Yet they tend to agree that Barth's distinctive approach to Scripture not primarily to be characterized as “historical” or even “literary” but as “*theological*.” But what does it mean for Barth's use of Scripture to be “theological”? This paper claims that it means several things. Attempts to describe Barth's theological use of Scripture have been too easily reduced their explanations to one or two features, with the outcome being one-sided accounts of what Barth is doing with Scripture in his theology.

In this paper I aim to give a brief, multifaceted introduction to Barth's theological use of Scripture. I will do so by identifying and describing five of the paradigmatic features of his use of Scripture in his *Church Dogmatics*. I will argue that Barth's theological use of Scripture is reverent, creative, Christocentric, textually-based and ecclesial.⁴ As I describe these five features, I will supply evidence that they are indeed genuine and salient features

¹ This the English translation of *kirchliche Dogmatik*. In this paper I will refer to the English Translation. For this and all other reference, I will simply refer to the author and the year of the work cited. Full references are provided in the list of Sources Cited [of **Bibliography—with other sources?**] at the end of the paper.

² See Watson 2000: xxx

³ Watson 2000 is one of the best short studies to reflect seriously on the great significance of Scripture in Barth's theology as a whole.

⁴ There are surely other features that could be mentioned. Yet, I hope that these five will yield an accurate and balanced, albeit brief, description of Barth's use of Scripture. Also, although several of the terms I will use to

(rather than arbitrary or insignificant features) of Barth's use of Scripture. I will supply this evidence in two main ways. First, I will give attention to the presence of the five features in Barth's own *theoretical* views of how Scripture should function in theology. Here, I will appeal primarily to volume I/2 of the *Church Dogmatics*. Second, I will give examples of how the five features are evident in Barth's theological *practice*. For this purpose, I have chosen the example of Barth's varied use of Scripture within his account of the divine attribute (or "perfection") of "constancy" (*Beständigkeit*) in *Church Dogmatics* II/1—an account in which he critiques the classical doctrine of immutability largely on the basis of Scripture.⁵ Thus, I will show how Barth's theory and practice converge to yield a certain five-featured way of using Scripture in Theology.⁶ After describing the five features, I will comment on the prospects for contemporary appropriation of Barth's work.

II. The Five Features Described

1. Reverent

First of all, Barth's theological use of Scripture is reverent. This means that Barth uses Scripture in reverent submission to Scripture and to the theological subject matter (*res*,

describe the five features of Barth's use of Scripture are mine, I do not think any of these features represents a novel or surprising way of characterizing Barth's use of Scripture.

⁵ In choosing to treat this theological locus, I recognize that other sections of the *Church Dogmatics* involve more extensive exegetical passages (especially in the later volumes, III and IV). However, because the doctrine of God's constancy/immutability is that has traditionally been given a more "philosophical" treatment, Barth's persistent engagement with Scripture in this context makes his contribution to the theological use of Scripture all the more striking. In particular, an examination of Scripture in the doctrine of divine constancy allows us to see how thoroughly and deeply the use Scripture is *integrated* into Barth's theology. For a further analysis of Barth's use of Scripture in his accounts of constancy and other divine attributes, see my forthcoming doctoral thesis (Pokrifka-Joe 2002).

Perhaps a brief summary of Barth's account of divine constancy is in order. Barth's affirmation that God is constant is to be distinguished from the traditional theological affirmation that God is immutable. Barth's view of God's constancy is more flexible and dynamic than the classical doctrine of divine immutability, and allows for God to change in certain respects within an overall pattern of consistency.

⁶ This five-featured approach does not constitute a full-fledged hermeneutic, which Barth was not concerned to articulate. Rather, it is an attempt to offer a summary of the character of Barth's use of Scripture. As such, I am aided by Barth's occasional theoretic comments on such matters, but the more basic proof of the adequacy of the features is in their ability to communicate what Barth is doing in his theological practice.

“object” or “referent”) to which it refers.⁷ Indeed, whenever we speak of Barth’s use of Scripture, we could say that rather than “using” Scripture, he *lets scripture use him*.⁸ Such readerly reverence is a correlate of Barth’s adherence to the Protestant “Scripture Principle,” the conviction that the Bible is authoritative and normative for Christian theology.⁹ For Barth, Scripture’s authority, although secondary and derivative to God’s authority, is the primary witness to God’s self-revelation and thus stands in judgement over church tradition, reason or experience.

Corresponding to Barth’s recognition of Scripture’s authority is what he identifies as the “basic rule” of biblical interpretation, namely: the subordination of the reader to the Bible and its central “object” or subject matter (Barth 1956: 715-722). Barth states the rule of subordination like this:

The necessary and fundamental form of all scriptural exegesis . . . must consist in all circumstances in the freely performed act of subordinating all human concepts, ideas and convictions to the witness of revelation supplied to us in Scripture” (Barth 1956: 715).

Against Enlightenment conceptions of freedom and autonomy, then, Barth regards this humble subordination as a form of the reader’s freedom. As such, we readers place ourselves under the authority of Scripture and allow ourselves to be continually transformed by it.¹⁰ Accordingly, all our interpretations must be regarded as provisional—as incomplete

⁷ This principle of ‘reverence’ corresponds to what O’Collins and Kendall (1997) refer to as the principle of ‘faithful hearing’ in the theological use of Scripture

⁸ For a helpful article that deals with the theologian’s “being used” by Scripture, see Gunton 1990.

⁹ Indeed, for a theology to be determined by Scripture is for Barth the decisive characteristic that makes it good (scientific) theology (Barth 1975: 283-287), and constant attention to Holy Scripture is the distinctive mark of the theologian (Barth 1975: 283f; cf. Watson 2000: 58).

¹⁰ To some extent, we ought to read any good book with this kind of respect, but our subordination to Scripture goes beyond the respect we show to other books. We submit to it as a way of submitting to its unique subject matter, the God who speaks through it.

Thus, we do not subordinate ourselves to Scripture as we do to God, but rather we submit to his witnesses in Scripture *for the sake of* God (Barth 1956: 717f). As we submit to the human authors in this way,

attempts to hear the word of God speaking to us through Scripture. Thus, our interpretations and presuppositions need to remain open to being overturned by the text and by God speaking through it. Two further quotations help to illuminate what Barth means by the interpreter's reverent subordination.

The decisive point is that in scriptural exegesis Scripture itself . . . must have *unconditional precedence* over all the evidence of our own being and becoming.

(Barth 1956: 719)

And again:

The message which Scripture has to give us, even in its apparently most debatable and least assimilable parts, is in all circumstances truer and more important than the best and most necessary things that we ourselves have said and can say (Ibid.)

Barth recognizes that aspects of Scripture will seem debatable and difficult to assimilate. But if we do not reverently defer to Scripture's wisdom, Barth believes that the scriptural world and witness remains largely inexplicable. The world of the Bible is only accessible, so to speak, "from the bottom up"—by placing oneself *under* the divine word speaking through it (Ibid). The full expression of such subordination or reverence requires a standpoint of faith and obedience in the reader. (This point is related to the ecclesial character of Barth's use of Scripture, as we will see below). Therefore, according to Barth, a

the Word of God interprets itself to us (718). The object of Scripture, permits not other kind of free human activity in relation to it than that of subordination (715f). Barth cites Isaiah 55 in support: God's thoughts are not our thoughts. Barth regards what we bring to the text—our ideas, convictions—as like a thick fog surrounding us. One when this fog dissipates can we understand and interpret aright. The fog can only break when we submit ourselves to the Scripture on its own terms for the sake of the God behind it. Corresponding to our responsible act of subordination, God's illuminates both them and our minds (716ff). The fog of our intellectual life (and even that of the human authors of Scripture) needs to become clear in the light of God's word (716).

critical or neutral standpoint towards the biblical text does not allow the interpreter to discern the text's import on its own terms.¹¹

In keeping with these theoretical comments, Barth's theological practice shows a consistently reverent treatment of Scripture. In his treatment of divine constancy, this is evident in his continual appeal to Scripture as the authoritative basis for his reflections. Although Barth's does not regard Scripture as perfect or infallible, Barth nowhere objects to the scriptural portrayal of God's character or (consciously) lets some other authority take precedence over Scripture.

A specific example of Barth's deference to Scripture within his account of God's constancy, is the way he treats the Old Testament passages that speak of God as "repenting" or "changing his mind" (Barth 1957: 495-499). For Barth, these texts must not be written off and domesticated. They are not merely instances of misleading figurative language or anthropomorphism, as the theological tradition had typically charged. Rather, Barth believes these texts genuinely tell us something about God—something that ought to overturn, rather than be deflated by, the Hellenistic conception of absolute divine immutability. For Barth, the overall scriptural witness yields the theological conclusion that God really does change in some respects and really does not change in other respects.¹²

All of the other four features of Barth's use of Scripture can be seen as particular expressions of Barth's reverent approach to Scripture.¹³

2. Creative

¹¹ Barth admits that there is a "relative understanding" that it possible of the Bible without faith and subordination, namely, the kind of understanding "possible between representatives of different worlds." (Barth 1956: 719).

¹² When we subordinate ourselves to the text, we take its claim that God repented just as seriously and literally as its claims that God does not repent.

¹³ Barth's "reverent" use of Scripture can be seen as a kind of "master-feature" of his use of Scripture that in some sense includes and determines the others. However, the other features fill it out with the concreteness needed to describe adequately how Barth's use of Scripture is distinctive in the context of other possible approaches to Scripture, some of the which are also "reverent."

Second, Barth's theological use of the Bible is *creative*. Barth actively engages the Biblical text and its subject matter in an incredible variety of ways, and in each of these ways he shows creative ingenuity.¹⁴ To be reverent toward Scripture is surely not a matter of the reader taking a purely passive role in interpretation.

To my knowledge, Barth's theoretical account of biblical interpretation does not anywhere speak of the value of being creative, at least not in directly. However, these programmatic comments do give implicit support to the importance of active hermeneutical creativity at several points. Consider the following passage, in which Barth further explains the meaning of the interpreter's "subordination" to Scripture.

Subordination . . . cannot mean that we have to allow our ideas, thoughts and convictions to be supplanted, so to speak, by those of the prophets and apostles, or that we have to speak the language of Canaan instead of our own tongue. In that case we should not have subordinated ourselves to them, but at most *adorned* ourselves with their feathers. In that case nothing would have been done in the *interpretation* of their words, for we should merely have *repeated* them parrot-like. Subordination, if it is to be sincere, must concern the *purpose and meaning* indicated in the ideas, thoughts, and convictions of the prophets and apostles, that is, the *testimony* which . . . they wish to bear. To this testimony of their words we must subordinate ourselves—and this is the essential form of scriptural exegesis (Barth 1956: 718; my italics).

Note then, that the reverent subordination to Scripture does not mean that theology is primarily a matter of unimaginative quotation of Bible verses. Theology must move beyond shallow parroting to active reflection¹⁵ that allows Scripture to transform us and our ideas.¹⁶

¹⁴ The 'creativity' of Barth's use of Scripture corresponds loosely to the principle of 'active hearing' employed by O'Collins and Kendall 1997.

¹⁵ Barth identified "reflection" (*Nachdenken*; lit. "to think after") as the second of three elements or phases of biblical interpretation, following "observation" and preceding "appropriation" (see Barth 1956: 727-736).

Such transformation requires a varied and creative interaction with Scripture—a variety and creativity that is striking to anyone who is familiar with Barth’s work.

As for variety, Barth’s treatment of constancy shows forth at least three main forms of Scripture usage.¹⁷ Hence, Barth engagement with Scripture includes: (1) groupings of biblical citations (or proof-texts) on a particular theme (e.g. on God’s repentance—see above); (2) extended exegetical reflections on a single biblical passage (e.g. Philippians 2); and (3) reflections on the themes or patterns in Scripture, without reliance on citation of specific biblical passages (see directly below).

Barth’s use of these forms is marked by surprising exegetical ingenuity. Even Barth’s thematic groupings of Scripture texts—what we might call his creative reworking of the scholastic method of “proof-texting”—involves an imaginative selection and arrangement of texts. In this way, Barth frequently brings out previously unnoticed connections between diverse biblical texts and biblical themes. In addition, Barth shows creativity in drawing eclectically from both past and present interpreters and cultural recourses. The manifold evidences of Barth’s great breadth of learning in theology, history, philosophy, and literature are all creatively brought together to serve the exposition of the Bible on a given theological issue.

Within his treatment of divine constancy, Barth’s creative use of Scripture is perhaps most evident in an excursus on “salvation history” (*Heilsgeschichte*) (Barth 1957: 506-512). Barth imaginatively discerns several features of the biblical meta-narrative that show forth God’s constancy amidst various changes in God’s relation to the world.¹⁸ Barth sometimes

¹⁶ We cannot simply abandon our own intellectual framework, Barth says, any more than “we can free ourselves from our own shadow” (Barth 1956: 718). Therefore, to try to abandon our own ideas for some alleged position of neutrality would be more an act of arrogance than humility. Again, subordination is our part in letting the ideas, thoughts and convictions we bring to be challenged and confronted.

¹⁷ These are arguably the main forms of Scripture-usage or interpretation found throughout the *Church Dogmatics* (for further evidence of this, see Pokrifka-Joe 2002).

¹⁸ I refer to the changes brought about by unfolding of the main works of God in history: creation, reconciliation and “redemption” (the latter being his word for eschatological consummation). See Barth 1957: 506-512.

reads between the lines in order to discern patterns that are embedded in the text and which make sense of both its details and its larger contours. No one could rightly accuse Barth of a kind of “biblicism” that simply repeats proof-texts without a creative engagement with it.¹⁹ Indeed, one wonders if Barth’s creativity sometimes caused him fall into the to opposite trap of reading too much into what he thinks is “implied” by Scripture.²⁰ Regardless of whether that is the case, there is no doubt that Barth’s creative scriptural exposition is ordered and strives towards coherence, rather than being untrammled or arbitrary. As we will now see, it is ordered especially by his conviction that the person and work of Christ constitutes the theological center of Scripture.

3. Christocentric

Third, Barth’s use of Scripture is Christocentric. We noted earlier that for Barth the theological interpreter is called to subordinate herself not only to the text, but also to its object or subject matter.²¹ According to Barth, Jesus Christ is the central, unifying object or subject matter of all of Scripture. In Barth’s words: “The object of the biblical texts is quite simply the name of Jesus Christ and these texts can be understood only when determined by this object” (Barth 1956: 727). In other words, Jesus Christ is the key “referent” to which Scripture testifies. Thus, Jesus Christ grants Scripture its unity and coherence (Barth 1956: 483ff).

Because modern critical study has drawn out the great diversity of Scripture, modern scholars are often critical of traditional efforts either to unify Scripture Christologically.

Barth shows sensitivity to such modern concerns, but also moves beyond them to a kind of post-critical recovery of aspects of traditional Christological readings of Scripture. On the

¹⁹ There are other senses of “biblicism” that might be appropriately applied to Barth (see Torrance 1990: 115-188), although Barth himself tended to use the term negatively (**cite German—use index**).

²⁰ I join other commentators in thinking that Barth’s treatment of Judas goes beyond the boundaries evident in the text (see McGlassen 1991: xxx and Ford 1985: xxx).

²¹ ‘In the freedom of loyalty, therefore, the examination of the biblical texts must do justice both to the texts themselves and their object’ (Barth 1956: 726).

one hand, then, Barth's theory and practice agree that the Christological unity of Scripture does not require Scripture to be flattened into a docile uniformity. Accordingly, Barth resists facile harmonizations of apparent contradictions in the Bible.²² In addition, when Barth does develop Christological readings of the Old Testament, there is an important sense in which the Old Testament continues to speak on its own terms (terms which are sometimes "non-Christological"). Yet on the other hand, Barth's way of interpreting and using the Bible, like that of many pre-critical theological interpreters, assumes that there is a profound theological coherence in Scripture, a coherence in which all major biblical themes and patterns converge harmoniously in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Within his account of God's constancy, Barth's Christocentric use of Scripture is evident in respect to two examples we have cited already. In the first example, Barth's treatment of biblical texts on God's repentance, we find something that we might call indirect Christocentrism. In respect to these texts, Barth notices a pattern in which God's repentance from intended judgement to bring blessing is consistently given precedence over God's repenting from intended blessing to bring judgement. Thus, while the threat of judgement upon the disobedient is real, God's judgement is subordinate to God's overwhelming grace. While Barth does not explicitly mention the name of Jesus Christ in this context,²³ the pattern Barth discerns here (in respect to the two kinds of divine repentance) is virtually the same as the pattern he discerns in the gospel narratives (especially in the relationship between the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus).²⁴ Barth thus appears to employ a Christological hermeneutic as a heuristic tool by which to uncover biblical-theological patterns, including those found in the Old Testament.

²² Barth sometimes resolves such (apparent) contradictions on a "higher theological level" and sometimes lets them go unresolved.

²³ Barth does mention Christ later in a similar context (1957: 520ff).

²⁴ See Barth **xxxx (USE INDEX)**. . .

The second relevant example we cited above was Barth's account of God's constancy in the history of salvation. This example involves a more direct and explicit expression of Barth's hermeneutical Christocentrism. Immediately following the excursus on salvation history, Barth states that Jesus Christ is "the meaning and secret of the history of salvation" (Barth 1957: 512).²⁵ He follows this with a typical programmatic statement: "In the investigation of the constant will and being of God we cannot go behind Jesus Christ" (513). Accordingly, Barth goes on to expound the constancy of God in light of classic Christological passages such as Philippians 2 (516ff). Then, in anticipation of his well-known Christological doctrine of election, Barth critiques and revises the traditional Reformed doctrine of the "immutable decrees of God" by means of the New Testament's own Christocentrism (520ff). After all, Barth is only interested in a Christocentrism that is firmly rooted in the text of Scripture. This brings us to our next point.

4. Textually-based

Fourth, Barth's use of Scripture is *textually-based*. By "textually-based" I refer (for lack of a better term) to how it is shaped and constrained by the plain verbal sense of the biblical text.²⁶ For Barth, the theologian must aim at "a representation" of the text that, in his words, "will allow even the detailed words of the text to speak exactly as the stand" (Barth 1956: 726). To say that Barth's theological engagement with Scripture is textually-based is another way of saying that it is consistently concerned to do serious "exegesis," to discover and draw out the *text's* meaning rather than investing it with one's own meaning (see Barth 1956: 726). Although Barth recognized that we could not escape bringing our own presuppositions to the text, he believed that those presuppositions could be revised and overturned by an encounter with the objective reality of the text and its referent (Barth 1956:

²⁵ See also his claim that "the history of salvation is first and last, at its center and its origin, the history of Jesus Christ" (513).

²⁶ By the text, we mean the final canonical form of the text, which is virtually the only form of the text that Barth is concerned to interpret.

724f).²⁷ Despite his creativity as a reader of Scripture, then, Barth believed that the theological exegete aims to draw out an objective meaning that is independent of the reader (and that he usually associated with authorial intention).²⁸

We can clarify the textually-based character of Barth's use of Scripture in relation to both his Christocentrism and his hermeneutical creativity. Although there is a sense in which Barth wishes to look imaginatively beyond the words of the text itself to its Christocentric subject-matter, it is also true that he wishes to do so only in a way that goes *through* the text and is governed by it. That is, Barth is not interested in using his creativity or reason to indulge in the development of speculative Christologies or Christological systems. To use one of Calvin's analogies (drawn from in a slightly different context), the biblical text provides the indispensable pair of glasses through which we must look in order to see God and Christ as they truly are.²⁹

Barth's orientation to discerning the plain meaning of the exact words of the biblical texts deters him from some kinds Christological and theological readings. These would include fanciful allegorizing and any theology that requires rigorous systematic consistency (see Barth 1975: 8f). The textually-based character of Barth's use of Scripture involves a concern to let all biblical texts speak on their own terms and in their own context—with the tensions and unevenness that this may bring. The text is not to be domesticated within external philosophical or theological systems, even Christocentric ones (see Barth's

²⁷ Compare Brevard Childs comment: "True exegesis is dialectical in nature. One comes to any text already with certain theological (ideological) assumptions and the task of good exegesis is to penetrate so deeply into the text that even these assumptions are called into question, tested, and revised by the subject matter itself" (Childs 1997: 19). See also Childs 1969.

²⁸ Some of Barth's *ad hoc* hermeneutical comments sound rather "modern" to the "post-modern" hermeneutical context concerned with reader-response and deconstruction. Thus, Barth did often associate faithful biblical exegesis with interpreting the text according to the intention of its human authors. But Barth's thought also moves beyond the constraints of the modern author-centered perspective. He makes clear that the (objective) meaning of the text—especially in its canonical context—can transcend the meaning that its authors allegedly had in mind. This is evident in his Christological interpretations of Old Testament passages. Yet Barth believes that such Christological readings illuminate the ultimate objective meaning of these passages. For an account of authorial intention and objective interpretation and literal sense generally compatible with and congenial to Barth, see Watson 1997: chapter 3.

comments in Busch 210f). As George Hunsinger argues, Barth is more concerned with “hermeneutical adequacy” than with systematic “coherence” in his theology (Hunsinger 2000: 191ff and Hunsinger 1991: 226, 281f).

Despite his seriousness about what the text actually says and his criticism of certain pre-critical exegetical abuses, Barth way of discerning the meaning of the text moves beyond the standard rules of modern historical-critical exegesis. This is plain in several respects. First, even the modified version of proof-texting that Barth employs still has a capacity to take passages out of context (as did the much Medieval use of this method)—which would lay Barth open to the critique of many modern biblical scholars. Second, Barth works with a much wider conception of the literary and theological context of a passage than that of most modern scholars—context that ultimately extends to the whole canon of Scripture.³⁰ Third, Barth sometimes undertakes creative figural and typological interpretations (though not usually “allegorical” ones) which most higher-critical scholars would reject as “eisegesis”—as “reading into” the text.³¹

We have already seen something of the textually-based character of Barth’s account of constancy in his treatment of the biblical texts about God’s repentance. The following statistics give us an idea of just how much Barth’s aims to root his theology in specific biblical texts. The thirty-two pages of Barth treatment of constancy (491-522 in the ET) contain three fine-print exegetical excurses (495-499; 506-512; 515-518) and over 50 references to specific passages of Scripture, many of which he quotes and discusses. This high degree of interaction with the text of Scripture is typical for Barth’s theology. But here it is especially significant since it occurs in respect to a theological locus that has traditionally

²⁹ Calvin, *Institutes* I.6.1 (Calvin [ET] 1960: 70).

³⁰ In this way, Barth departs to some extent from a historically-controlled understanding of context to a more synchronic, literary understanding. This wider understanding of context may explain in part why Barth did not regard his use of proof-texts as problematically non-contextual—since he might well have argued that these texts were kept in their *canonical* context.

been dominated by a “philosophical” approach (what Barth called “natural theology”) evident in the classical theological treatments of divine immutability.³²

5. *Ecclesial*

Finally, Barth’s reverent, creative, Christocentric, and textually-based way of interpreting and employing Scripture in theology is also ecclesial in character. Barth’s way of engaging Scripture is shaped decisively both by his dialogue with the church of the past, through its theological tradition, and by his participation in and responsibility to the living church of his day. After all, it is not accidental that Barth called his *magnum opus* the *Church Dogmatics*. In his prolegomena volumes, Barth dedicates significant space to extolling the value of hearing the voice of the church (Barth 1957: 797-853)³³ and to recognizing its secondary, yet genuine, theological authority (585ff). Barth compares the theologian’s relation to the church to a child’s relation to their parents (585f). Just as the 5th commandment teaches us to “Honor our Father and Mother,” so also, Barth says, must the theologian honor the church and its tradition. As with our earthly parents, our obedience is qualified; for the theologian may at times be called to contravene his theological parents in order to obey God’s word mediated to him through Scripture.

Before we go any further, however, we need to clarify *which church* is at work in Barth’s use of Scripture, a point that Barth does not always make explicit. We may answer this question on two levels. On one level, Barth’s reading of Scripture is shaped by the ancient and undivided church universal or catholic, the church that for Barth is defined paradigmatically by the ancient Apostle’s and Nicene creeds. On another level, Barth’s allegiances lie with a particular branch of the universal church, the church of the Reformation

³¹ Here Barth takes full advantage of this wider conception of context and an understanding of the objective literal sense of a text that is not moored exclusively to authorial intention.

³² For example, one could consider the treatment given to immutability by the Reformed Scholastic Polanus (see the passage cited in Barth 1957: 492).

³³ This paragraph (section) of the *Church Dogmatics* is entitled “Dogmatics as a Function of the Hearing Church.”

and the Reformed tradition (what Barth typically calls the “Evangelical” church³⁴). This is the church with which Barth allies himself in distinction from both Roman Catholicism and Modern Liberal Protestantism.

With this initial clarification of *which* church is in view, we can continue to explain in what sense Barth’s theological use of Scripture is ecclesial. In a sense, Barth’s notion that the theological reader of Scripture ought to self-consciously situate herself within the Christian community constitutes Barth’s bold answer to the contemporary concern for the role of the reader in interpretation. Barth avers that such reverent ecclesial readers are rightly positioned to understand the sense of the text, rather than either those who presume unbiased neutrality or those who affirm a plurality of valid interpretative communities.

Furthermore, for Barth’s use of Scripture to be ecclesial, means that it is positively and specifically related to both the church of the past and the church of present, which we will consider in turn. First, Barth’s use of the Bible is *guided by* the church of the past, both explicitly and implicitly. This is evident especially in the way in which Barth’s biblical interpretation is influenced by his acceptance of the ancient creeds and the Reformed confessions of faith.³⁵ Within his exposition of divine constancy, Barth’s cites and interacts with the church’s past theological tradition almost as frequently as he interacts with Scripture. Barth critiques such tradition when he judges it to have departed from the biblical testimony (e.g. Barth 1957: 520ff), but always strives to honor the tradition by at least giving it a hearing. Furthermore, Barth’s theological exegesis itself is typically guided positively by certain aspects of the church’s theological tradition. For example, Barth exegesis of

³⁴ Barth’s calls this Reformation church “evangelical,” but in a decidedly continental rather than Anglo-American (or sociological) sense of the term.

³⁵ Although Barth will often critique individual theologians on the basis of Scripture, traditional ecumenical creeds (and the Reformed Confessions) function essentially as authoritative guides for faithful Christian interpretation of the Bible. Barth states and exemplifies the belief that a good theologian must listen attentively and respectfully to the witness of church tradition before she makes her own theological claims. The theologian is not called to slavishly follow tradition, but she ought to give it the benefit of the doubt (innocent until proven guilty). The same goes for guidance of the contemporary church, to which the theologian stand in a relationship marked by both reverence and freedom.

Philippians chapter two employs the classical Chalcedonian language and conceptuality of the two natures of Christ in order to argue that God's fundamental being does not change in the incarnation (515). He adds support to this claim with a favorable citation of the Reformed scholastic theologian Amandus Polanus (Barth 1957: 515f).

Not only does Barth frequently interact with the church of the past in his *Church Dogmatics*, but his work indicates that he was engaged with the church of his day. Second, then, Barth's use of Scripture *takes place* in the context of the contemporary church,³⁶ and is *undertaken for* that church as its primary audience. The theological use of Scripture, like all theology, is a service for the church that aims to hold it accountable to God's revelation, as attested in Scripture.³⁷ In his account of divine constancy, for example, Barth dedicates several pages of an exegetical excursus to the biblical treatment of the prayers of the faithful and their relationship to God's constancy (Barth 1957: 510ff). The self-involving manner in which Barth treats this theme has particular relevance to members of the church, whether scholars or pastors, and decidedly less relevance for those who are not.³⁸

III. Conclusion: Appropriating Barth's Five-Featured Approach

In the paper thus far we have surveyed five salient features of Barth's theological use of Scripture. We have discerned convergent evidence for these features in both Barth's

³⁶ This point emerges clearly in Barth's definition of theological exegesis, namely, "exposition of Scripture" that occurs "within the pale of the Church" and which asks the question "To what extent is there given to us, here in this text, witness to *God's word?*" (Barth 1936: 177; Barth's italics).

³⁷ As such, the concerns of the academy are secondary to those of the church. Moreover, we could say that it is only when theology is first oriented to the church as its context and audience that it is able to be true to its calling in the academy (as an "autonomous science" with its own rules and criteria). Watson rightly stresses that Barth does not tend to play off the concerns of the church against the academy (Watson 2000: 66).

³⁸ We can relate this ecclesial feature of Barth's use of Scripture to the other four features we have described in the following ways. First, the reverence that Barth has for Scripture is part and parcel with the church's proper communal subordination to Scripture as its norm, a notion Barth derives largely from his Reformed heritage. Second, the creativity of the Barth's exegesis is both fed and guided (even bounded) by the resources of the Christian community of past and present. Third, the Christocentric character of his theology is an expression of the Christocentric character of the ecumenical creeds, of traditional "ruled readings" of Scripture and of the more recent (modern) Christocentrism of Luther, Schleiermacher and others. Finally, the textually-based character of his theology is the special contribution of his Reformed-evangelical ecclesial heritage.

theoretical comments on the theological use of Scripture and in his actual theological practice in respect to God's constancy.

Leaving a number of questions untouched and unanswered, I want to conclude this paper with some comments on the issue of the appropriation of Barth's theological approach to Scripture within contemporary theology and biblical studies. This question involves a several sub-questions.

First of all, is it *possible* to appropriate Barth's style of Scripture-usage within contemporary theology? Some would answer this question negatively. One reason to say that we cannot appropriate Barth's approach is to say that Barth's use of Scripture is an unrepeatable "virtuoso performance."³⁹ A consideration of Barth's extraordinary achievement in the theological use of the Bible ought to give anyone a degree of sympathy with this claim. Accordingly, the contemporary appropriation of Barth's use of Scripture cannot and should not be concerned with the forbidding task of "repeating" the precise shape and character of Barth's unique "performance." This point leads us to our next question.

Second, then, *what would it mean* (other than an effort in "vain repetition") to appropriate Barth's style of Scripture-usage today? I believe that such an appropriation would involve the theologian in a use of Scripture that is *relevantly similar* to Barth's, but which is in other ways free to diverge from Barth's way doing theology or exegesis. What do I mean by "relevantly similar"? As an initial guideline, I propose the following: a person's theological use of Scripture is relevantly similar to Barth's when it is marked by at least four of the five features we have identified in Barth. This allows a scholar to miss one feature but to still maintain a significant "family resemblance" (to use Wittgenstein's concept) to Barth's approach. In other words, we could safely assume—all other things being equal—that such a scholar belongs to theological "tradition of inquiry" (to use Alasdair MacIntyre's

conceptuality) similar (or the same) to the tradition of inquiry to which Barth belonged.⁴⁰

For this to be the case, a theologian or biblical scholar does not need to follow Barth slavishly or to become a full-fledged “Barthian.”⁴¹

For this general guideline for appropriation (i.e. sharing at least four of the five features with Barth) to be applied properly, however, we must add a couple further qualifications to this guideline. (1) First, since what it means for a theologian or biblical scholar to be “ecclesial” or “Christological” and so on can vary greatly from scholar to scholar, we need to add the following stipulation. Any scholar who wishes to appropriate Barth’s approach must manifest the features of his use of Scripture in such a way that would *not directly contradict* any of Barth’s most cherished theological principles—including any of the five features themselves. For example, a theologian whose work is marked by four of the five features but decidedly irreverent (against feature-1) or anti-Christocentric (against feature-3) would not be appropriating Barth’s approach. (2) Second, for a scholar genuinely to appropriate Barth’s work requires that they do so *intentionally*—for that is what it means to “appropriate” something. This does not mean that a given scholar would need to intend specifically to draw from Barth in respect to each of the four or five of the features of his exegesis by which their work is characterized. Rather, this qualification only requires that

³⁹ Childs 1997: 19. Childs says here that the term “virtuoso performance” is Paul McGlasson’s but not cite any source where this is found.

⁴⁰ We could elaborate some of the ideas in this paragraph as follows (although this elaboration is not essential to grasping or accepting the more general point made above). Barth represents a particular tradition of theological rationality that involves a distinctive ‘take’ on the inter-relationships of such crucial elements of theological method as Scripture, tradition, reason and experience. Like Thomas Kuhn’s rival scientific paradigms and Alastair MacIntyre’s traditions of moral inquiry, particular paradigms or traditions of theological method tend to be generated by the work of an outstanding intellectual that forms a kind of paradigmatic example for those to come. Barth’s theological exegesis and exegetical theology would qualify to be one such example. Again, such an “example” or “tradition” need not be followed slavishly, but to be a member of this tradition requires that one’s theological engagement with Scripture is marked by a significant number of the paradigmatic features which mark Barth’s theological use of Scripture.

⁴¹ Barth himself made it clear that he wished that there were no “Barthians”—although he did look for those that would carry on something of his approach. (**Cite and clarify.**)

but that they have a generally positive assessment of Barth's theological work and a desire to learn and draw something from Barth's way of doing theology and using Scripture.⁴²

I will close by turning to a final question. According to our relevantly-qualified guideline for appropriation, *who* among today's theologians or biblical scholars, if anyone, is actually appropriating Barth's approach to Scripture? Among "theologians,"⁴³ I would list William Placher's *Narrative of a Vulnerable God* (1994) and Douglas Farrow's *Ascension and Ecclesia* (1999).⁴⁴ Among (theologically-oriented) "biblical scholars," I would list Brevard Childs, especially in his *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (1993), and several studies of Francis Watson, especially his *Text and Truth* (1997).⁴⁵ Some of these scholars are strong on some of the five features and relatively weak on others, but all of them represent an approach to Scripture that stands in significant continuity with Barth's theory and practice. They have learned something of the basic elements of theology's hermeneutical grammar from Barth without necessarily following his detailed conclusions about various theological loci.

⁴² I recognize that there are scholars whose work is marked by four or five of the features of Barth's use of Scripture, and who do so in a way that does not contradict any of Barth's basic principles, but who are not intentionally following Barth in this respect.

For example, consider the work of Jesuits cited at several points in this paper: Gerald O'Collins and Daniel Kendall, *The Bible for Theology* (1997). As is not surprising for a book written by two Roman Catholics, O'Collins and Kendall do not cite Barth (who had some very strong words against Catholicism) at all in his work. Yet I do not find anything in their work that would represent a contradiction of any of Barth's principles and all of the features are present in them, generally in both theory and practice. Plenty of differences remain (i.e. their understanding of what it means to be "ecclesial," or "creative"), but the family resemblances are there (see earlier citations). In addition, the work of (Anglican) Biblical scholar Richard Bauckham, especially in his recent work *God Crucified* (1998), would be another scholar who has much in common with Barth's approach to Scripture, but who does not communicate any intention to "follow" Barth.

The work of such scholars is certainly worthy of consideration, but it would not strictly count the "appropriation" with which we are concerned in this paper. Such scholars as these may be participating in or following a larger tradition within Christian orthodoxy (that includes a certain way of handling Scripture) that Barth himself participated in and followed.

⁴³ I put the term "theologian" in quotation marks simply to indicate that these scholars are called theologian as opposed to biblical scholars according to the somewhat arbitrary criteria of modern academic specialization. In an earlier age (when theological exegesis flourished), they might just have been called scholars of Holy Scripture.

⁴⁴ Both of these books include generally sympathetic treatments of Barth's work (though not specifically his use of Scripture), which is implicit evidence that they are at some level intentional "appropriators" of Barth. I recognize that this point could be questioned.

⁴⁵ Both Watson and Childs cite Barth frequently and usually sympathetically in their work, which indicates that they see themselves as in some way carrying on the tradition of theological scripture-usage in which Barth

If these scholars are in any sense representative, then it seems that the 21st century is opening with an increasing number of scholars who are looking to Barth for guidance and whose engagement with Scripture displays a family resemblance to Barth's. In my view, this is a trend that is only to be welcomed.

stood. Watson in particular, has given increased attention recently to Barth's use and interpretation of Scripture (see Watson 2000).

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Barth's theology oscillates back and forth from the radical discontinuity between God and creation (â€œnoâ€) and the equally radical love of God for creation (â€œeyesâ€). Early Biography. Karl Barth was born in Basel, Switzerland, on May 10, 1886. Disillusioned with the liberal theology of his youth Barth sought a completely new theological foundation by rereading scripture. By 1919, Barth's research on Paul's Letter to the Romans yielded the first edition (of six in the original German) of his R  merbrief (ET, The Epistle to the Romans). The following two years of study (which included Overbeck, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Ibsen and Kierkegaard in addition to the Bible) lead to a lecture entitled â€œBiblical Questions, Insights, and Vistasâ€ delivered in 1920.