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Barth's christological ecclesiology as theological resource for evangelical free church ecclesiology

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Abstract

This essay argues that Barth's christological ecclesiology is worthy of consideration as a resource to fund a more robust and distinctly theological evangelical free church ecclesiology. Specifically, Barth's articulation of the church as witness, combined with his emphases on the gathering, upbuilding and sending of the church, all resonate with a distinctly free church vantage point. Additionally, I argue that Barth's theological interpretation of Matthew 18:20 (a verse of great significance for the free church tradition) further reveals his compatibility with free church ecclesiology. I conclude that while the traditional problems associated with evangelical reception of Barth need to be addressed and his doctrine of the church as grounded in Christ (and thus election) critically assessed, Barth does end up offering a resource that can inform the development of a theologically robust evangelical free church ecclesiology.

Keywords: Karl Barth; *Church Dogmatics*; ecclesiology; evangelical; free church; Matthew 18:20

Theologian John Stackhouse, Jr. is not alone in wondering aloud whether evangelical ecclesiology is a reality or merely an illusion. Stackhouse laments:

We evangelicals have implied an ecclesiology more than we have articulated one. ... [we] have acted out our convictions about the church more than we have set them out ... What we haven't done much is reflect on ... evangelical ecclesial realities and try to make some theological sense of them.¹

Although Stackhouse's concern may be overstated, at the very least it is representative of voices which have consistently sounded the alarm that evangelical ecclesiology is theologically underdeveloped.² Such voices are quick to point out that evangelicalism often operates more pragmatically than theologically, tending to prioritise the individual and

¹John G. Stackhouse, Jr, 'Preface', in John G. Stackhouse (ed.), *Evangelical Ecclesiology: Reality or Illusion?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), pp. 9–10.

²Kevin Vanhoozer and Daniel Treier are among the clearest of these voices, noting convincingly that ecclesiology continues to be neglected within evangelical theology, so much so that it can be described as 'that infamous evangelical weakness'. See Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Daniel J. Treier, *Theology and the Mirror of Scripture: A Mere Evangelical Account*, Studies in Christian Doctrine and Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), pp. 13–14.

her salvation over corporate concerns, while viewing the church primarily through a supplemental and voluntaristic lens. The dominant emphases of the movement, it is argued, centre more on 'getting the gospel of God out' than on grounding the being and mission of the church in the God revealed in Christ.

The problem only seems to get worse when we examine the free church tradition as expressed within evangelicalism, which many have identified as a prime candidate for exhibiting the sort of ecclesiological impoverishment just mentioned. Roger Olsen, for instance, notes the common perception that free churches 'lack an ecclesiology ... [or] reject or neglect ecclesiology ... [because of] its often more implicit than explicit ecclesiology'.³ It should be acknowledged that, while the free church tradition has many strengths (missional orientation and contextual capacity come quickly to mind), it is true by and large that the tradition to date not only has failed to give a thoroughly theological account of the church and its work in the world (especially in comparison with more robust evangelical ecclesiologies, not to mention Catholic or Eastern Orthodox doctrines of the church), but also has demonstrated very little interest in doing so. In short, the free church tradition, especially as expressed within evangelicalism, has rightly earned the reputation of being ecclesologically minimalist.

Amidst such ecclesiological impoverishment, Kimlyn Bender has made a somewhat provocative proposal: that 'Barth provides evangelicalism with significant resources for a revitalized, rich, evangelical understanding of the church', and specifically that he can provide the tradition a desperately needed theological account of the church.⁴ The proposal is provocative due in large part to the negative history of evangelical engagement with Barth; Cornelius Van Til's framing of him as an enemy that comes in the guise of a friend poisoned the Barthian well for a whole generation of evangelical theologians, while Kenneth Kantzer expressed the mindset of many evangelicals in noting with an air of suspicion: 'thank God for Karl Barth ... but read him with your eyes open'.⁵ The reality is that Barth has had a tumultuous track record among evangelicals, particularly free church theologians like Kantzer and Carl F. H. Henry. The question remains a live one: to what extent does Barth's work have potential value for the evangelical project?⁶ And here we focus on a particular element of that question: despite the history of mixed reviews and lingering theological disagreements, might Barth actually offer resources that evangelical, free church theologians could appropriate in developing a more theologically robust ecclesiology for their tradition?

I will argue in this essay that, indeed, Barth's christological ecclesiology is worthy of close consideration as a resource to fund a more robust and distinctly *theological* evangelical, free church ecclesiology. Specifically I will make the case that Barth's later ecclesiology resonates with a distinctly free church vantage point while offering a fertile resource for grounding free church ecclesiology theologically in a way that the tradition desperately needs. To be clear, the merits and demerits of Barth's theology, and particularly of his christological ecclesiology, must be critically assessed; and evangelical, free

³Roger Olson, 'Free Church Ecclesiology and Evangelical Spirituality', in Stackhouse, *Evangelical Ecclesiology*, p. 164.

⁴Kimlyn J. Bender, 'The Church in Karl Barth and Evangelicalism: Conversations across the Aisle', in Bruce L. McCormack and Clifford B. Anderson (eds), *Karl Barth and American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2011), p. 187.

⁵Kenneth S. Kantzer, 'Thank God for Karl Barth, But', *Christianity Today* 30/14 (3 Oct. 1986), p. 14.

⁶For more on evangelical reception of Barth, see Kevin Vanhoozer, 'A Person of the Book: Barth on Biblical Authority and Interpretation', in Sung Wook Chung (ed.), *Karl Barth and Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), pp. 26–44.

church theologians will inevitably have their disagreements with certain aspects of Barth's overall project and dogmatic emphases. While a full embrace of Barth's theology by the evangelical and free church traditions is neither realistic nor desirable, I believe that many of Barth's insights into the nature of the church can be gleaned and incorporated into these traditions and can move them towards greater ecclesiological development. I will make this case by first providing a brief orientation to the evangelical and free church traditions. Next I'll explore the elements of Barth's mature ecclesiology that are particularly compatible with this tradition, specifically Barth's understanding of the witness of the church, the assembly of the church and the sacraments of the church. Finally, in light of that exploration, I will assess the extent to which Barth's christological ecclesiology might serve as a resource for funding greater theological development of evangelical, free church ecclesiology.

Locating the evangelical and free church traditions

First I must briefly define what I mean by the 'evangelical tradition', certainly no mean task. Alister McGrath attributes the notorious difficulties of defining evangelicalism to the various origins, resources and contexts associated with the multifarious movement.⁷ Nonetheless, Timothy Larsen believes he can summarise the tradition in five characteristics, holding that evangelicals are: (1) orthodox Protestants, (2) of the revivalist tradition, (3) who have a pre-eminent place for the Bible, (4) stress reconciliation with God through Christ's cross and (5) emphasise the work of the Holy Spirit to bring about individual conversion, an ongoing life of fellowship and service, and participation in the great commission.⁸ Of course, the classic Bebbington definition has only four distinguishing marks: conversionism, activism, biblicism and crucicentrism. Most importantly for our purposes here, we do well to follow Vanhoozer and Treier's conviction that evangelicalism is best defined theologically rather than merely sociologically;⁹ and with Michael Bird we hold that the centrality of the *evangel* in evangelicalism goes a long way in locating the movement, affirming that 'an evangelical theology begins with the gospel because the gospel establishes the hermeneutical horizons for its talk about God and constitutes the purpose or *raison d'être* of the church's existence ... [Evangelical] theology has its agenda and energy derived from the good news of Jesus Christ.'¹⁰ In short, then, evangelicalism demarcates 'a people of the gospel', particularly as 'a people of the book', children of the Reformation and revivalist movements who retrieved and rearticulated Christian orthodoxy under the *norma normans non normata* of scripture and emphasised the need for personal conversion and corporate reconciliation to God in Christ by the Spirit.

But in this essay I am particularly interested in the intersection of evangelical and free church traditions. Curtis Freeman gets us a start in demarcating the latter by making much of the name, describing its constitution in terms of five freedoms: (1) freedom of governance (congregational polity), (2) freedom of worship (non-prescribed liturgy),

⁷ Alister McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), pp. 54–5.

⁸ Timothy Larsen, 'Defining and Locating Evangelicalism', in Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Treier (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), p. 1.

⁹ See Vanhoozer and Treier, *Theology and the Mirror of Scripture*, pp. 10–11.

¹⁰ Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), p. 41.

(3) freedom of faith (freely gathered community), (4) freedom of conscience (non-coercive ethos) and (5) freedom of religion (non-established church separate from the state).¹¹ Miroslav Volf thinks he can get the list down to two primary characteristics: 'first those churches with a congregationalist church constitution, and second those churches affirming a consistent separation of church and state'.¹² We might split the difference by summarising the tradition, broadly conceived, under three characteristics. (1) The free church tradition is *congregationally constituted*; that is, the ecclesiality of the church is established 'from below' in the form of God's gathered priestly people rather than 'from above' in the form of a hierarchical episcopate. (2) The free church tradition is *adverse to Constantinian arrangements*; that is, it holds that the distinctiveness of the church is best preserved when it is non-established and separate from state control or interference. (3) The free church tradition is *locally oriented*; that is, it insists on the primacy of the local, visible church (versus a trans-local institution) that assembles in groups of even just 'two or three' in the name of Christ (Matt 18:20). These foundational convictions are demonstrated in the free church insistence that the magisterial ecclesial authority is Christ alone as head of the church (Col 1:8) while the ministerial ecclesial authority is the collective gathering of royal priests (1 Pet 2:9; Rev 1:6) equally endowed with the Spirit of God (Acts 2; 1 Cor 7:40). In this tradition it is the presence of Christ by the Spirit in his faith-filled, gathered people, not the authority of a bishop or the power of a trans-local institution, that constitutes the church. There is obviously broad ecclesial expression within the free church tradition: churches from Baptist to Congregational to Pentecostal to Mennonite to Brethren, along with the broad spectrum of nondenominational and independent churches, clearly belong under this banner.

Locating Barth's christological ecclesiology

Barth was, from first to last, what Timothy George has termed a 'churchly theologian'. That is, Barth believed throughout his career that theology was to be done in and for the church, such that George can deftly summarise Barth's understanding of theology as 'a spiritual discipline within the community of faith ... the purpose of [which] is to serve the integrity of preaching, and thus ... is part of the church's humble worship of God'.¹³ For Barth, then, theology and the church were always intimately related, such that it is often hard to see where the church's theology ends and a theology of the church begins. This is perhaps nowhere better seen than in the *Church Dogmatics*, of which George can note that it 'does not treat the church as a separate locus of theology but weaves it into the general structure of [the] dogmatic project'.¹⁴

The attempt to locate a centre of Barth's doctrine of the church in the *Dogmatics* is also complicated by the fact that he never began the intended concluding volume concerning the doctrine of redemption, which no doubt would have addressed ecclesiology to a large degree. The (unfinished) volume IV on the doctrine of reconciliation is as close as we come to an epicentre for Barth's mature ecclesiology: here in IV/1, IV/2

¹¹Curtis Freeman, 'Where Two or Three are Gathered: Communion Ecclesiology in the Free Church', *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 31/3 (Fall 2004), p. 259.

¹²Miroslav Volf, *After our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), p. 9.

¹³Timothy George, 'Running Like a Herald to Deliver the Message: Barth on the Church and Sacraments', in Chung, *Barth and Evangelical Theology*, p. 193.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 204.

and IV/3.2 we find parallel sections dedicated to some element of 'Christian community'. But it should be noted that even here the church is addressed indirectly as a further reflection upon the history of Jesus Christ manifesting in the power of the Spirit, and thus is in some ways as a subset of Barth's overarching christology and underdeveloped pneumatology. In an important sense volume IV further confirms and elaborates upon Barth's foundational conviction that we must see how all God's works and ways originate in his self-determination to be the gracious God to humanity in Jesus Christ, and this includes any works and ways having to do with calling a covenant community. Barth explicitly affirms in volume II/2 that 'Ecclesiological assertions arise only as they are borrowed from Christology. That is to say, no ... ecclesiological assertion is true in itself and as such. Its truth subsists in the assertion of Christology, or rather in the reality of Jesus Christ alone.'¹⁵ Reinhard Hütter is thus right to conclude that 'Barth's ecclesiology is a function of his Christology, and the nature of the relationship between the two is fundamentally determined already in his doctrine of election.'¹⁶ In discussing election Barth indicates that, by the necessity of Christ's double predestination, there are two forms of the one elected community corresponding to the judgement and mercy of God: Israel and the church. For Barth neither Israel nor the church can be understood apart from their election in Jesus Christ as the subject and object of election. George can thus say that, for Barth, Jesus Christ himself is the 'the eternal basis for the community's calling, justification, and ultimate redemption'.¹⁷ This is all-important in grasping why Barth's doctrine of the church has such potential for providing the (evangelical, free) church a more theologically robust ecclesiology: far from a voluntaristic ecclesiology 'from below', this is indeed a doctrine of the church that emerges from far, far 'above' (or, even better, 'from before').

Barth on the witness of the church

In diving into Barth's doctrine of the church with a view towards its resonance with and potential power to develop evangelical, free church ecclesiology, we do well to remember volume IV's christological, and even Chalcedonian, organization: IV/1 explores the Lord as Servant with an emphasis on Christ's divine nature and his obedience as the Son of God in his priestly office, manifest in the 'gathering of the community'; IV/2 explores the Servant as Lord with an emphasis on Christ's human nature and his exaltation as the Son of Man in his kingly office, manifest in the 'upbuilding of the community'; and IV/3 explores Christ as the true Witness with an emphasis on the union of his natures and his glory as the Mediator in his prophetic office, manifest in the 'sending of the community'. If we understand that IV/3 is actually the culmination of Barth's doctrine of reconciliation then we rightly begin our exposition of Barth's doctrine of the church there, with not only perhaps his strongest ecclesiological theme but also with the strand that undoubtedly establishes Barth's greatest resonance with free church ecclesiological emphases.

It is no coincidence that in this part-volume tracing out the theological implications of Christ being the true Witness and exercising the prophetic office *par excellence* we

¹⁵Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* [hereafter *CD*], 13 vols, ed. T. F. Torrance and G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–1974), II/2, p. 149.

¹⁶Reinhard Hütter, *Bound to be Free: Evangelical Catholic Engagements in Ecclesiology, Ethics, and Ecumenism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), p. 86.

¹⁷George, 'Running Like a Herald', p. 204.

find Barth's culminating image for the church: as witness or herald.¹⁸ Craig Carter rightly affirms that, 'The key to Barth's ecclesiology is his contention that the sole purpose of the Church is to bear witness to Jesus Christ in the world. The rest of his ecclesiology is an attempt to bring all aspects of the doctrine into harmony with this central insight.'¹⁹ Barth himself could summarise his doctrine of the church by noting: 'The Church runs like a herald to deliver the message ... the Church lives by its commission as a herald.'²⁰ In the *Dogmatics* his summary of this section is equally illuminating: 'The Holy Spirit is the enlightening power of the living Lord Jesus Christ in which He confesses the community called by Him as His body ... by entrusting to it the ministry of His prophetic Word.' He goes on

[Christ] does this by sending [the church] among the peoples as His own people, ordained for its part to confess Him before all men, to call them to Him and thus to make known to the whole world that the covenant between God and man concluded in Him is the first and final meaning of history.²¹

The church's nature in this regard merely follows from the fact that Christ is the true Witness who testifies regarding the authorised nature of the church, entrusting to it a ministry of witness to all the world, one that is in continuity with and normed by the witness of the prophets and apostles in holy scripture. This commissioning (even ordination) is then unpacked in terms of the ultimate vocation, not just of the church, but of all humanity: to witness to the glories of God in Christ and the reality that God has freely loved humanity by graciously determining to be for them. Thus in contrast to sectarians and any vision of the church as a 'holy huddle', Barth's vision is that, 'The community of Jesus Christ is for the world ... it is ... ordained by nature to exist for the other human creatures distinct from it. In this way also it exists for God, for the Creator and Lord of the world, for the fulfilment of His purposes and will.'²² The church's existence, in short, is to be one of a sent witness to the world in word and in deed, a witness particularly of the reconciliation that is in Jesus Christ.

Barth on the assembly of the church

In IV/1 Barth explores the 'gathering of the community', noting in the summary over §62 that 'The Holy Spirit is the awakening power in which Jesus Christ has formed and continually renews His body ... the one holy catholic and apostolic church.' He goes on:

This is ... the gathering of the community of those whom already before all others He has made more willing and ready for life under the divine verdict executed in His death and revealed in His resurrection from the dead. It is therefore the provisional representation of the whole world of humanity justified in Him.²³

¹⁸Avery Dulles labels Barth as the premier representative of the model of church as herald. See Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Image Books, 1987), pp. 76–88.

¹⁹Craig A. Carter, 'Karl Barth's Revision of Protestant Ecclesiology', *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 22/1 (1995), p. 44.

²⁰Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York: Harper, 1959), p. 147.

²¹Barth, *CD IV/3.2*, p. 681.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 761.

²³Barth, *CD IV/1*, p. 643.

The gathering of the community is thus something that is initiated by the Spirit and brings (continual) divine renewal to Christ's body, and the gathering of the congregation for worship in particular images in a provisional way what will be true in a much fuller way at the eschaton: a community made right with Christ and one another by God's power and love. Bender observes that in this section Barth is concerned to take up the question of the nature of the church, particularly by assessing how the church's fellowship has its origin in the work of the Spirit, who continually establishes the church's being and the church's time.²⁴ Meanwhile, the christological dimension is always in view: the church's gathering is ultimately 'from above' in a way that exhibits an ecclesial correspondence with Christ's divine nature.

But Barth also expressed the theological nature of the church particularly by his all-important affirmation that the community is 'the earthly-historical form of the existence of Jesus Christ himself'.²⁵ Here we see Barth's attempt to describe the being of the church in its relation to the being of Jesus Christ, and when this description of the church is compared with some of Barth's earlier descriptions of the same, we see that his ecclesiology became more and more robustly theological over the course of his career. For instance, illustrative of Barth's earlier conception of the church is the description found in the Barmen Declaration, of which Barth was the principal author: 'The Christian church is the community of brethren in which Jesus Christ presently works in the word and sacraments through the Holy Spirit.'²⁶ But in the *Church Dogmatics* it is not merely Jesus Christ's *working through* the church that accounts for its being, but his *very existence*. The church is the 'earthly-historical form' of Christ's being, continually complementing his heavenly-historical existence post-ascension. This earthly form is both visible and yet only fully known by faith. Vanhoozer summarises the sense of this 'visible hiddenness' nicely by drawing out the parallel to Christ's earthly ministry that Barth seems to have in mind: 'For Barth, just as the glory of Christ was concealed when he lived on earth, so too the glory of Christ is concealed in the visible church.'²⁷ Indeed Barth held that the church 'is not unequivocally represented in any such generally visible manifestations and analogies'.²⁸ Barth insists that the visible, gathered church, when seen through the eyes of faith, does indeed bear witness to an invisible glory, the glory associated with being Christ's body on earth. But simultaneously Barth strains to communicate that the gathered assembly, while truly attesting to this glory, never fully comprehends nor completely embodies it.

This highlights an extremely important point regarding Barth's confession that the church is the earthly-historical form of Christ's existence: such a statement must immediately be balanced by an insistence that there can never be a conflation of Christ and the church. Indeed, much of Barth's critique of both Catholic and liberal Protestant conceptions of the church is that they stumble at just this point (though in different ways), forgetting that the 'redemptive act of God and that which passes for our response to it, are not the same ... Everything is jeopardized if there is confusion in this respect. ... The being and activity of Jesus Christ needs no repetition. It is present and active in

²⁴Kimlyn J. Bender, *Karl Barth's Christological Ecclesiology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 162.

²⁵*CD IV/1*, p. 661.

²⁶Quoted in James J. Buckley, 'Community, Baptism, and Lord's Supper', in John Webster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), p. 200.

²⁷Personal conversation with Kevin Vanhoozer, fall 2017.

²⁸*CD IV/1*, pp. 656–7.

its own truth and power.²⁹ The church is the body of Christ, but it is not Christ; the church is an intermingling, but not an indistinguishable convergence, of divine and human activity. In this sense the church must always be portrayed as a dynamic rather than a static phenomenon, having a ‘special visibility’ that is ultimately neither fully invisible (an idea he labelled ‘ecclesiological Docetism’) nor institutionally visible in a singular and simplistic way.³⁰ Barth can thus state simply that the ‘Church is when it takes place’.³¹ Vanhoozer helpfully summarises: ‘The church is an event! The community is gathered by the Spirit as a being-in-act whose “special visibility” is to be the earthly-historical form of the eschatological existence of Jesus Christ.’³² Hütter can add that, for Barth, ‘The one true church can only exist as an event in which, through the Holy Spirit’s action, the human witness fully coincides with its referent, God’s graceful election in Christ. Yet this event occurs, under the condition of time, provisionally and periodically, “again and again”.’³³ For Barth the church, like God, scripture and all other entities, has its ‘being in becoming’. But here the payoff is that as the community gathers to worship it becomes the church anew, and with the assembly there emerges a proleptic picture for the world to witness, a foretaste of the consummation when God’s elective purposes to be for us and with us in Christ will be fully accomplished. But until that day it is clear the church is no bit character in the drama of redemption; rather it is, in Barth’s view, the outworking in history of eternal election and the provisional representation of the sanctification of all humanity.³⁴

We also do well in this section on Barth’s understanding of the assembly of the church to examine his use of Matthew 18:20, a verse that is of particular significance for the free church tradition. Barth dedicates more than twelve pages across *Church Dogmatics* IV to this particular verse in expounding his ecclesiology. Matthew’s gospel is unique among the canonical gospels in using the term *ekklēsia* in describing the community of faith which would emerge after Jesus’ ascension, and 18:20 is the location of one of those uses (along with 18:17 and 16:18). In the context of speaking about reconciliation between believers, discipline of unrepentant community members and authority exercised in the assembly and in prayer, Jesus concludes his remarks by noting simply: ‘For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them’ (NIV). Barth discusses this text in several contexts, but the most significant reflections come in §67, amidst his explanation of the upbuilding of the church community. Here Barth’s section summary notes:

The Holy Spirit is the quickening power with which Jesus the Lord builds up Christianity in the world as His body ... causing it to grow, sustaining and ordering it as the communion of His saints, and thus fitting it to give a provisional representation of the sanctification of all humanity and human life as it has taken place in Him.³⁵

This time the emphasis is on the power of the Spirit to bring growth, sustenance and order to the body of Christ that it may better represent the eschatological reality of all humanity: sanctification in Christ. Here Bender can note that

²⁹Ibid., p. 769.

³⁰Ibid., p. 653.

³¹Ibid., p. 652.

³²Personal conversation with Kevin Vanhoozer, fall 2017.

³³Hütter, *Bound to be Free*, p. 88.

³⁴CD IV/2, p. 614.

³⁵Ibid.

Barth's conception of the church as the body of Christ ... [emerges as] the central image and conception ruling Barth's ecclesiology. Barth's systematic development and construal of this image and theme express the beauty, power and coherence of Barth's doctrine of the church, as well as both its striking originality and its Biblical and traditional mooring.³⁶

Once again, the christological grounding is hard to miss: the church as Christ's earthly body requiring sustenance supplied by the Spirit corresponds to Jesus' humanity and correlates with the church's need for upbuilding.

Barth insists at the close of his sub-section on 'The Growth of the Community' that the 'power of this Holy One, of Jesus Christ as the heavenly Head ... is also the indwelling power of life and growth which is immanent in the community on earth.'³⁷ In substantiating this claim Barth appeals to an array of New Testament texts before commenting on Matthew 18:20, arguing that the text does not merely envision Jesus coming to be present as a third or fourth; rather, he 'is present and at work in the gathering together of the two or three, as the centre which constitutes this circle'.³⁸ But it is in the context of 'The Order of the Community' that Barth has the most to say about this critical text. Barth begins the section by noting it is important to 'consider the form in which there is accomplished the upbuilding of the community (understood as its growth and upholding). The form essential to that is order.'³⁹ Barth then launches into an extended discussion of the dogmatics of canon law, believing that 'the order of the particular event in which the existence of the community finds not merely its most concrete manifestation but also its central point, namely, public worship' is especially in need of biblical grounding and dogmatic reflection.⁴⁰ Barth eventually grounds his assertion that 'all law in the Church has its original seat in the event of divine worship, and that it is primarily established in [the congregational] happening' by appealing to Matthew 18:20 and arguing that within it we find reasons for holding that 'in that which is done and takes place in the coming together of these men their King and Lord is present and at work, the One who is as such the source and guarantee of the law which obtains for them'.⁴¹ Barth then appeals to four examples to make his case: in the community's words, mutual recognition of each other as brothers (and sisters), purpose of being unitedly strengthened and preserved to eternal life, and prayers for one another, it is abundantly clear there is a power which manifests corporately that which cannot be experienced privately apart from the divine presence which is only promised *amidst* the assembly.⁴² Bender summarises that for Barth Matthew 18:20 provides evidence that

the church has its source in divine worship, for it is in its worship that the community is established as Christ becomes present through the Spirit where 'two or three are gathered together' in his name. [Thus] Christ is himself the source and

³⁶Bender, *Karl Barth's Christological Ecclesiology*, p. 221.

³⁷Barth, *CD IV/2*, pp. 656–7.

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 658.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 676.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 678.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, pp. 698–9.

⁴²*Ibid.*, pp. 699–706.

basis of the church's order and law ... as he is attested in Scripture and thus made present in the worship of the Christian community.⁴³

For Barth, it is hard to overestimate the centrality of the assembly for the enactment of Christ's promise that he really will be in and among his people, and Matthew 18:20 is by far the most frequent and significant proof text in that regard.

Barth on the sacraments

I turn now to a third dimension of Barth's mature ecclesiology that has import for assessing its resonance with and potential to inform the evangelical, free church tradition, and that is his understanding of the sacraments. Here it is important to remember that Barth planned to finish *Church Dogmatics* IV with a chapter on the 'ethics of reconciliation' that would have included reflections on baptism, the Lord's Prayer and the Lord's Supper; the only part he was able to complete, however, was a fragment on baptism titled 'The Foundation of the Christian Life'. The intended context of theological ethics is important to recognise, for as Vanhoozer rightly observes, the key question for Barth when it comes to the sacraments is this: how does God's action relate to human, specifically ecclesial, action?⁴⁴ Once again, Barth exhibits a deep concern that the divine and human not be conflated, particularly that human actions not be equated with the once-for-all reconciling work of Christ. At the same time, Barth refused to see the sacraments as mere 'add-ons' no longer necessary or meaningful in light of divine action. Vanhoozer nicely summarises Barth's solution here: 'To the action of God there corresponds a genuinely human action, such that the divine and human actions are neither confused nor separated.'⁴⁵ Of course, this too follows a christological correlation: Christ's objective, redemptive work doesn't need to be repeated, nor does it require any sort of human supplement, mediation or subjectification; rather, the objective work of the God-man includes the subjective within itself, calling forth and enabling a properly human and ecclesial action as response rather than imitation.

Given the fact that we only have Barth on baptism in the *Dogmatics*, we'll use it as an illustrative case study of Barth on the sacraments. As his commentary on Romans makes clear, Barth began his career understanding baptism as a sacrament, full stop; from his essay 'The Doctrine of the Sacraments' (1929) it is also clear that Barth initially held to the legitimacy of infant baptism.⁴⁶ But by the time he publishes his *The Teaching of the Church regarding Baptism* (1943), he begins expressing some significant concerns about the justification of infant baptism.⁴⁷ Anthony Cross summarises Barth's criticisms of the practice: he felt that New Testament evidence for infant baptism was insufficient, notions of vicarious faith and real infant faith failed to hold water and that infant baptism was unable to account for the necessary response which ought to

⁴³Bender, *Karl Barth's Christological Ecclesiology*, p. 215.

⁴⁴Personal conversation with Kevin Vanhoozer, fall 2017. I am heavily indebted to Vanhoozer for the summary of Barth's understanding of the sacraments that follows.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Baptism is a sacrament of truth and holiness; and it is a sacrament, because it is the sign which directs us to God's revelation of eternal life. ... It does not merely signify eternal reality, but is eternal reality ... Baptism mediates the new creation ... [as] a means of grace.' Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, p. 192.

⁴⁷Here see Nico den Bok, 'Barth on Baptism: Concerning a Crucial Dimension of Ecclesiology', *Zeitschrift Für Dialektische Theologie. Supplement Series* 5 (2011), p. 137.

manifest in the believer following their baptism.⁴⁸ By *Church Dogmatics* IV/4 Barth had become explicit that infant baptism was unacceptable to him because ‘the Christian life will and can begin only on the basis of [one’s] own liberation by God, [one’s] own decision ... The personal faith of the candidate is indispensable to baptism.’⁴⁹ In other words, infant baptism couldn’t fully embody the creaturely response that Barth required as he continually understood the sacraments through an ethical lens.

However, the bigger bombshell of *Church Dogmatics* IV/4 was his outright abandonment of a sacramental understanding of baptism (and of the supper). Vanhoozer summarises the trajectory of Barth’s career in this regard:

In his earlier work, Barth treated baptism as a ‘definite sign’ of the objectivity of God’s work in a creaturely form. ... At the end of his life, however, the emphasis on Jesus as the first sacrament leads him to reject all other sacraments. Barth was particularly concerned that sacramental accounts of baptism confused creaturely action with the unique, finished work of Christ.⁵⁰

Indeed, Barth himself expressed exactly that notion when he stated that ‘Baptism responds to a mystery, the sacrament of the history of Jesus Christ, of His resurrection, of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. It is not itself, however, a mystery or sacrament.’⁵¹ Barth’s primary concern in this departure from the dominant ecclesial tradition was to guard the all-important distinction between the actions of God and the actions of humanity in salvation, a concern that manifests in the summary statement provided at the beginning of IV/4. First, Barth makes it abundantly clear that a ‘man’s turning to faithfulness to God, and consequently to calling upon Him, is the work of this faithful God which ... becomes a new beginning of life as his baptism with the Holy Spirit’.⁵² God alone is the gracious source of human salvation, and this salvation is marked by a baptism which God himself administers to bring newness of life. Only once this is established can he continue:

The first step of this life of faithfulness to God, the Christian life, is a man’s baptism with water, which by his own decision is requested of the community and which is administered by the community, as the binding of confession of his obedience, conversion and hope, made in prayer for God’s grace, wherein he honours the freedom of this grace.⁵³

Vanhoozer thus can conclude that, for Barth, ‘Baptism isn’t so much a means of grace as it is a means of human response to a prior grace. ... God baptizes by the Spirit; humans baptize with water.’⁵⁴ We can see here that Barth is going to great lengths to guard any conflation of God’s action and human action; the latter is always in response

⁴⁸Anthony Cross, ‘Baptism in the Theology of John Calvin and Karl Barth’, in Neil B. MacDonald and Carl R. Trueman (eds), *Calvin, Barth and Reformed Theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2008), p. 79.

⁴⁹Barth, *CD* IV/4, pp. 183–4, 186.

⁵⁰Personal conversation with Kevin Vanhoozer, fall 2017. For more on Barth’s understanding of the humanity of Jesus as ‘the first sacrament’ see *CD* II/1, pp. 53–4.

⁵¹Barth, *CD* IV/4, p. 102.

⁵²*Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁵³*Ibid.*

⁵⁴Personal conversation with Kevin Vanhoozer, fall 2017.

to and distinct from the former, grounded in the fundamental conviction that the 'Church is neither author, dispenser, nor mediator of grace and its revelation. It is the subject neither of the work of salvation nor the Word of salvation. It cannot act as such.'⁵⁵

But if this is true, then Barth could only conclude that the majority church tradition had erred in practising infant baptism and in understanding the practice as a sacrament. Why? Because baptism is inherently about human response to divine grace (a principle paradigmatic of all Barth's ethics).⁵⁶ Yet infants clearly can't respond in this way, neither in the faith that receives the divine action nor in the ethical response that naturally follows from such reception. In fact, Barth can go so far as to say that

It is the perverted ecclesiastical practice of administering a baptism in which the baptized supposedly becomes a Christian unwittingly and unwillingly that has obscured ... the once-for-allness of this beginning, replacing it by the comfortable notion that there is not needed any such beginning of Christian existence. ... We must not allow infant baptism to induce in us this comfortable notion.⁵⁷

Sacramental paedobaptism, according to Barth, clouds the picture of the church's primary identity as witness, an identity that is enacted as God's quickening action enables his people to recognize and then testify to their elect status in Christ. Barth's later position on baptism, then, is consistent with his deep-seated ecclesiological conviction that the assembled church is a herald always responding and testifying to, rather than repeating or enacting, divine action. He proclaims in this regard that the 'sacraments are nothing whatever but response ... All we can do is witness how God speaks [and acts]. Witness ... is [our] response; the whole life of the church from top to bottom is nothing but response to the Word of God.'⁵⁸ This is why Barth can say at the very end of his life: 'I regard baptism, in brief, as an act, a confession, a prayer of faith, or of the obedience of faith – not as a "means" of grace and salvation, not as a "sacrament".'⁵⁹ However, we must be clear at this point that Barth's view of baptism is not 'merely symbolic' and does not understand the practice as an optional 'add-on' to the Christian life; on the contrary Barth can say, in the long tradition of understanding the sacraments as 'visible words' which give pictorial and tangible witness to the gospel, that they are 'full of meaning and power. They are thus the simplest, and yet in their very simplicity the most eloquent, elements in the witness of peace on earth among the men in whom God is well-pleased.'⁶⁰ For Barth, this is no faint praise.

Assessing Barth as resource for evangelical free church ecclesiology

Having surveyed the most relevant aspects of Barth's ecclesiology, we can now turn towards a final assessment of our primary question: does Barth's ecclesiology offer a compelling and compatible theological resource for evangelical, free church theologians as they seek to cultivate a more robust ecclesiology that is consistent with the convictions of

⁵⁵Barth, *CD IV/4*, p. 32.

⁵⁶Thus Barth can say of this tandem: 'Without this unity of the two in their distinction there could be no Christian ethics.' *CD IV/4*, p. 41.

⁵⁷Barth, *CD IV/3.2*, pp. 517–18.

⁵⁸Cited in John Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), p. 166.

⁵⁹Karl Barth, *Letters, 1961–1968* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1981), p. 96.

⁶⁰Barth, *CD IV/3.2*, p. 901.

their tradition regarding the church? We must acknowledge that there is reason to be hesitant here: from Barth's largely tarnished reputation among evangelicals (thanks in large part to Van Til's initial assessments) to his well-known criticism of Pietism (of which certain segments of the free church tradition have drunk deeply), there is good reason to think this isn't exactly a match made in Basel. Barth's doctrine of scripture, and especially his insistence on the indirect identity thesis that the Bible 'becomes' rather than 'is' the Word of God has often been the most formidable 'dividing wall of hostility' between Barth and evangelicals and has frequently led the latter to question the former's credentials as a 'theologian of the book'. Inerrancy has in many ways become a defining mark of conservative evangelicalism in America, and Barth is no inerrantist. Barth's doctrine of election has similarly proved to be a stumbling block, especially because it has led many evangelicals to conclude (despite his claims to the contrary) that Barth is either a universalist or that his position inevitably leads to universalism. On top of that, Barth's actualistic conception of being (including the being of God, scripture, and the church) has often been confusing if not alienating to many evangelical interlocutors; many end up asking the question: if all being is in becoming, how can we be sure that the truths testified to in the Bible (about God, humanity, the world, salvation, etc.) are objectively true from moment to moment? Additionally, the language barrier and the different cultural contexts of Germany/Switzerland and the United States (where the evangelical and free church traditions are alive and well) have not helped make the dialogue around these contentious issues any easier.

Nevertheless, there is good reason to think that these initial roadblocks are not insurmountable in terms of making Barth more palatable to evangelical and free church theologians. For instance, with regard to Barth's doctrine of scripture, there are some well thought-out responses by evangelical theologians who argue that Barth's view of the Bible is still quite high and therefore the theological resources he offers can indeed be appropriated, especially if it is able to be shown that Barth's explicit doctrine of scripture is ultimately inconsistent with his implicit theological emphases and interpretive practices (i.e. that Barth's exegetical instincts betray a higher view of scripture's authority and trustworthiness than he directly acknowledges).⁶¹ Similar work has been done regarding Barth's doctrine of election and the accompanying concern of universalism; though Barth does make his (innovative) doctrine of election a centre of his theological project, this need not render everything in the *Dogmatics* beyond the pale.⁶² And Barth's actualism need not be a stumbling block either, if we take Barth's own advice to 'pack light' when it comes to the philosophical assumptions that we bring to scripture and the theological task; by Barth's own recommendation, we should feel free to discard his actualism for another metaphysical framework if we find a better supplemental philosophy to assist us in the work of doing theology as a distinct science that has its own methodology and unique subject matter.⁶³

⁶¹For a compelling critique of Barth's doctrine of scripture toward the end of reconciliation with evangelical theology, see Vanhoozer, 'A Person of the Book'; and Mark D. Thompson's 'Witness to the Word: on Barth's Doctrine of Scripture', in David Gibson and Daniel Strange (eds), *Engaging with Barth: Contemporary Evangelical Critiques* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008).

⁶²See David Gibson, 'The Day of God's Mercy: Romans 9–11 in Barth's Doctrine of Election', in Gibson and Strange, *Engaging with Barth*, pp. 136–68; and Michael Horton, 'A Stony Jar: The Legacy of Karl Barth for Evangelical Theology', *ibid.*, pp. 346–81.

⁶³See Michael Horton's 'Covenant, Election, and Incarnation: Evaluating Barth's Actualist Christology', in McCormack and Anderson, *Barth and American Evangelicalism*, pp. 112–47; and relatedly, Henri Blocher's 'Karl Barth's Christocentric Method', in Gibson and Strange, *Engaging with Barth*, 21–54.

With these defeaters initially abated, we can now directly address the question: could Barth's christological ecclesiology really be a fit for evangelical, free church ecclesiology and assist it in further theological development? Some have observed the initial resonance of these odd bedfellows, perhaps most notably John Howard Yoder, who makes a compelling case that 'since IV/2 there is no refuting Barth's commitment to the free church vision'.⁶⁴ Yoder can describe what he calls 'Barth's incomplete pilgrimage' as 'being on the way to what Anglo-Saxon ecclesiological thinking calls the free church'.⁶⁵ For Yoder the supporting concrete examples of his 'free church sympathies' include 'Barth's use of the Bible [as] that of the free churchman' and 'Barth's preference for *Gemeinde* [over *Kirche*] ... [which] means the *local* gathering'.⁶⁶ Tracey Stout, in reflecting upon Yoder's assessment, concludes similarly that 'Barth developed his free church understanding over time', and that his

noted preference for the more concrete term 'community,' over the more abstract word 'church,' was ... a move toward the ecclesiological understanding of German-speaking Baptists and pietists who regarded the church as the assembly or congregation ... [conveying Barth's understanding] that the church is not a vague ideal, but a concrete, visible people.⁶⁷

In short, there is good reason to think that the mature Barth and the evangelical, free church tradition might be more compatible than has often been recognized.

Yoder's reading has not been without its detractors, however, most notably George Hunsinger in his essay 'Karl Barth and the Politics of Sectarian Protestantism'. But interestingly, Hunsinger concedes some portions of Yoder's contention, including the fact that, 'It is obviously true that Barth's later doctrine of the church shows some strong affinities with the free church tradition.'⁶⁸ We have seen these arenas of affinity demonstrated over the course of this essay. Beginning with the witness of the church, we saw Barth's summary image of the church as witness bears a strong resemblance to the free church trumpeting of mission as the primary calling of the church. George is thus right to note that 'Barth's emphasis on the church as herald or witness resonates strongly with evangelical perceptions', and we could certainly say this is particularly true of the free church subset of that tradition.⁶⁹ The pragmatic impulse to 'get the gospel of God out' that is so characteristic of free church evangelicalism turns out to have greater theological grounding than it might seem initially, for the impulse can be shown to be properly grounded in the biblically justifiable conviction that the nature of the church is primarily martyrological (Matt 10:18, Acts 1:8, Rev 6:9) and thus that its proper work is, from first to last, kerygmatic (Rom 16:25; 2 Cor 5:19; 1 Pet 2:9). There is unquestionable resonance with Barth's ecclesiological emphases here.

Moving on to the assembly of the church, we can see that Barth's discussion of the gathering of the community resonates strongly with a free church account of the

⁶⁴John Howard Yoder, 'Karl Barth: How his Mind Kept Changing', in Donald K. McKim (ed.), *How Karl Barth Changed my Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), p. 171.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 169.

⁶⁶Ibid., pp. 169–70.

⁶⁷Tracey Mark Stout, 'Free and Faithful Witness: Karl Barth on Believers' Baptism and the Church's Relation to the State', *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 33/2 (2006), pp. 173–4.

⁶⁸George Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), p. 120.

⁶⁹George, 'Running Like a Herald', p. 207.

church, especially because Barth makes it clear he has the church as local congregation primarily in view, as when he remarks that, 'Each community has its own locality ... But in that locality, as established by the Lord of all the communities, it should be the one complete community. ... The one church exists in its totality in each of the individual communities.'⁷⁰ We've found that Barth's theological engagement with the biblical testimony, particularly Matthew 18:20, demonstrates Yoder's claim that his use of the Bible resembles that of the free church theologian in many ways, especially when he concludes from this verse that 'It is in the concrete event of its gathering that the community has its invisible and also its visible being ... that the Lord Himself is in the midst of it by His Spirit.'⁷¹ Barth's extended exegesis of Matthew 18:20 comes largely in the context of church order, which he insists dogmatics must address because it is the foundation from which canon law springs to direct the particulars of ecclesial life. So while not vying for congregationalism in particular points of polity (he believes polity belongs in the realm of canon law and thus that legitimate diversity will manifest in various ecclesial traditions), he can insist 'we have to consider all questions of that which is lawful and right in the Church in the light of its assembling for public worship'.⁷² Far from merely affirming a vague sense of Christ's spiritual presence among any conglomerate of two or three Christians who happen to be in proximity, Barth interprets Matthew 18:20 with a depth of theological insight, seeing that it establishes a 'christological-ecclesiological concept of the community' and provides the basis for seeing the local congregation as a constituted form of that Christian community by virtue of having its relationship to Christ as 'its principle of order, its basic law'.⁷³ This is certainly music to free church ears, but for Barth the ecclesiological primacy of the gathered assembly emerges not from a pre-established commitment to congregational polity but rather out of a close reading of scripture, one that demonstrates great sensitivity to its canonical context and true subject matter. For evangelical, free church theologians this is theology properly exhibiting the all-important principle of *sola Scriptura*, and it is a tremendous help in overcoming initial impassés and enabling Barth to be further embraced as a 'theologian of the book' among their number.

And, finally, in the sacraments of the church we can see how Barth's later views, specifically on baptism, resonate with certain free church concerns and emphases. For one, his views clearly connect the sacraments back to the theme of the church as witness, a theme which resonates quite powerfully with evangelical and free church sensibilities. Secondly, we can note that much (though certainly not all) of the free church tradition rejects the practice of infant baptism out of a conviction that only professing believers are candidates for baptism. In this sense we can see that large swaths of the free church tradition would resonate with Barth's belief that the baptism of infants inevitably frames the act 'docetically' in a way that compromises the significance of the human response to grace by conflating it with the divine giving of grace. Free church theologians hold strongly to the idea, borrowing Vanhoozer's summary of Barth's view here: 'Discipleship cannot be inherited. The meaning of baptism lies precisely in its correspondence as the first human act responding to a prior divine act. In short, baptism

⁷⁰Barth, *CD IV/1*, pp. 672–3.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, p. 671.

⁷²Barth, *CD IV/2*, p. 706.

⁷³*Ibid.*, p. 680.

primarily has an *ethical* meaning.⁷⁴ The majority of free church theologians would argue that, indeed, baptising infants clouds the important distinction between human and divine action and contributes toward a mentality that Christian faith can be inherited rather than insisting that it emanates out of God's gracious initiative alone.

Thirdly, the free church tradition has by and large articulated a less 'sacramental' view of the practices of baptism and the Lord's Supper (often referring to them as 'ordinances'). In fact, they have often framed these practices through the lens of a proper *response* to the grace of God rather than a *communication* of the grace of God. So Barth's understanding that baptism is our initiation into the Christian life, one of free response to God's gracious initiative in Christ, resonates with a free church concern that baptism and the supper not be viewed salvifically but rather doxologically. For Barth, it is our baptism by the Holy Spirit that applies Christ's redemptive work to us, the act by which we become free to respond to God as we ought, free to be as we already are in Christ; our baptism with water is, as Vanhoozer summarises Barth's position, 'a human ethical echo of Christ's work ... the first great act of Christian obedience'.⁷⁵ In this important sense, free church theologians would agree: the sacraments don't cross the chasm between the divine and the human, but rather only attest or bear witness that the gap has been spanned by Christ himself. In other words, the free church tradition would agree with Barth that the sacraments, as set forth in the majority Christian tradition, are too 'religious'.

As all these component parts are taken together, we are right to conclude with Stout that 'Barth's ecclesiology ... resembles the [free church] view of the church, [which has] consistently emphasized the reality of the local congregation as the church ... [and] insisted upon the awakening and regeneration of all members of the church'.⁷⁶ This is significant because Barth's ecclesiology, as I have argued from the beginning, is deeply grounded in christology and the doctrine of God via election, and this makes Barth's doctrine of the church a resource which could provide greater theological funding exactly where the free church tradition needs it most. One place this is abundantly clear is the sacraments: Barth's full-orbed and theologically grounded view that a pure sacramental framing of baptism and the supper conflates human response and divine initiative demonstrates much more nuance than the mere memorialism often found in free churches. Barth's constructive critique of the majority tradition has great potential to prompt a more robust free church theological account of the sacraments and of the gathered church that administers them.

Another place we see the potential for Barth's theology to cultivate further theological development of free church ecclesiology is his understanding of the believing individual's integral relation to the assembled church. Barth's account, even though it emphasises the need for personal, ethical response to the gospel (i.e. no inherited discipleship), is allergic to the individualism which can at times plague the free church tradition. There is a deep-seated theological reason for this allergy: Barth's belief that from 'the very outset Jesus Christ did not envisage individual followers, disciples, and witnesses, but a plurality of such united by him both with himself and with one another'.⁷⁷ Barth's theological orientation also causes him to eschew any sense of

⁷⁴Personal conversation with Kevin Vanhoozer, fall 2017.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Tracey Mark Stout, *A Fellowship of Baptism: Karl Barth's Ecclesiology in Light of his Understanding of Baptism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2010), pp. 99, 102.

⁷⁷Barth, *CD*, IV/3.2, p. 681.

volunteerism or pragmatism in accounting for the church's existence, or even for the church's congregational gathering. He insists that the church 'can never be understood as a society which men join of themselves and in which they are active in the pursuit of their own ends' and that members of the church 'have not met by accident, or gathered together arbitrarily, but have been brought together by the revelation of His name ... [and thus] are not left to their own devices in their common action, but their King and Lord Himself gives them direction and orders and commands and consolation and promises'.⁷⁸ Stout is thus right to note that:

On a sociological level Barth's understanding of the church is indeed voluntary. ... [But] on a stronger, theological level the church is not voluntary. ... [Rather] the Christian community is a fellowship of the baptized. The Christian life is a fellow-humanity among all those whom Jesus has awakened. The church is a communion of saints.⁷⁹

Indeed, George can even go on to assert:

By grounding the church so completely within the ... Christological framework of his theology, Barth presents a very high ecclesiology, one that stands as a corrective to the rugged individualism and 'Jesus-in-my-heart-only' piety that marks too much of evangelical life today. ... He teaches that the church is not a mere option or add-on to the Christian life, but that it is integral to the eternal purposes of God and indispensable for faithful discipleship.⁸⁰

If George can say this of evangelicalism at large, how much more might he say this of the free church tradition specifically, a tradition badly in need of what Barth brings to the table. In this regard Bender can say:

By grounding the church in the doctrine of election (and thus within the doctrine of God) ... Barth preserves the divine initiative in relation to the church. He thus ensures that the church is viewed as part of God's eternal covenantal intention and decision, and not simply as a corporate body composed of individuals who willingly join themselves together upon the basis of a shared religious experience. For this reason, Barth insists that the proper descriptive mode for understanding the church must be theological, rather than sociological or historical.⁸¹

In short, it seems clear that Barth can provide a vitally needed 'ecclesiology from above' or 'from before' to a tradition which has often been content with ecclesiological minimalism and missiological pragmatism.

Yes, the extent to which Barth's doctrine of the church is grounded in Christ (and thus in Barth's controversial doctrine of election) and the distortions such christocentrism might have on the doctrinal locus in question must continue to be critically assessed. If the evangelical, free church tradition is to appropriate Barth's theology,

⁷⁸Barth, *CD*, IV/2, pp. 654, 699.

⁷⁹Stout, 'Free and Faithful Witness', pp. 180, 186.

⁸⁰George, 'Running Like a Herald', pp. 206–7.

⁸¹Kimlyn J Bender, 'Karl Barth's Doctrine of the Church in Contemporary Anglo-American Ecclesiological Conversation', *Zeitschrift für Dialektische Theologie* 21/1 (2005), p. 85.

this is a necessary condition of that work. But thankfully that task already has a wonderful start, and it points in the direction of Barth indeed offering the evangelical, free church tradition a compatible resource that can fund deeper theological development of its ecclesiology, one that would take it beyond the church as mere voluntary organisation or as the pragmatic means of mission.⁸² This is not to say that Barth alone is the solitary resource to fund such development, a silver bullet. Far from it: I have tried to be honest about the liabilities which attend an appropriation of Barth's theology and the issues which must be navigated, particularly from an evangelical vantage point, if the project of appropriation is to succeed. Part of that success will involve identifying other theological resources in addition to Barth's work, some of which build upon his greatest insights with less baggage for evangelicals.⁸³ But when it comes to the free church tradition specifically, it is hard to imagine a better initial resource for the work of funding a more robust, *theological* ecclesiology. Both in terms of substantive theological content and in terms of resonance with the overall contours of the free church tradition, Barth will be hard to match. For now, let us simply end by reflecting on Barth's firm conviction, very much in alignment with a free church vantage point:

The smallest village church can be more important than the whole great Amsterdam Conference, if such profession is made [within it] in accordance with the 54th Question of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, where, in answer to the question what we believe of the Church, it is stated ... 'That the Son of God may gather, defend and preserve from the whole human race a chosen congregation for eternal life through His Spirit and Word in the unity of the true faith from the beginning of the world even to the end.'⁸⁴

⁸²The collection of essays in Gibson and Strange, *Engaging with Barth*, and Chung, *Barth and Evangelical Theology*, are exemplary in this regard.

⁸³The work of John Webster represents such a resource. Webster, believing that 'dogmatics is the schematic and analytical presentation of the matter of the gospel', is perhaps a more reliable guide for evangelical theology than Barth. His theological ecclesiology is similarly amenable to the free church tradition (though he was Anglican), following and yet building upon Barth in emphasising the church as witness, its peculiar visibility, etc. See John Webster, 'Biblical Reasoning', *Anglican Theological Review* 90/4 (Fall 2008), p. 750.

⁸⁴Karl Barth, *Against the Stream: Shorter Post-War Writings, 1946–52* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1954), pp. 76–7.

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