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The Reformers as fathers of the church: Luther and Calvin in the thought of Karl Barth

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Abstract

Karl Barth's understanding of Luther and Calvin is not best illumined by an examination of his direct citation of their work, but by a consideration of his description of their vocation as church fathers as outlined in *Church Dogmatics, I/2*, a position held with remarkable consistency over the course of his career. Barth's discussion of Luther and Calvin there not only sets forth his understanding of the Reformers in a historical genealogy of revelation and its witnesses, but places them in an ordering of church authorities. Moreover, his description of their unique vocation sheds important light upon his understanding of the modern discipline of church history itself. His treatment of the Reformers thus both exemplifies and follows from his conviction that church history is not an independent theological discipline but can only accompany the central disciplines of exegetical, dogmatic and practical theology.

Key words: Karl Barth; John Calvin; church fathers; church history; Martin Luther

In the academic discipline of textual criticism, it is often said that manuscripts should be weighed and not simply counted. What this means is that in attempting to determine the original wording of the Greek text of the New Testament, the number of manuscripts that witness a particular reading is not as important as the age and significance of the manuscripts that give this wording. In brief, many extant manuscripts might possess the same reading, but they may all have been later copies that include a demonstrably mistaken transcription of an even earlier text. In this regard, a few earlier manuscripts may be much more significant for determining a reading than many later ones, for numerous later copies are less important than the existence of early documents closer in time and fidelity to the original. The point is simply that number does not overshadow substance, and the quality of references is more significant than their quantity.

Something similar should be remembered when one looks at Karl Barth's evaluation of Luther and Calvin. If one were simply to assess the most important engagement with Luther by Barth in the crude terms of frequency of references to Luther himself, then the most important work by Barth on Luther would be the lectures he gave very early in his academic career in Göttingen in the winter semester of 1922–23 for a course on Zwingli, with his lectures on Calvin in the previous summer semester of 1922 a distant

second.¹ With regard to references to Calvin, these two works could simply be reversed, with *The Theology of Calvin* lectures containing the most references to the Reformer, and the *Theology of Zwingli* lectures coming in second.² Barth's early historical and theological attention to Luther and Calvin as figures in their own right would never be replicated on the scale or with the intensity of these early lectures. Yet Barth's mature understanding of Luther and Calvin far outstrips these lectures in significance of judgement even while demonstrating lines of continuity in assessment. In truth, Barth's early lectures were, by his own later admission, the result of feverish work to master the foundational thinkers of Reformed theology – a tradition that he belonged to in name but which did not truly know.³ Hence, his first theological lectures were historical studies of Calvin, Zwingli and the Reformed Confessions (and the Heidelberg Catechism) in order to understand the Reformers themselves and the Reformed heritage. This is what occupied him during his early years in Göttingen.⁴

For all of the importance of Barth's examination in these lectures of Luther's interaction and influence with regard to Zwingli and Calvin, it would be a mistake to see this early period as the one where Barth was most indebted to Luther for his own thought and where Luther displayed the most influence upon his work. In these early lectures on Zwingli and Calvin, Barth was learning a tradition, and his engagement with Calvin and Zwingli entailed a new concentration on the theology of Luther as well, for, as the pre-eminent first-generation Reformer who influenced both, his significance could not be ignored. Barth wrestled with Luther's thought especially in the Zwingli lectures as he examined the debates on the Lord's Supper that came to a head at the Marburg Colloquy in 1529 and pondered the inability of Zwingli and Luther to reach agreement there on sacramental questions. In a very important respect, at this juncture Luther was for Barth primarily a character in a debate with Zwingli, and thus a foil for the Reformed tradition that Barth was attempting to learn and make his own. His research led not only to the production of these Zwingli lectures, but also to the important essay

¹By rough count, there are more than 660 direct references to Luther in the *Theology of Zwingli* and more than 280 in the *Theology of Calvin*: see Barth, *Die Theologie Zwinglies 1922/1923* (GA II.40), ed. Matthias Freudenberg (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2004); and Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995). The third source for most mentions of Luther and Calvin alike is the 1923 lectures on the Reformed Confessions: see Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, trans. Darrell L. Guder and Judith J. Guder (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

²By rough count there are more than 950 references to Calvin in *Theology of Calvin*, and more than 280 in the *Theology of Zwingli*. By themselves, of course, such numbers mean very little. George Hunsinger is thus correct when he states: 'What Barth learned from Luther cannot be appreciated through statistical calculations' (*Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), p. 280, n. 2). Again, it is the quality and use of references, not their frequency, that is of importance.

³Barth could remark in an interview late in his life that, though he had read Luther and Calvin before his first academic appointment, he was not a true confessional Reformed person (*konfessioneller Reformierter*) when he entered it, and that upon assuming this position he had to engage with the thought of Reformed theology with seriousness for the first time (*Jetzt mußte ich mich gründlich mit reformierter Theologie beschäftigen, zum ersten Mal eigentlich*). It was during this period that he studied Zwingli, Luther and Calvin with concentrated intensity – a time, as he recalled, of tremendous labour. See Karl Barth, 'Interview von H.A. Fischer-Barnicol, Südwestfunk (5.5.1964)', in *Gespräche 1964–1968* (GA IV.28), ed. Eberhard Busch (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1996), p. 151.

⁴See Barth's letter to Eduard Thurneysen of 22 Jan. 1922, in *Barth–Thurneysen Briefwechsel 1921–1930* (GA V.4), ed. Eduard Thurneysen (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1974), p. 29.

of 1923, 'Luther's Doctrine of the Eucharist: Its Basis and Purpose', where he brought to culmination his reflections on Luther's position on the Lord's Supper and connected these sacramental convictions to other important theological questions that would continue to haunt his lifelong reflection on Luther and the Lutheran tradition.⁵

Just as significant for understanding Barth's estimation of Luther as these extensive interactions with him in the Zwingli and Calvin lectures are his weighty (if brief and passing) references to him in the ensuing years. These references portray Luther not predominantly as a historical character in a debate with Zwingli, but as a figure in his own right that turned the course of history in the Reformation and stood not only as the foremost representative of its accomplishment, but as one in a line of faithful witnesses to God and God's revelation.

This assessment of Luther was prefigured in Barth's famous commentary on Romans. In the preface to the second edition (1921), Barth famously mentioned the apostle Paul, Franz Overbeck, Plato, Immanuel Kant, Søren Kierkegaard and Fyodor Dostoevsky as significant influences upon his thought.⁶ Notably absent from this initial list were Luther and Calvin. Yet elsewhere in the commentary (as well as in prefaces to later editions) the early importance of both Reformers for Barth is evident, and the reason for this is their exposition of scripture. What Barth discovered in Luther and Calvin was an approach to scripture that engaged the subject matter of the text in a way that was not limited to the historical questions and methods of his contemporaries. In the preface to the second edition, Barth lauded Luther and Calvin's insight into reading scripture in contrast to the historical critics of his own time, citing 'that creative energy which Luther exercised with intuitive certainty in his exegesis; which underlies the systematic interpretation of Calvin; and which is at least attempted by such modern writers as Hofmann, J. T. Beck, Godet, and Schlatter'.⁷ Similarly, in the preface to the third edition (1922), Barth could commend not only Calvin's biblical exegesis but also the understanding of the inspiration of scripture that gave coherence to his exegetical practice.⁸ These comments and others show that Barth valued Luther and Calvin for both their exegetical approach and their theological understanding of scripture's importance during this period, although their absence from his list of significant influences in the preface to the second edition remains noteworthy.

In a short time, however, Barth's list of important persons began to change. It became a list not of idiosyncratic and eclectic theological (and philosophical?) influences, but of theological heritage and confessional continuity – a theological genealogy of faithful witnesses to God's revelation extended through church history.⁹ A year after the publication of the second edition of the *Romberbrief*, for example, in the lecture, 'The Word of God as the Task of Theology', Barth provided a list of persons that was now marked by the intentional identification of a historic line of faithful witnesses to divine revelation. This is evident in his placement of Luther and Calvin in a genealogy of true theological paragons in which Barth hoped also to situate himself: 'I would

⁵Barth, 'Luther's Doctrine of the Eucharist: Its Basis and Purpose', in *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings 1920–1928*, trans. Louise P. Smith (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), pp. 74–111.

⁶Karl Barth, 'Preface to the Second Edition', in *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: OUP, 1968 [1933]), pp. 3–4.

⁷Ibid., p. 7; cf. p. 22.

⁸Barth, 'Preface to the Third Edition', in *The Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 18–19.

⁹In point of fact, this type of list was already prefigured in the Romans commentary, but there it was more a list of association than of ancestry. See Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 57, 117; cf. p. 137.

like to conclude this discussion with a historical footnote. If my reflections here are decisive in any way, then the line of ancestors upon which we have to orient ourselves runs through *Kierkegaard* to *Luther* and *Calvin*, to *Paul* to *Jeremiah*. Many are used to calling upon these familiar names.¹⁰ As Barth emphasised, this list does not include Schleiermacher.¹¹ Indeed, Barth was working to identify not only those who belonged in this faithful line of witnesses, but also those who did not, and particularly those who in his view had betrayed the decisive insights of the Reformers.

It should perhaps be noted that in time Kierkegaard himself would drop in Barth's estimation and would not be included on the same plane as the others in this list of faithful witnesses, but of most importance for our present purpose is to register that Barth here holds Luther and Calvin in the highest regard and places them in the same ancestral line as the prophet Jeremiah and the apostle Paul. Yet despite this straightforward commendation of Luther and Calvin, Barth also circumscribes their dignity, demarcating their witness to the truth of God's revelation from revelation itself, insisting that, regardless of their faithfulness, even they can only point to what God alone can do, for 'our goal is the speaking of *God himself*'.¹² This was another conviction Barth would hold to the end, and it was a thoroughly dialectical one. On the one hand, the Reformers were of pre-eminent importance, standing in the line of Jeremiah and Paul. Yet on the other hand, they had no true importance except insofar as they gave witness to God's revelation, pointing beyond themselves to this Word that comes from God in their attendance to holy scripture. This recognition of the Reformers as exemplary witnesses to God's revelation by virtue of their service as pre-eminent expositors of holy scripture is the basis of Barth's understanding of Luther and Calvin as church fathers. It is also the basis for his distinction between them and prophets and apostles like Jeremiah and Paul, who, as biblical witnesses, possess an authority Luther and Calvin do not.¹³

Though Barth treated Luther and Calvin as a pair with regard to their importance for the Reformation and their practice of faithful exegesis of scripture, he nevertheless did draw distinctions between them and the confessional traditions that followed in their wake. In his lectures on Calvin in 1922, Barth emphasised the singular role that Luther played for the church's Reformation, writing:

¹⁰Barth, 'The Word of God as the Task of Theology', in *The Word of God and Theology*, trans. Amy Marga (London: T&T Clark, 2011), p. 182; cf. p. 183.

¹¹Barth believed that Schleiermacher represented the end result of the betrayal of the Reformation, a conviction he expressed to his students in Göttingen: 'Protestantism has not in fact had any greater theologian since the days of the reformers. But this theologian has led us all into this dead end! This is an oppressive and almost intolerable thought. How can it really be reconciled with confidence in Protestantism's power of truth? Or should we in fact say that this was and is the normal and legitimate continuation of the Reformation, the completion of the work of Luther and Calvin: this doctrine of the feeling of absolute dependence or of the universum and all that is connected with it? If it were, for me the right thing to do would be to become a Roman Catholic again.' See Barth, *The Theology of Schleiermacher: Lectures at Göttingen, Winter Semester of 1923/24*, ed. Dietrich Ritschl, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1982), p. 259.

¹²Barth, 'The Word of God as the Task of Theology', p. 196.

¹³It is important to note, however, that Barth had at this point not yet elaborated the technical distinction between primary and secondary witnesses to God's revelation, which came only with his reflections upon apostolicity and canon in his Göttingen theology lectures, which commenced in 1924.

The man who thought out first, and with most originality and force, the basic anti-medieval and, as we saw last time, the basic antimodern thought of the Reformation, that of the theology of the cross, was neither Zwingli nor Calvin but Luther. Both Zwingli and Calvin learned from Luther, not without at once contradicting him, not without giving their own shape to what they learned, yet learning from him at the decisive point. Luther's Reformation was not the whole Reformation. It was not even the source or place of origin of the whole Reformation. Nevertheless, it initiated the movement which characterizes the whole and of which the Reformation of Zwingli and Calvin was primarily a repetition, even though a second turn was given to the Reformation in and with the repetition.¹⁴

Barth also, however, praised Calvin for moving beyond Luther, stating that Calvin emphasised not only justification as Luther did, but also sanctification; not only faith, but obedience; and thus not only the vertical but the horizontal elements of the Christian life.¹⁵ Moreover, Barth could look awry at what he esteemed to be Luther's emphasis upon faith and subjectivity,¹⁶ as well as what Barth esteemed Luther's casual demarcation and even confusion of revelation and the creaturely medium taken up for God's self-manifestation.¹⁷ Nevertheless, Barth also maintained

¹⁴Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, p. 70; cf. pp. 80–81. See also pp. 70–71: 'A good member of the Reformed communion must begin by simply recognizing Luther's unique position in the Reformation, not moving away from or forsaking Luther, nor, in following the hints of Zwingli and Calvin, feeling compelled to go a step beyond him; but instead, while consciously following those hints, constantly coming back to him. At the outset we distinguish ourselves from Lutherans in this way. As disciples of the most loyal disciples of Luther, we do not detract from Luther any more than Lutherans do, whereas they for their part can never manage to promote regard for Luther without open or concealed polemics against Zwingli and Calvin.'

¹⁵See Barth, *Theology of John Calvin*, pp. 81–2; cf. pp. 87–90. These are distinctions between Luther and Calvin that Barth would hold for his entire life. See Barth, 'Gespräch mit Rheinischen Jugendpfarrern (4.11.1963)', in *Gespräche 1963* (GA IV.41), ed. Eberhard Busch (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2005), p. 260; cf. Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, pp. 43–4, 80–81; and also *Church Dogmatics* [hereafter *CD*], 13 vols, ed. T. F. Torrance and G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–74), IV/2, p. 509. These estimations changed little over Barth's lifetime, evidenced in Barth's comments in 1965: 'Luther and Calvin are essentially always concerned with two great things: Luther teaches the freedom of the Christian person as one who believes in the Word of God. Calvin teaches the majesty of God, which gives us the freedom to have faith and to render obedience. These are, so to speak, the two poles of the Reformation. Luther is more human-oriented and Calvin more oriented to God. One should not make this out to be a contradiction between them, but it is a difference.' See Barth, '13 Interview von G. Puchinger (15.4.1965)', in *Gespräche 1964–1968* (GA IV.28), p. 193 (author's trans.).

¹⁶See Barth's 1923 lecture 'The Substance and Task of Reformed Doctrine', in *The Word of God and Theology*, p. 223 (cf. p. 231): 'The Reformed confessions [over against the Lutheran ones] did not lay the emphasis on the fact that the human is justified through *faith* instead of through *works*, but, rather, that it is *God* and not the *human* who completes this justification'. Gerhard Ebeling judged this criticism of Luther's subjectivity as the foundation of all Barth's later criticisms of Luther. See Gerhard Ebeling, 'Über die Reformation hinaus? Zur Luther-Kritik Karl Barths', *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, Beiheft 6: Zur Theologie Karl Barths: Beiträge aus Anlaß seines 100 Geburtstags (1986), pp. 36–7, cf. p. 47.

¹⁷In other words, Barth judged that for Luther the indirect identity of revelation and the creaturely medium of revelation was flattened into a direct one, such that the Creator–creature distinction was jeopardised. Therefore in reference to christology and sacraments, Barth wrote in his 1923 essay on Reformed doctrine: 'The Lutherans went so far as to make a *direct*, miraculous, but earthly identity out of the indirect identity between the heavenly and earthly gifts that are only perfected in God himself, between the thing

in his early lectures that Luther and Calvin, and their respective emphases, were both necessary and complementary for understanding the Reformation accomplishment and for evangelical witness to the gospel.¹⁸

If in fact there was a substantive advantage to the Reformed tradition over the Lutheran in Barth's estimation, it was comprised of two primary elements: first, that whereas Luther discovered a material principle (justification by faith) in scripture, Calvin emphasised the formal principle of scripture as the rule of all faith and life; and second, that whereas Luther's focus was upon questions of salvation and faith (i.e. soteriology), Calvin's was upon questions of God and truth (i.e. theology proper), and this in turn protected the Creator-creature distinction more carefully than Luther had done, as well as prioritising christology over anthropology. In truth, Barth's estimation of Luther was always marked by both deep appreciation and an undeniable ambivalence.¹⁹ Yet, Barth's ultimate judgement was that Luther and Calvin were, in the end, partners in a common project of church reformation. What Paul, Luther and Calvin all have in common, Barth consistently argued, is a recognition of and insistence upon the movement of God to humanity that must precede and frame any talk of our movement and obedience towards God.²⁰ It was, even more fundamentally, a recognition of the lordship of God in all matters of salvation, a recognition that in turn demanded a decision.²¹ It is this common declaration of God's singular lordship by Luther and Calvin, along with their corresponding confession of the singular authority of scripture, that makes them fathers of the church.²² Barth articulated this exact conviction more than a decade later in the weightiest passage that he provides on Luther and Calvin as paired Reformers, to which we will now turn.

and the sign, between witness and revelation. Thus they made a direct mediation out of revelation, which, if it is real, is always a veiling. They constructed a religious "givenness" ("The Substance and Task of Reformed Doctrine", in *The Word of God and Theology*, p. 227; see also 'Luther's Doctrine of the Eucharist', in *Theology and Church*, pp. 99, 108–11; cf. *CD* 1/2, pp. 163–71; *CD* IV/2, pp. 51–2, 75–7). Even more pointedly, Barth worried that Luther's emphasis on subjectivity and the intermingling of the divine and human natures of Christ in christology, which failed to maintain the irreversibility of their relation, opened the way for Feuerbach's critique of religion as the divinisation of the human. See Barth's 1920 lecture, 'Ludwig Feuerbach', in *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings 1920–1928*, pp. 230–31. In later years Barth criticised Luther along a third major line, specifically, as the source for a law and gospel distinction that Barth maintained played into German nationalism.

¹⁸Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, p. 90.

¹⁹For an intensive account of Barth's relation to Luther traced over time, including details and criticisms beyond those considered here, see Gerhard Ebeling, *Lutherstudien*, vol. 3, *Begriffsuntersuchungen – Textinterpretationen – Wirkungsgeschichtliches* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1985), pp. 428–573. For a very succinct summary of the central criticisms, see Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther: An Introduction to His Life and Work*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), pp. 227–8.

²⁰See Barth's 1922 essay, 'The Problem of Ethics Today', in *The Word of God and Theology*, p. 168.

²¹See Barth, 'Reformation als Entscheidung', in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1930–1933* (GA III.49), ed. Michael Beintker, Michael Hüttenhoff and Peter Zoicher (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2013), pp. 532–5.

²²As Barth would later write in his Gifford Lectures of 1937/38, the fundamental fact of importance regarding the Reformers, regardless of any problematic elements of their thought, was that 'the revival of the gospel by Luther and Calvin consisted in their desire to see both the church and human salvation founded on the Word of God alone, on God's revelation in Jesus Christ, as it is attested in the Scripture, and on faith in that Word'. See Barth, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God according to the Teaching of the Reformation: Recalling the Scottish Confession of 1560*, trans. J. L. M. Haire and Ian Henderson (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005 [1938]), pp. 8–9.

Barth's mature estimation of Luther and Calvin

While Luther and Calvin are important interlocutors throughout Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, the most sustained and significant discussion of them in their own right occurs relatively early in that massive work. In the second part of the first volume, Barth examines holy scripture in three sections (§19–21). In the second of these, he discusses the authority of scripture and the corresponding authority of the church. He locates three specific areas where the authority of the church is exercised under the authority of scripture: first, in confessing the parameters of the biblical canon and thus effectively setting forth its constituent books; second, in recognising exemplary expositors of the Bible and holding them up before the church for her instruction as authoritative teachers; and, third, in producing confessions of a common faith and establishing them as formal articulations of what has been heard in holy scripture, these confessions thus possessing a relative authority under the authority of scripture itself.²³ Barth's discussion of Luther and Calvin occurs in the second of these three sections, where he begins simply by acknowledging the existence of such teachers:

We assume that between the Church now and here and the Church then and elsewhere there exists a unity of confession in respect of the authority of the word of specific ecclesiastical teachers, i.e., specific expositors and preachers of the Bible, whose word has in fact emerged from all the words of other expositors and preachers and spoken to the Church of their day and of a later day, and still speaks to the present-day Church, in a way which cannot be said of other teachers of their own or other periods.²⁴

While the existence of such teachers is not a theological necessity for Barth, he nevertheless notes that the church recognises 'that there are "Church fathers" and that these fathers have a definite ecclesiastical authority'.²⁵ He argues, however, that such figures are not to be thought of in the same sense as church fathers are in Catholic thought. The Reformation did not recognise earlier prestigious teachers as part of a rigid hierarchical ranking of theological authority or as a 'second source of revelation'.²⁶ Nevertheless, the evangelical tradition does recognise church fathers when these are rightly defined; moreover, Barth's remarkable claim is not just that there are church fathers, but that these fathers are, pre-eminently and singularly, Luther and Calvin themselves. They are, for Barth, the quintessential church fathers, for reasons we will examine below.

This identification of Luther and Calvin as church fathers does not entail, however, that their persons are held to be of particular interest. Indeed, Barth expresses a concern that the Lutheran tradition especially placed too much emphasis upon the person, personality and life of Luther.²⁷ With regard to this focus on Luther's person, Barth writes:

²³These three areas are found in *CD I/2*, pp. 597–603, 603–20 and 620–60, respectively.

²⁴*CD I/2*, p. 603.

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 604.

²⁷Although Barth acknowledged that these tendencies could also be found in the Reformed tradition, he held that the latter was in general more circumspect, esteeming Calvin e.g. solely for his ecclesiastical instruction. *Ibid.*, pp. 604–5.

Certainly the firm popularity which has been retained by the figure of Luther even in modern developments, and in particular the estimation as an apostle of freedom of conscience or a religious personality or a German which he has been accorded more recently on every possible or impossible count, is no substitute for a recognition of his ecclesiastical signification as a Reformer and Church teacher.²⁸

These were no idle words when Barth published them in 1938, for while Luther had been esteemed a towering spiritual personality and religious genius in the nineteenth century, it was during the 1930s that he especially came to be considered as a hero of the German *Volk* and a nationalist figure.²⁹ In Barth's estimation, Luther was misunderstood if identified and thought significant as a religious personality or pious genius, a soldier of reason against medieval superstition, or a national hero or 'great German'.³⁰ Barth had quite simply no interest in Luther as understood in any of these roles, although he well recognised the recurrent temptation to cast him into the image of the contemporary age.³¹ Yet to know Luther in truth was simply to acknowledge him for what he not only was in his time but continues to be: a teacher of the church who was best not celebrated but heard.³²

One of the things Barth learned from Kierkegaard that never left him was that there is all the difference in the world between a 'religious genius' and an apostle.³³ Barth did not think of Luther and Calvin as apostles, of course, as their writings were not to be included in the canon of holy scripture. Yet as preeminent biblical expositors and teachers, and therefore as church fathers, they were, in their own way, true heirs of the apostles in that they pointed away from themselves to scripture, just as the apostles of scripture pointed away from themselves to Christ.³⁴ It is therefore accurate to

²⁸Ibid., p. 606.

²⁹For an understanding of Luther in light of the developments in Germany from the time of the Reformation, through the Enlightenment and the liberalism of the nineteenth century, up until Barth's own time, see Peter Opitz, "Wer darf sich ernstlich auf die Reformation berufen?" Die gefeierte Reformation und Karl Barth', *Zeitschrift für Dialektische Theologie* 32 (2016), pp. 7–34. Opitz recounts how with the 450th anniversary of Luther's birth in 1933 renewed attention was given to Luther, but now in the context of a rising National Socialism and its portrayal of Luther as 'the great German' (ibid., pp. 8, 10). For Barth's reactions against this celebration of Luther, see his 1933 essays, 'Luther' and 'Reformation als Entscheidung', in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1930–1933* (GA III.49), pp. 478–87 and 516–50, respectively; see also Opitz, 'Wer darf sich ernstlich auf die Reformation, berufen?', pp. 9–10. Opitz traces a long-standing line of development tying Luther to German nationalism and shows that this nationalistic emphasis intensified during the rise of National Socialism. One example of such extreme nationalism was the church historian Hans Preuss, who paired Luther and Adolf Hitler as great 'German leaders' (*deutsche Führer*) who stood above their contemporaries even while suffering in struggle for them against the foes of their respective times. Such views were not peripheral in Germany at the time but are widely attested (ibid., pp. 21–2).

³⁰Barth, 'Luther', pp. 485–6.

³¹Ibid., p. 486.

³²Ibid., p. 487; cf. Barth, 'Reformation als Entscheidung', pp. 528–9.

³³Søren Kierkegaard, *The Book on Adler*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 173–88.

³⁴Thus, Barth recounts, when Luther died it was said in the evangelical church of the Reformer that 'a prophet like Elijah or John the Baptist was among us, a man of God, a bearer of the light, a theologian whose theology came directly from revelation' ('Reformation als Entscheidung', pp. 530–31). In a similar way, Calvin's *Institutes* was esteemed by his own respective church tradition as a book the likes of which had not been seen since the writings of the apostles themselves (ibid., p. 531). The Reformers

conclude that, for Barth, Luther and Calvin are fathers of the church because of this analogous relation to the apostles: they are exemplary witnesses to the singular witness of the prophets and apostles. It was this unique role, and not the Reformers' personality, that was decisive. Indeed, Barth had no place for hero worship and already in 1923 wrote in regard to a witness to revelation: 'The human does not come into consideration, not even as a prophet, never mind as a Christian hero but rather as a minister, as a *servant* of the divine Word.'³⁵

This attitude meant that Barth put very little weight upon anniversaries commemorating the Reformers. He had little time for a nationalist 'Deutschen Luthertag' (German Luther Day) or the 450th anniversary celebrations of Luther's birth in 1933. Nor did he have any real regard for similar celebrations of Calvin's anniversaries. Toward the end of his life, Barth wrote a short piece titled 'Thoughts on the 400th Anniversary of Calvin's Death', and he found it no accident (and in fact quite appropriate) that Calvin's grave had been allowed to slip into oblivion but a few years after his passing.³⁶ Calvin was not a hero, Barth insisted, and should not be worshipped as one. He was, rather, a witness, a servant of the Word of God – and for Barth, who considered John the Baptist as the paragon of the Christian's vocation of indication, this was the highest compliment he could in fact give Calvin.³⁷ As with Luther, Barth had no romanticism when it came to Calvin or his Geneva, nor with the Reformation in general. His criticisms of Calvin could in fact be trenchant, as when in this brief essay he stated that Calvin was 'undoubtedly stronger when he spoke about faith and obedience than about love and hope', and was 'not only a child of his time, but also the prisoner of certain rigidities in his own basic ideas'.³⁸ Still, Barth could nevertheless conclude by saying of Calvin that, despite all such 'necessary criticism and corrections, there is hardly a better teacher, apart from the biblical prophets and apostles, than he'.³⁹ In this regard, Barth's estimation of Calvin was no different in 1964 than it was in 1923 when he bemoaned the rise of hero worship with regard to Calvin in the Reformed church.⁴⁰

In summary, for Barth what made Luther and Calvin church fathers was not their forceful and unique personalities, or even the eventfulness of their lives and distinctive accomplishments. What made them church fathers was their divine call and the fulfillment of that vocation as teachers of holy scripture. This focus on their role as pre-eminent expositors of the Bible, and thus as witnesses to that which scripture itself attested rather than as religious personalities, made all of the difference in how they were to be understood. Their importance hinged on the fact that they were called and used by God to restore his word for the church, to teach that word to the church and to bring about the church's renewal. So although it is true that for Barth to say Reformation was to say Luther and Calvin, they were for him church fathers only because of this call and use. One could perhaps say that what Barth valued so much about them was their utter *transparency* before the word of God in scripture.

were and thus are rightly recognised as singular church fathers, teachers of the church. What the Reformers are not, Barth insists, are 'poets, philosophers, or kings' (*ibid.*, p. 526).

³⁵Barth, 'The Substance and Task of Reformed Doctrine, in *The Word of God and Theology*, p. 215.

³⁶Barth, 'Thoughts on the 400th Anniversary of Calvin's Death', in *Fragments Grave and Gay*, ed. Martin Rumscheidt, trans. Eric Mosbacher (London: Collins, 1971), p. 105.

³⁷*Ibid.*

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 109.

³⁹*Ibid.*

⁴⁰Barth, 'The Substance and Task of Reformed Doctrine', pp. 213–15.

The Reformers are therefore positioned by Barth not only in relation to and under the prophets and the apostles, and thus holy scripture (what we might call a vertical relation), but also as witnesses among a cloud of church witnesses (what we might call a horizontal relation). He notes that while holy scripture stands over all secondary tradition, it is nevertheless the case that scripture speaks to every generation and individual as it finds itself within the company of the church, among those fellow pupils of scripture who include all of its members. We therefore hear the echo of scripture not first in our own voice but in the voice of others who precede us in the faith. Yet while that company of teachers may appear boundless, Barth proffers that not all voices are to be heard in the same way, for some witnesses speak in such a way that 'others had and still have to listen to them'. He continues, 'And basically the older and more experienced fellow-pupil is simply the Church teacher'.⁴¹ Pre-eminent among these teachers are Luther and Calvin.

Not only must such teachers therefore be identified, they must be heeded, though not slavishly obeyed or mimicked. To refuse to listen to such exemplary voices in a kind of emancipated biblicism, Barth contends, is not to read the Bible in freedom but to succumb to a captivity of our own subconscious convictions in our interpretation. To read the Bible freely is, perhaps ironically, to read it under the tutelage of church teachers.⁴² In this light, it becomes clear that Barth rejects not only a traditionalism that saw the Bible and tradition as two parallel sources of truth, but also a biblicism that cut itself off from all tradition and prior voices altogether. As he writes:

In actual fact, there has never been a Biblicist who for all his grandiloquent appeal directly to Scripture against the fathers and tradition has proved himself so independent of the spirit and philosophy of his age and especially of his favourite religious ideas that in his teaching he has really allowed the Bible and the Bible alone to speak reliably by means or in spite of his anti-traditionalism.⁴³

In contrast, the biblicism of the Reformers, for all of their calls for the supremacy of scripture, differed from this modern biblicism, and 'not in spite but in application of the Evangelical Scripture principle it kept itself free from this anti-traditionalism'.⁴⁴

We might assess Barth's position as follows: what made the evangelical (i.e. Protestant) church unique was not its recognition of an ecclesiastical authority expressed in 'specific teachers of the church', but rather its definition of a church father predicated on singular witness to the truth of scripture rather than antiquity, along with the claim that it was the *Reformers* who rightly received this title. It goes without saying

⁴¹CD I/2, p. 607.

⁴²For Barth, this entailed that the spiritual authority of the Reformers took precedence over our own individual reading (CD I/2, p. 620). This did not mean, however, that Barth subjugated his own reading to the Reformers when he took it to be contrary to the witness of scripture itself, as is especially evident in Barth's break with Calvin on the question of election in CD II/2. Barth could put this approach in quite frank terms: 'Holy Scripture is the object of our study, and at the same time the criterion of our study, of the Church's past. As I read the writings of the "Fathers", the witness of Holy Scripture stands continually before my eyes; I accept what interprets this witness to me; I reject what contradicts it. So a choice is actually made, certainly not a choice according to my individual taste, but according to my knowledge of Holy Scripture.' See Barth, *Credo*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005 [1962]), p. 183.

⁴³CD I/2, p. 609, where Barth also asks: 'Will those who will have the Bible alone as their master, as though Church history began again with them, really refrain from mastering the Bible?'

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

that such judgements are contentious and thus may be contested. Important for our purpose here is simply to register that Barth holds in tension the absolute authority of scripture and the relative authority of the Reformers in a nuanced dialectic that judges the quality of Christian witness not on antiquity but on something akin to Kierkegaard's notion of contemporaneity with Christ, yet one effected from God's side. In the time of the Reformation, God called forth Luther and Calvin for the church's renewal through a fresh and decisive hearing of the Word of God. This estimation is evident when Barth writes:

If our Churches confessed that they were reformed by the Word of God and not simply by Luther and Calvin, their reformation did take place by the witness borne to them by Luther and Calvin. Therefore the witness of Luther and Calvin is decisive and essential for their existence as this Church, as the Churches reformed in this way, and therefore for the whole contingency of their existence as the Church of Jesus Christ.⁴⁵

Barth then concludes: 'If they free themselves from this witness they are no longer these Churches and therefore no longer contingently the Church of Jesus Christ.'⁴⁶

Barth's argument here hangs on a delicate balance and decisive distinction between absolute and relative authority, as well as one between necessity and contingency. It is also predicated on a firm sense of ecclesiality grounded in a divine election and providence that calls not only the church, but also its teachers and reformers, into existence. His claim is not that the Reformers Luther and Calvin hold the same authority as scripture, for scripture possesses an absolute authority, but rather that this absolute authority is always expressed in any time through the teaching of a relative authority; and for the evangelical churches this is pre-eminently the teaching of Luther and Calvin. While the existence of such teachers is not necessary for the act of revelation itself, revelation nevertheless in actual fact comes to establish such teachers to serve as witnesses to it; and their appearance is not simply the result of the contingent fact of their historical genius, but rather is grounded in the necessity of God's eternal election and providence. Moreover, while the church is necessarily predicated on its founding by Jesus Christ and his rule of it through holy scripture, this too takes place through the contingencies of history, such that the evangelical church cannot be recognised for what it is, nor understood as a church of Jesus Christ, apart from the witness – found pre-eminently in Luther and Calvin – to the exemplary teaching of scripture that provides its bearing and identity. It is in this circumscribed yet crucial way – as a relative and contingent yet real, concrete, and indeed providentially ordered authority – that the witness of Luther and Calvin stands over that of the other teachers and traditions of the evangelical churches.⁴⁷

Of course, the fact that such authorities are not absolute but relative requires that they are themselves open to correction in light of the word of God, and Barth's esteem of Luther and Calvin did not lead him to an uncritical reverence for them, as we have seen. Moreover, that they are relative authorities entails the possibility that they could in

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid.

time be superseded.⁴⁸ Yet while theoretically possible, Barth judges this eventuality practically unlikely (and, indeed, difficult to imagine, because he has grounded their appearance in divine providence). Barth therefore states that, despite the calls of modern sceptics, Luther and Calvin have rightly retained their central place for the Protestant churches.⁴⁹ They set the standard for the recognition of other church fathers past and present, because they correctly taught the word of God and were used and confirmed by God in the reformation and renewal of the church at a decisive turning point in its history. For this reason, other teachers are rightly judged in light of their teaching.⁵⁰

This supremacy of Luther and Calvin does not mean, however, that the list of teachers of the church is closed. At the same time, although for Barth there is every reason to expect the emergence of church teachers beyond Luther and Calvin, Barth maintains that very few teachers are in truth church fathers like Luther and Calvin; for, as he writes, 'This real guidance of the Church, as it was exercised by Luther and Calvin, is a rare thing'.⁵¹ Thus, rather than identifying actual examples of further teachers, Barth lists four criteria that must be met for a person to be recognised as a teacher of the church of this magnitude. First, such a person must be an expositor of holy scripture who, like the Reformers, has helped the church rightly understand the word of God; second, such a person must be in accordance with the confession of the Reformation, for the Reformers set the standard for such confession; third, such a person must speak as a teacher to and for the whole church and not simply for a segment of it; and finally, such a person must, in agreement with the Reformers and with responsibility to the church, speak a word of decision for the church and call it to confession.⁵²

As we have already witnessed, Barth dialectically balances recognition of the real authority of such teachers with a great wariness regarding attention that is to be paid to them as persons. He hints that an overenthusiasm for church teachers raises the same spectre of danger as the angel worship warned about by Paul in Galatians 4. Moreover, he holds that when the Reformers are revered as persons, the church may become more Lutheran and Calvinist, but it will then become, correspondingly, less Christian and evangelical.⁵³ In the end, 'the authority of a human doctor of Holy Scripture' can be predicated not of the person but only of his task, which is 'to acquaint his pupils not so much with himself as with the object which is his and their concern, to point and bind them not so much to himself as to this object'.⁵⁴ And just as it is the object of the message and not the voice of the teacher that is of

⁴⁸Barth notes that this question parallels his earlier judgement that while the canon is open in principle, it is closed in practice, since a change in the canon would require an agreement of the universal church (see *CD I/2*, pp. 597–603; also *CD I/1*, pp. 99–111). In a similar manner, Barth holds that until the (evangelical) church receives new truth resulting in a new confession and the replacement of the authority of the Reformers with that of new teachers, it is to accept the previous and ongoing confession of the church, including its recognition of the ecclesiastical authority of Luther and Calvin. It therefore should 'not play truant from the school of Luther and Calvin until we are better instructed, but to learn in it what there is to be learned. It is a matter of instruction in understanding Holy Scripture, when and to the extent that the Reformers are genuine teachers of the church' (*CD I/2*, p. 612).

⁴⁹*CD I/2*, pp. 609–12.

⁵⁰*CD I/2*, p. 613.

⁵¹*Ibid.*

⁵²*CD I/2*, pp. 613–16.

⁵³*CD I/2*, p. 617.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*

ultimate importance, so also, similarly, the voice of the teacher is not ultimately his own, but the voice of the church of his time. Such a teacher speaks for the church, for scripture and the confession of the church are not judged by the standard of the teacher, but the teacher by the standard of scripture and the church's confession.⁵⁵ We pay teachers their proper due, Barth insists, precisely when we honour God and not them, and thus when we place ourselves under them insofar as they themselves are placed under scripture and witness to what it attests: God's very revelation and salvation, which call forth our faith and decision – the same decision impressed upon and made by the Reformers themselves.⁵⁶

With all of these observations in view, it should not surprise us that Barth refused to equate faithfulness to Luther and Calvin with simple repristination of their theology.⁵⁷ What is required to honour the Reformers is not mimicry but reflection, interpretation and, if carefully understood, translation – perhaps even correction: 'Not those who repeat the doctrine most faithfully, but those who reflect upon it most faithfully so that they can then expound it as their own doctrine, are their most faithful pupils.'⁵⁸ This means that for Barth *ad fontes* could never entail a simple preservation and repetition of the past:

The Church of today would not be accepting them if it were simply accepting or reproducing them in their historical form. It would be accepting them not as the Church of today, not obedient to its own calling along the lines of the Reformation, but as an institute of antiquities – the worst dishonour of which it could be guilty for all its well-meant veneration.⁵⁹

Years later in a conversation, Barth asserted that Luther and Calvin themselves were not 'museum directors', and that he had no interest in being one himself.⁶⁰ Along with the ecclesial confession, the teacher of the church exercises a real if circumscribed and qualified authority.⁶¹ Yet that authority is not so much possessed as witnessed, and thus is best exercised when never claimed, and most honoured when consulted but not simply imitated. As Barth later iterated this point in his short piece reflecting upon Calvin's death: 'It is not worth while really to become a "Calvinist", but it certainly is almost singularly worth while to become Calvin's free pupil.'⁶² In fairness, Barth held the same standard for himself. If you meet a Barthian, he could later say, tell them that I am not one.⁶³

⁵⁵CD I/2, p. 618.

⁵⁶See Opitz, 'Wer darf sich ernstlich auf die Reformation, berufen?', p. 23.

⁵⁷Barth did not think that one could simply solve theological challenges of the present by parroting the Reformers. As he stated: "Back to ..." is never a good slogan' (CD IV/1, p. 372). Earlier in 1935 he could more pointedly state with regard to simple retrieval of the past: 'Repristination is nonsense' (Barth, *Credo*, p. 182).

⁵⁸CD I/2, p. 619.

⁵⁹Ibid. Late in life, Barth stated to his conversation partners that in the face of a vibrant Catholicism what was needed was that Protestants 'must rediscover the work of Luther and Calvin, but not be prisoners of their work'. Barth, 'Interview von H.-Ch. Tauxe, Gazette de Lausanne (20.4.1965)', in *Gespräche 1964–1968* (GA IV.28), p. 199 (author's trans.).

⁶⁰Barth, 'Was bedeutet uns Barmen heute?, 1954', in 'Der Götze wackelt': *Zeitkritische Aufsätze, Reden und Briefe von 1930 bis 1960*, ed. Karl Kupisch (Berlin: Käthe Vogt Verlag, 1961), p. 163.

⁶¹CD I/2, p. 620.

⁶²Barth, *Fragments Grave and Gay*, p. 110.

⁶³Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), p. 417.

There are nevertheless a number of tensions that remain in Barth's explication of the role and authority of church teachers. Certainly the fact that the Reformers are both contingent historical persons whose viewpoints could be corrected in light of further reflection upon scripture, yet also at the same time persons whose appearance was grounded in a providential and divine ordination, creates complexity in understanding the nature of their authority – an authority Barth situates precisely between unquestioned obedience and indifferent dismissal. He esteemed church tradition as both necessary and relative, even as others esteemed it as entirely contingent or as absolute. His articulation of the authority of Luther and Calvin displays a precarious balance between an abandonment and an absolutising of tradition, both of which he rejected.

Another area of dialectical tension is that Barth had a somewhat circuitous understanding of ecclesial authority with regard to individual teachers and church confessions. The logic of his communal understanding of confession, which stands over individual teachers and believers, is such that one might have expected him to elucidate the authority of confessions before that of the Reformers. Yet he sees the confessional task of the Protestant churches as made possible by the initial renewal to which Luther and Calvin called the churches, and he thereby treats them in his discussion of church authority before taking up the question of the authority of the confessions. Here Barth seems to follow a chronological rather than ontological ordering of the authority of the confession and the individual teacher: in truth, confessions have an authority that exceeds that of the individual reformer or theologian; but for Barth the church fathers Luther and Calvin stand before the confessions in the sense that they made such confession of the church possible in their wake. In this, Barth may be less consistent with his dogmatic ordering of relative authorities but nevertheless more honest in his assessment of the Protestant confessions themselves with regard to the circumstances of their actual historical appearance.

The 'end' of historical study

Perhaps no person has been as laudatory of the Reformers' ecclesiastical role while being relatively disinterested in their actual material lives as was Barth. This may make him a reluctant historian of the Reformers, but it does not jeopardise his faithful witness to their intention and spirit. In effect, he wanted to understand the Reformers as they understood themselves. This entailed attending to what they themselves attended to rather than fixating upon the Reformers themselves as historical figures. Even as a confessional Reformed theologian and church member, Barth had no interest in esteeming Calvin simply as an ancestor of his own tradition.⁶⁴ Commenting on the meaning of Reformed confessional identity in 1923, Barth concluded:

Remaining true to the Fathers must mean, then, adhering precisely to history the way they themselves adhered to it: letting history speak but only as an indication beyond itself to revelation, not confusing age with originality, and not confusing the authority that is given to the Church with the authority by which the church was founded.⁶⁵

⁶⁴Barth, 'The Substance and Task of Reformed Doctrine', p. 206.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 208. Barth added that this kind of confessional stance 'does not bow down before any hat propped on a stick, even if it is the hat of Calvin himself' (ibid., pp. 208–9). As earlier noted, Barth thought that in this respect the Reformed were more circumspect than their Lutheran counterparts (ibid., p. 214). In

The most important thing about Luther and Calvin for Barth was therefore not the material content they provided on specific theological questions (as important as this may be), but the exemplary role they played in calling the church back to the word of God and the supremacy of scripture. In this regard, the fact that Barth had so little interest in them as historical figures is understandable: he saw them as exemplary solely because they displayed unwavering focus upon the subject matter that had captured their lives and compelled their testimony in speech and life. He had no regard for Luther or Calvin as historical geniuses but only as secondary witnesses to the primary witness of scripture in attesting God's revelation.⁶⁶ This was the path he followed in his own work.⁶⁷

Barth's stance amounts to a rejection of hagiography of historical figures, but its significance runs much deeper and is much more disturbing: it is ultimately an attack not only upon uncritical historical hero worship, but upon historical science itself when it is set forth as an academic discipline for its own sake and forsakes the theological setting and purpose of its practice. Barth's construal of historical investigation is, in short, a rejection of any independent discipline of church history that does not find its place in the richer conception of the church's theological task that moves from explication (biblical theology), to meditation (dogmatic theology), to application (practical theology).⁶⁸ His understanding and estimation of Luther and Calvin are thereby predicated upon and indeed reveal the underlying rationale of his insistence that church history is indeed necessary but can only be an ancillary theological discipline that does not stand alongside of but must rather serve biblical, dogmatic and practical theology. Historical study is never for the church an end in itself, because its service, however necessary, is always merely preparatory to the ultimate task of the church's proclamation and confession.

This estimation of historical study when approaching figures of the church's past is in fact parallel to and in perfect accordance with Barth's views on historical criticism and its place in biblical interpretation.⁶⁹ Church history, like historical criticism, is

his lectures on Reformed theology, Barth stated: "The well-known Wittenberg saying, "God's Word and Luther's teaching will not perish now or ever" (*Gottes Wort und Luthers Lehr vergehen nun und nimmermehr!*) could never be uttered by a Calvinist. To put Calvin in the first line, pairing it with God's Word, would be impossible for even the most enthusiastic Calvinist" (Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, p. 21).

⁶⁶But interpretation of the confessions or of the writings of Luther and Calvin is just as little the special task of dogmatics as is biblical exegesis. It cannot become merely a report on various doctrines of the fathers, or have as its aim, even its subordinate aim, their rehabilitation. The theology of the fathers and the confessions must be used as a pattern only in proper subordination to the Word of God attested in Scripture. It must never allow an appeal to them to replace the thinking for which it is directly responsible to Scripture. It is not by referring to the fathers and confessions and reproducing their doctrine, but only by actually learning from them, that it maintains its confessional attitude. We can be confessional only *κατὰ πνεῦμα*. If we try to be *σο κατὰ σάρκα*, we shall not be so at all.' *CD I/2*, pp. 837–8.

⁶⁷John Webster has put this point succinctly: 'Genuine and fruitful theological work on Barth's account is always objective, in that it takes its rise in astonishment at the *Sache* by which the mind is seized.' See John Webster, *Barth's Earlier Theology: Four Studies* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), p. 9.

⁶⁸What is called church history does not correspond to any independently raised question concerning Christian talk about God, and it cannot therefore be regarded as an independent theological discipline. It is an auxiliary science indispensable to exegetical, dogmatic and practical theology.' *CD I/1*, p. 5; also *CD I/2*, pp. 722–40.

⁶⁹Barth's engagement with historical criticism exceeds what can here be examined. For a magisterial introduction to this topic, see Richard E. Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004).

an indispensable preparatory though subsidiary discipline that must push on to richer theological investigations that do not make either the historical world of the Bible or the figure of church history ends of study in themselves, but which rather serve the subject matter of the divine revelation to which both scripture and its teachers testify. Just as Barth denounced an objective historical criticism when esteemed by its practitioners to be the self-sufficient and final method to understand scripture, so he also undermined any field that makes Luther and Calvin objects of independent historical interest and fails to take account of their proper vocation as witnesses and church fathers. To treat scripture or such later witnesses to the gospel in this way is, in Barth's parlance, to treat them as abstractions: not as what they truly are in the divine economy, but as independent objects of study. For this reason, Barth read the Reformers analogously to how he read the scriptures: not as interesting objects of historical investigation in their own right, but as witnesses that point beyond themselves to the subject of their witness.

However much Barth's approach to historical investigation may grate against modern critical and academic sensibilities, it provides a challenge precisely because of such marked iconoclasm. It is difficult to deny that in the contemporary age much historical research has become the examination of trees with little consideration of the forest – an examination that, in turn, dissects the trees themselves into a multifarious array of ever more particulate source material. In such a world, not only texts but their authors are dissolved into a viscous amalgam of background sources and constitutive tributaries of prior influences, with meaning itself often dissolved in the process. We live in a world of scholarship that is trained to look *at* things and refract them into a seemingly endless number of dispersed constituent background elements, not to look *along* with them to what they indicate.⁷⁰

In pushing against this way of approaching scripture and history, Barth was pushing against much of the modern age and its dominant historiography. Correspondingly, what made Luther and Calvin of interest to Barth was not their lives and accomplishments but the object of their work, and what he shared with them was an undivided commitment to look *along with* rather than *at* the witnesses of the church's past and to read them akin to how he read scripture: to think *after* them (*Nachdenken*), to face the subject matter (*die Sache*) with which they were confronted, and to feel and take the weight of their decisions upon his own shoulders.⁷¹ Once again, Barth's stance here with regard to Luther and Calvin is entirely consonant with Kierkegaard's distinction between a religious genius and an apostle or witness. A religious genius displays the brilliance of an inner insight, the discovery of a truth within the self, the product of an incandescent intelligence or other religious capacity of feeling or conscience. Modern scholarship itself may seek to deconstruct the genius into a collection of prior historical influences, questioning the very idea of a single individual who turns history. A witness like Luther or Calvin, however, points away from himself and from prior history to that which he did not discover on his own. He is rather imposed upon, commissioned, indeed burdened, with a message he not only did not create or discover but would

⁷⁰Perhaps no one in the modern period has drawn this distinction and detailed its ramifications as succinctly as C. S. Lewis in his essay, 'Meditation in a Toolshed', in *God in the Dock*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 212–15.

⁷¹Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis*, pp. 58–9. We might say that *Nachdenken* is that which unites Barth's reading of scripture with his reading of its witnesses, and then extended to all reading of all persons. It is that which unites his special and general hermeneutics (see *CD I/2*, pp. 457–72).

perhaps not even have chosen.⁷² He can only report it and point to it. This is not the celebration of imagination or of intelligence, though both may be present in such a witness. It is rather the rapt attention to a message that overshadows the messenger and applies to him as much as to all who hear it. Historical study may illumine this message, but it does injustice to both the message and messenger if it attempts to drown both in the ever-flowing stream of historical occurrence and its relativising waters. For both Kierkegaard and Barth, this particular practice of historical contextualisation was in fact a subtle way to evade confrontation with the truth to which the witness testifies and with the decision it places before us.

Two things remain for us to ponder in light of Barth's counter-witness to our modern age. First, we are left with the decision whether or not to confront our seemingly irresistible urge to reduce witnesses to geniuses or to historical instantiations of prior sources, rather than to accept the far greater challenge of honestly facing the questions raised by the witnesses themselves.⁷³ The second is reckoning with the undeniable fact that today theology has largely become the practice of church history with but few exceptions. Unlike Luther and Calvin, and Barth himself, we do not live in an age of exemplary witness as much as in a golden age of the historical investigation of prior witnesses. There may have been a time when one could justifiably bemoan a 'retreat to commitment' as the greatest danger to Christian vitality.⁷⁴ But now, the retreat is not to commitment but to historiography itself as a safe enclave of dispassionate respectability: we are all historians now. Perhaps prior ages were wary of an ascendant philosophy that might overshadow theology's rightful tasks, but philosophy itself has succumbed to the relativism of historical consciousness. It is not philosophy, but history, which now sets the rules for respectability and the game to be played. Trying to understand what has been lost with the triumph of history as the queen of the biblical and theological sciences is no direct slight of critical historical investigation, nor warrant to overlook or dismiss the real gains achieved by its ascendancy, but the question remains valid and pressing nonetheless. Perhaps one place where such questioning may begin is with the recovery of Barth's understanding of church history as a subordinate and supplementary discipline that can serve, but not overtake, the constructive and confessional task of theology in every age. For Barth, historical science, like historical criticism, is not to be abandoned, much less practised shoddily, but it is not the final word, and it must instead find its rightful place in a larger theological framework of meaning and practice. Barth's own hope for resisting the acids of historicism, however, did not lie in a methodological reorientation but in waiting upon God to speak anew through his witnesses of scripture and church – all of which simply reinforces our suspicions that Barth, though very much a modern theologian, stands in this respect far closer to Luther and Calvin than to our own age of critical (and ironic) distance and its commitment to convictional neutrality and scientific method.

Perhaps the greatest irony is that Barth's objections to the historicist readings of scripture, which he pressed so adamantly in the 1920s, could now simply be translated into arguments against how we read witnesses to scripture, whether the Reformers or others. We should not ignore the strange paradox that Barth himself has often been

⁷²One cannot help but think of how Luther and Calvin were thrown into their role as Reformers apart from and even against their own desires and choices.

⁷³For the dangers of doing this to Barth specifically, as well as to others more generally, see Webster, *Barth's Earlier Theology*, pp. 7–10.

⁷⁴William W. Bartley, III, *The Retreat to Commitment* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court Publishing, 1984).

treated in this way, though he would have been as dismayed and perhaps appalled by this as would Luther or Calvin. Yet if Barth has a future beyond a narrow field of academic investigation, it will not be because of a renewed interest in his life for its own sake. It will be because of the manner in which Barth himself disappears and becomes transparent before the witness of scripture, enabling his theology to serve church reform, renewal and confession rather than historical commemoration. For the church lives not by commemoration, but by hope and expectation.

Historical study must take account not only of means but of ends, and the ends one chooses will be perennially contested, though the act of choosing cannot be avoided. If studies of Barth like this one, as well as studies of Luther and Calvin, and of church history generally, are to fulfil their fitting and proper end, they must dare to climb up from the plateau of academic scholarship and respectability to a yet higher level of exploration – or at the very least point to it. If we as theologians cannot help being (and perhaps must be) historians too, then perhaps we might begin to fulfil this latter vocation faithfully when we are not afraid to climb to a higher plane of inquiry and pull the ladder from our historical investigation up after us. But this is meaningful, and indeed possible, only if a ladder has already been dropped down to us from above.