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The abandonment of inauthentic humanity: Barth’s theology of baptism as the ground and goal of mission

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Abstract
This article explores the development of Karl Barth’s theology of the sacraments, with specific reference to his evolving understanding of the function and ground of baptism. It is argued here that Barth’s late explication of baptism in the final fragment of Church Dogmatics IV/4 posits an inextricable link between the nature and purpose of baptism and the ground and goal of mission, as two inseparable acts of ethical obedience to the call and Word of God.

Keywords
baptism, sacrament, mission

Karl Barth’s theology of the sacraments tends to be a polarizing issue. In particular, his baptismal theology has aroused considerable, and considerably heated, debate. Oscar Cullmann’s rather inflammatory remarks from 60 years ago still retain their potency: ‘Barth’s study of Baptism arouses attention and alas! threatens to precipitate schism.’1 While Cullmann’s complaint was specifically with Barth’s repudiation of infant baptism in the final segment of Church Dogmatics (CD) IV/4, indeed Barth’s entire baptismal framework has long been a point of contention. It is either regarded as one of his dogmatic Achilles heels or – for those whose


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sympathies lie more with the free church tradition – evidence that, at least towards the end of his life, Barth showed signs of coming to his sacramental senses.2

Similarly, Barth’s theology of mission has at times, perhaps mistakenly, been regarded as ambiguous, and even ambivalent. How can he, on the one hand, speak so openly about the necessity of mission as a task of the church, and yet also come so close to advocating a universalist soteriology that would render mission (at least insofar as it is conceived as an act of evangelistic proclamation) superfluous?3

‘Barth’, says one recent commentator, is monotonously depicted as representative of the position one should avoid. Reference to Barth hinders mission.4 In this article, I do not propose to explore in detail either Barth’s sacramental theology broadly conceived, or the overall trajectory of his theology of mission. For an excellent account of the first theme, one would be helpfully directed to John Yoccum’s book on *Ecclesial Mediation*.5 For the best recent treatment of the second theme, one can do no better than attend to John Flett’s remarkable contribution, *The Witness of God*. Rather more modestly, this article will attempt to sketch some lines of connection between Barth’s missiology and his evolving understanding of baptism.

It is self-evident, of course, that Barth’s view of baptism changed over time. Daniel Migliore, among others, has identified at least three separate periods in the evolution of Barth’s understanding of this doctrine, while John Yoccum has focused his attention on the distinction between the 1943 lecture on baptism and the material in the fragmentary *CD IV/4*.6 Whereas throughout the 1920s–1930s Barth employed sacramental terminology with respect to baptism, seemingly with little difficulty, by the 1950s he was very much less enamoured of the whole idea.

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2 Interestingly, John Howard Yoder has scoffed at any such thing. Barth’s revision of his understanding of baptism was never done ‘with the intention of entering [into] dialog [sic] with Baptists or Pentecostals or Mennonites’. And further, ‘Barth’s rejection of the aptness or the normativeness of infant baptism never turned the corner into denying its validity and consequently affirming baptism upon confession of faith as normative. He continued, as did the Faith and Order ‘convergence’ document of 1982, to reject anything which can look like ‘rebaptism’.’ J. H. Yoder, ‘Karl Barth – Post-Christendom Theologian’, in J. H. Yoder, *Karl Barth and the Problem of War, and Other Essays on Barth*, ed. M. T. Nation (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2003), 180–181.


He would, he said to an English-speaking seminar class in Basel, ‘prefer to abrogate the word “sacraments” entirely, or alternatively ‘use [it] for all ecclesiastical actions.’ ‘Sacraments,’ he is recorded as saying, ‘do not play such a great role in the New Testament as they do in the brains of many theologians.’

This apparent turn to anti-sacramentalism is seen by some, for example John Webster, as a late and regrettably ‘shoddy’ development in Barth’s thought that coheres neither with his earlier attachment to the sacramental theology of the Reformed tradition, nor with the overwhelming tenor of the *Church Dogmatics*. According to Webster, *CD IV/4* is ‘obviously unsatisfactory’ and ‘dominated by special pleading’. Others, such as Kurt Anders Richardson, regard it precisely as the hermeneutical key to the entire *Dogmatics*. The major emphasis of the present article is not to argue one side or the other of this particular debate. It should be said, however, that whatever the other flaws in his interpretive framework, Richardson does offer a remarkably cogent account of the way in which Eberhard Jüngel’s warm embrace of Barth’s late views on baptism have been quite consciously omitted from the English-speaking discussion. Just why this might be the case is itself an intriguing question, but one that lies outside the scope of this article.

With that in mind, it is in the context of baptism that we see most clearly the evolution of Barth’s theology of the sacraments. While he apparently intended to book-end Chapter 17 of the *Church Dogmatics* with an exposition of baptism at the start, and the Lord’s Supper at the end, he was ultimately able to produce for publication only the fragment of §75 in which he gave his final statement on baptism. He was never even to begin the section on the eucharist. Nonetheless, in this fragment, we see signs of a thoroughly revised doctrine that, in Barth’s own words, ‘left not one stone upon another’ of its predecessor. In great part due to his son Markus’s 1951 book *Die Taufe ein Sakrament?*, Karl notes in the preface to *The Christian Life* that he had been forced to abandon his previous sacramental understanding of baptism, including that which he had proposed in 1943 under the title *The Teaching of the Church regarding Baptism*.

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9 Webster, *Barth*, 157.
11 See Richardson, *Reading Karl Barth*, 62–65, 176-190
12 K. Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics IV/4* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981), 46. (Hereafter *ChrL.*
Again, the emphasis of this article does not lie so much in an exploration of the anti-sacramentalist position that Barth adopted in his later work, nor to ask (with Webster) whether that with which he replaced his earlier doctrine of baptism is theologically convincing. It is, however, to ask about the extent to which this modified view of baptismal sacramentality effected any change to the broader issue of the relationship between baptism and mission. In other words, this article seeks to ask three interrelated questions. First, what did Barth understand baptism to be and to do? To answer this, we will look most closely at Barth’s writings prior to the final fragments of CD IV/4. Second, did his answer to that question change as his theology of the sacraments changed? To put it otherwise, did the meaning and purpose of baptism depend, for Barth, on its sacramental status? In this second section, the focus will be particularly on CD IV/4 in which Barth expounds his own ‘last word’ on the subject of baptism. And, third, we will ask, what is the relationship, within this overall evolution of thought, between baptism and mission?

Barth and baptism: The early years

In his Göttingen lectures of 1923, in which he expounded the theology of the Reformed confessional texts, Barth noted particularly the link between baptism, forgiveness and sanctification, which is made explicit in Questions 69–74 of the Heidelberg Catechism.

To be washed with the blood and Spirit of Christ means [says Barth] to have the forgiveness of sins... through grace ...and also to be renewed by the Holy Spirit and sanctified as members of Christ, so that we may more and more die unto sin and live in a consecrated and blameless way.14

Of course, the emphasis here lies, for Barth, in the inseparable both/and; the ‘indivisibility of faith and obedience’; the incorporation of task (Aufgabe) in the gift (Gabe).15 The washing with blood and Spirit contains within itself the assurance of forgiveness, but also establishes an obligation to obedience that is to be worked out ever anew. As we will see, this explicit link between gift and task recurs in Barth’s final statements on baptism at the end of his life, in direct connection with his missiology.

But here in Göttingen, in the linkage of baptism with sanctification, Barth is not saying anything that contradicts his Reformed predecessors such as Johannes Heidegger, who also associates baptism with regeneration, and declares the

15 Barth, Theology of the Reformed Confessions, 110.
outward ‘sprinkling and dipping in water’ to be a proclamation of ‘inward ablution from sins…’. Similarly Wollebius, for whom ‘remission of sins and regeneration by Christ’s blood and the Holy Spirit’ are ‘sealed’ by the ‘outward sprinkling with water …’. There are also clear points of continuity with Barth’s earlier contention in The Epistle to the Romans when, in identifying why baptismal death is in fact grace, he contends that baptism’s ‘negation is positive…; because the final word spoken over the man of this world [at this point] is at once hinge, and threshold, and bridge, and turning-point, to the new man; because the baptized person…is identified with the new man who has been born’.

Later in 1929, quoting approvingly two of Luther’s sermons, Barth commented similarly that ‘“Baptism makes the man [sic] whole again, pure and blessed.” “When a man is baptized, he, in baptism, thus becomes beautiful and glorious before God, like the dear Son, so that no sin remains there, but pure and eternal righteousness”.’

That is, for the Barth of this period, baptism actually does something. It is not simply a sign of something else that has been done. Certainly, the context of this rectification is, in Barth’s view, eschatological; through the Word and revelation of God, our divine future is made present, at least as a received, if not a possessed promise. Similarly, of course, nowhere, not even in this early stage of Barth’s career, does he accord to baptism or indeed to any sacrament the ability to effect grace in and of itself, ex opere operato. ‘It must be emphasized,’ he says, ‘that the sacraments effect nothing through their own power… Grace cannot be bound to the sacraments in such a way that whoever receives the signs receives eo ipso the matter.’

Nonetheless, at all of these points, Barth underscores the relationship between baptism and sanctification. Insofar as he does this, he would no doubt agree also with Luther’s more modern interpreter, Gordon Lathrop, who says that ‘[b]ecoming a Christian is not simply a matter of choosing a new life-style and adopting new words. It is a bath, a gift, a rebirth.’ There is, in other words, a certain note here of ‘beginnings’. Baptism signifies some degree of renewal, regeneration, becoming.

At the very least, baptism signifies the start of a new noetic reality. As Barth puts it in his *Table Talk*:

The saving work of Jesus Christ is the same for all men. That Christ died for all provides a common ontological basis for all men. However, we must remember that ontology is not something static or fixed. Within this ontological structure that is valid for all, there are ontological differences. When a man has faith and is baptized, then he *knows* (noetic) something that changes his life (ontic). This *knowledge is reality*, so that the baptized man does undergo an ontological (noetic) change within the once-for-all ontological condition created for all men by Jesus Christ.23

Twenty-four years after his Göttingen lectures, Barth was to say much the same thing. Again lecturing on the Heidelberg Catechism, Barth refers to baptism as the *sacramentum initiationis*, as the attestation of ‘my re-birth by the Holy Spirit’. 24 And in his final lecture fragments, he puts it this way (although in an entirely different sacramental context, a point to which we shall return shortly): baptism, says Barth, speaks of the *foundation* of the Christian life. ‘[It] relates especially to the *beginning* of the history, to man’s [sic] *entry* into a life determined by calling upon God.’ 25

At face value, therefore, it might seem as though, no matter where one dips into his writings, Barth’s view of the *purpose* (if not sacramentalty) of baptism looks essentially the same. Whether one returns to his earliest lecture series in Göttingen, or his final and incomplete lecture notes from Basel, Barth nonetheless interprets baptism as, at least in part, an initiatory act; an act by which one enters into, either, the life of the Christian community, or the history of the relationship of obedience to God.

But in fact the reality is somewhat more nuanced than that. To speak of baptism purely as an act of initiation, *after* which time one participates in the life of the Christian community and *before* which time one did not, risks both over-stating the subjective element of the action, and presenting it as though the choice was a simple either–or. Isam Ballenger, for example, while correct to state that baptism ‘is not an act denoting completion’, nonetheless sways too much to the other side precisely by regarding it ‘rather [as] an act of initiation . . . ’, and as though it were no more than that.26 Similarly, Ion Bria speaks of baptism as if its only function is ‘the reception of a new member into the life of . . . the church’.27 Barth refuses to entertain such an

23 Barth, *Table Talk*, 92.
25 Barth, *ChrL*, 45. Emphasis added.
over-simplistic dichotomy. Notwithstanding the fact that baptism is always for Barth an initiating event, one would nonetheless seriously misread him to be equating this with nothing more than a single moment at which the baptismal candidate first receives the Holy Spirit for entry into obedient service. Baptism is never, in Barth’s view, a static *terminus a quo*. While, as Graham Watts affirms, ‘it is almost certainly the case that Barth’s understanding of baptism is popular amongst many Christians of Baptist persuasion’\(^{28}\), we should be reminded again of Yoder’s cautionary note that Barth’s position was neither occasioned nor motivated ‘by any general, principled ecumenical openness to conversation with the antipedobaptist [sic] denominations’.\(^{29}\)

There is, that is to say, a range of other things that baptism does, quite aside from initiating the baptismal candidate into the community of faith. Above all, the event of baptism is an act of *witness*. ‘For me,’ says Barth in his *Table Talk*, ‘the sacraments have the power to testify…Sacraments are a *means* to this relation [i.e. with Christ], but “means” denotes “witness”’. As with the Lord’s Supper, baptism is not a means for the gift of grace, but rather the means of the *announcement* of the gift of grace. As Eberhard Jüngel notes, baptism, at this point in Barth’s evolution of thought, attests not only a *what*, but *that* salvation has occurred.\(^{30}\) To put it otherwise, by baptism, the Christian *knows* something; baptism provides an assurance and testimony. It is an event through which the Christian’s faith is confirmed.\(^{31}\) This, from the mid-1950s, accords well with Barth’s comments in the lectures from 1946 that were to become the basis of his *Dogmatics in Outline*, in which he states that, while baptism does not by itself testify to anything, it does bear witness to that which the Holy Spirit attests. This is far more than simply the ratification of faith and Christian community membership.\(^{32}\) Rather, as an objective sign of the objective work of the Spirit, baptism tells me who I now am, and in doing so, assures me and provides certainty, even in the midst of temptation and sin:

> For the relevance of holy baptism is this, that we may our whole life long think upon the fact that we are baptized; just as Luther in temptation took a chalk and wrote on the table, *baptizatus sum*. [In the moment of that temptation] the fact may interpose, that I am baptized.\(^{33}\)


\(^{29}\) Yoder, ‘Karl Barth – Post-Christendom Theologian’, 182.


\(^{31}\) Barth, *Table Talk*, 86–88.


For Barth, then, the act of baptism does not simply announce the entry of the baptismal candidate into the community of faith, it also bears witness to the work of the Spirit. Far from being a purely subjective action by the candidate, it is an objective attestation of the prior objective work of God. It is, as he says in *The Christian Life*, a divinely permitted ‘answering, attesting, and proclaiming of the one act and revelation of salvation that has taken place in the one Mediator between God and man . . .’.34

Just as baptism-as-initiation remains a constant (but by itself insufficient) thread throughout Barth’s writings on baptism, so too the understanding of baptism-as-witness remains ever-present. In his Göttingen lectures on the Reformed confessions, Barth states that baptism and all other sacraments act as ‘divine testifying’, ‘depict[ing] there for the senses [what] actually happens in the Spirit’. 35 Again in his *Credo* of 1935, he affirms the ‘event character’ of the sacraments, but notes too that this eventfulness of the sacramental administration consists in their ‘witnessing’. 36 And finally, even in perhaps his strongest affirmation of the Reformed sacraments – his Gifford lectures of 1937–1938 – Barth insists that ‘by means of definite concrete media witness is borne to God’s grace . . .’.37

Famously, Oscar Cullmann seeks to devalue this witness and attestation to the point of mere *cognitio*. He is quite correct that the New Testament does not itself argue that such *cognitio* ‘constitutes what really happens in Baptism’, but insofar as he claims that this is what Barth himself wishes to argue, Cullmann sets up a straw man.38 The divinely permitted attestation, of which Barth speaks, is far more than simply being ‘made aware’ of what Christ has done. Indeed, Barth explicitly rejects the idea that the saving reality of Christ can be made effective simply by being taught about and persuaded by it.39 As Lathrop puts it, while ‘one learns to be a Christian . . . one can never learn the faith; it is always given, like a surprise, a birth, a resurrection from the dead’.40 And, of course, Barth, of all people, was aware of

34 Barth, *ChrL*, 46, 287.
38 Cullmann, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 23, 31. The influential Welsh Baptist scholar, R. E. O. White, seems to support Cullmann’s charge, but importantly does so only on the basis of Barth’s small book *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, which Barth himself says ‘should not . . . be regarded and quoted as my last word on the subject’. Barth, *CD IV/4*, ix. In that place, Barth does say that baptism is a *cognitio salutis*. However, this does not make it any the less Christ’s own work that, ‘as such has a spiritual effect on the recipient’. The point is simply that it is not a regenerative act; it is not a *causa salutis*. See Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, 27–29; Yoccum, *Ecclesial Mediation*, 142–143.
39 Barth, *ChrL*, 145.
the limitations of human cognition. On the contrary, far from being merely a point of cognition, the act of baptismal attestation is both confirmation and proclamation. It provides certainty and assurance, not (only) because it looks back to an historical event (although it does also do that), but because in it, Jesus himself ‘directly actualizes and presents and activates and declares himself in the power of the Holy Spirit’, thus making his death a ‘present event’ for the one being baptized. Again, and in contrast to those anti-sacramentalist traditions who have, perhaps unthinkingly, adopted Barth as their champion, Barth’s understanding of baptism ‘addresses the tendency of many evangelical groups who turn baptism into an event focused on the subjective experience of the individual’. Prior to CD IV/4, the acting Subject in baptism is thus not the candidate, nor even the community of faith into which the candidate is, by baptism, initiated, but rather Christ himself. As Barth said as far back as 1923, ‘Christ baptizes, Christ shares himself, and his Spirit is always and only the true acting one.’ In this, lies its fundamental sacramentality.

In answer to our first question, then, Barth understands baptism to be and do a number of distinct but related things. It acts as an event of initiation; as an event of attestation; and as an event of actualization and assurance.

**Baptism in the final fragments**

To this point, our attention has been primarily upon what Barth thought and wrote about baptism from the early 1920s through to the early 1960s. We have seen that, in spite of all that may have changed with respect to Barth’s sacramental theology, there are nonetheless two consistent threads in his understanding of baptism that run through these years. First, the act of baptism stands in part as an initiatory act, signifying (but not causing) regeneration and the remission of sins. Second, the act of baptism stands as an eventful testifying, an objective statement and affirmation of the prior objective work of Christ through the Holy Spirit. Now, however, we need to ask whether and to what extent any of this changed once Barth’s mature statement on baptism in CD IV/4 – which, it will be remembered, ‘left not one stone upon another’ of what came before it – had been developed. That is to say, with Barth’s total repudiation of baptismal sacramentality in CD IV/4, does his understanding of the meaning and purpose of the event also change?

41 Barth, *Table Talk*, 87–88.
42 Barth, *ChrL*, 46, 145. And insofar as this happens, the cognitive element in baptism cannot be seen other than in the closest possible relation to ethics and discipleship.
43 F. Rees, ‘The Christian Spirituality of a Baptist Theologian’, in Dyer and Neville, *Resurrection and Responsibility*, 4. Rees is here referring to the theological narrative employed by the German–Australian Baptist theologian Thorwald Lorenzen, but the point could equally truly be made of Barth.
44 Barth, *Table Talk*, 87.
Clearly the most obvious change that is evident within the very structuring of Barth’s final statement on baptism is its division into two parts: baptism with the Holy Spirit, and baptism with water. Webster regards this as an almost Platonic distinction, although he does also concede that the separation of the two is ethical in its intent. Indeed, John Yoccum rightly reminds us that the radicality of CD IV/4 is precisely that both baptism and the Lord’s Supper were to be located ‘under the rubric of ethics.’ Barth, of course, also holds the two parts together, as ‘correlated as well as distinguished’ (CD IV/4, 41). Indeed, these two baptisms are not two separate events, but rather are the one event in two parts, with two acting subjects. But whereas in his earlier works, including the 1943 lecture, Barth wished to champion the acting subjectivity of Christ in the baptismal event, Barth is determined here to show that at the beginning of the Christian life there stands a genuinely human act of obedience that, while subservient to the work of the Holy Spirit, is nevertheless authentically free. It is instructive to compare this with Bonhoeffer’s understanding of baptism from 1937. As far as Bonhoeffer was concerned, too, there is an ethical imperative in baptism:

Der Ruf in die Nachfolge Jesu, die Taufe auf den Namen Jesu Christi, ist Tod und Leben. Der Ruf Christi, die Taufe stellt den Christen in der täglichen Kampf gegen Sünde und Teufel. So bringt jeder Tag mit seiner Anfechtung durch Fleisch und Welt neue Leiden Jesu Christi über den Jünger.47

In other words, Bonhoeffer saw baptism as the entry into a new ethical environment, in which a whole new range of discipleship imperatives would flow. But for the Barth of CD IV/4, however, baptism with water does not just lead to a radically new ethical framework, but it is itself the human ethical response.

If ethics and the Christian life form the broader context in which Barth discusses Spirit and water baptism, how does he proceed to argue his case? In part, the answer lies in a nuancing of the baptismal subjectivity that, as we saw from his earlier works, Barth previously restricted to Christ. In the first part of §75, in which Barth explores baptism with the Holy Spirit, he is concerned to ask how it is that someone can become a Christian. Knowing that such a happening is only ever a divine possibility, how is it that – ‘eye of a needle or not’ (CD IV/4, 6) – a man or woman can themselves become the subject of, and active participant in, the event of

46 Yoccum, Ecclesial Mediation, 138. ‘Barth’s decisive move…is to treat these actions [baptism and eucharist], not as occasions on which grace is given through creaturely, ecclesial actions, and which also have ethic implications; but, as essentially and strictly human ethical actions.’

47 D. Bonhoeffer, Nachfolge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke, 4 (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1989), 81. ET ‘The call to discipleship of Jesus, baptism in the name of Jesus Christ, is death and life. The call of Christ, baptism, places the Christian in the middle of a daily struggle against sin and the devil. And so the disciple is faced, every day, with new temptations of flesh and world and, in consequence, new sufferings for the sake of Jesus Christ.’ Translation by the author.
the Christian life? Perhaps not surprisingly, Barth refers us back to the life and history of Jesus. It is this that is the ‘origin and beginning of the Christian life’; the history of the representative elected man, whose history was and is valid for all people. And thus the Christian is the person to whom it is not hidden that they have, not just a potential, but an actual share in that history of Jesus. In becoming the free subject of the Christian life, the Christian affirms the truth of God that is true for all, and grasps the promise that, in Christ, is valid for all (CD IV/4, 13, 17, 28). As Barth says, ‘one may see how it can come about that the history of Christ which took place once in time becomes in the life of a man, once again in time, the event of his renewing’ (CD IV/4, 25).

Concerned that he emphasizes neither the extra nos at the expense of the in nobis (the christomonist solution), nor the in nobis at the expense of the extra nos (the anthropomonist solution), Barth argues that the unique history of Jesus – a very ‘particular story with a universal goal and bias’ (CD IV/4, 21) – takes place extra nos but works in nobis and pro nobis, in such a way that the event by which someone becomes a Christian occurs as a free act of the human subject. This, in fact, is the non-sacramental praise of water baptism.\(^48\) The event is of course an event with divine origin, but with the human participant ‘taken seriously as an independent creature of God’ (CD IV/4, 22). But if we are to ask how this – the ‘divine change in virtue of which the human decision can be made’ as a free decision of obedience, willingness and readiness – can happen, the answer is: ‘it is the work of the Holy Spirit’ (CD IV/4, 27). As Anderson puts it, ‘In Spirit baptism, God initiates what he is accomplishing in nobis, effecting internally what he has been bringing to us all along through Jesus Christ as ‘God with us’\(^49\).

According to Barth, the freedom in which a person takes this step of obedience is not an innate freedom, but rather the freedom that is given as a divine gift through the work and power of the Spirit. Through this gift, the history of Jesus Christ becomes ‘internal’ to the person to whom the freedom is given; the history of Christ ‘becomes his as a Word which is accepted, affirmed, seized and followed by him’ (CD IV/4, 29). And so, for Barth, in and through this work of the Holy Spirit, we come to the real beginning of the Christian life. This – the baptism of the Holy Spirit – as the event in which, through the divine freedom, a person has disclosed to them the history of Jesus Christ as their history, is the true ‘cleansing and reorientation’ whereby they become a Christian. Here, if anywhere, says Barth, can one speak genuinely of baptismal sacramentality. In this event – and in a way in which baptism with water can never do – the person is cleansed, renewed and changed ‘truly and totally’, for in this event we see not just a form of grace, or half-grace, but ‘whole’, ‘wholly adequate’, and ‘active and actualizing grace’ (CD IV/4, 34–35). In all this, Barth has tried to safeguard the subjectivity of the person to whom this change and reorientation happens; the reference, he insists, is ‘particularly and pointedly to man in his own freedom’ (CD IV/4, 27). Nonetheless, the change

\(^{48}\) Yoccum, Ecclesial Mediation, 147.

\(^{49}\) Richardson, Reading Karl Barth, 176.
itself, and indeed the freedom in which the person responds in obedience to that change, are acutely works that can only properly be described as the baptism of the Holy Spirit – for God alone can be author, dispenser and mediator of grace (CD IV/4, 32).

What place, then, is left to water baptism? Strangely, perhaps, this forms the largest part of CD IV/4 and yet, by Barth’s own structuring, is only a subsidiary response in human obedience to the divine change by which it is itself made possible. However, water baptism is not by this subsidiarity rendered superfluous. On the contrary, it is given its own decisive significance and integrity. For Barth:

the praise of baptism is not served but fatefuly damaged if the sanctity of this action is sought, not in the true and distinctive thing which characterizes it as a human action, but in a supposedly immanent divine work. (CD IV/4, 101)

As the corresponding act of human obedience, as the ‘first exemplary work of faith’ (CD IV/4, 44), water baptism is indispensable, even if secondary. Without any sacramental status, it is nonetheless a necessitate praecepti (CD IV/4, 101). In fact, argues Barth, it is precisely the attempt to bestow sacramental status on water baptism that undermines its integrity, by ‘conjuring away...the free man whom God liberates and summons to his own free and responsible action’ (CD IV/4, 106).

As against the Roman, Lutheran and Reformed doctrines of baptism, which have as their point of consensus that ‘the meaning of baptism is to be sought and found in a divine [but concealed] action’ and that can thus ‘be defined, described and explained as a mystery’, Barth instead insists that water baptism is, rather, a free human action of obedience that ‘corresponds to the divine action in the founding of the Christian life’ (CD IV/4, 105). It is not thereby an autonomous moral decision on the part of the human participant, but rather a free decision based on the prior act of God. It is in this free and obedient correspondence that water baptism has its significance and dignity.

And so, on this set of presuppositions, Barth expounds many of the central baptismal passages in the New Testament to show that, irrespective of exegetical history, the link between water baptism and sanctification is not nearly as clear-cut as has been assumed. Whereas in the early years of his career, Barth was not much troubled by explicit connections between baptism and sanctification, at the end of his life he was determined that only by ‘over-hasty exegesis’ (CD IV/4, 117) can

50 In this I disagree with Yoccum, who argues that the ‘discrepancy in length is appropriate to the subject matter, and the locus of Barth’s primary interest...’. Yoccum, Ecclesial Mediation, 146. That is, Yoccum argues that water baptism, and thus the responsive obedient act of the human, is the major and foundational event. I would wish to argue, however, that while the emphasis is indeed on the human subject, this event of obedience is nonetheless responsive to the act of the Spirit by which it is made possible.

51 See also Richardson, Reading Karl Barth, 180.
water baptism be regarded as a washing of regeneration. It is only – but in this is its special dignity – a ‘basic human Yes to God’s grace and revelation’ *(CD IV/4, 118).*

Importantly, however, the event of water baptism is not just a positive testimony. We saw that in earlier works Barth described baptism as an eventful testifying, an act that bears witness to the objective and prior saving work of God in Christ. Now, however, Barth returns to a familiar dialectical pattern, whereby water baptism testifies not only to God’s Yes but also to God’s No – and to His Yes *because of* His No. ‘Confirmed in baptism,’ says Barth, ‘are God’s No and God’s Yes’ *(CD IV/4, 158).* Baptism acknowledges the crisis of judgment under which humanity stands, and the warfare against evil and against human self-justification that has been waged *by* God, *for* humankind. In baptism, ‘the Christian community can only bear witness to this divine No… Hence baptism has first the character of renunciation’ *(CD IV/4, 159).* Only after this confirmation and attestation of God’s No does baptism bear positive witness. But, because of the divine No, there is a renewal of life for the service of God and neighbour, a forward liberation into which humanity is freed to enter. Baptism, as a witness to this Yes, thus ‘acquires and has, inseparably from its character as a renunciation, the character of a pledge. It is a confession of faith.’ Having said Yes to God’s No, the baptized person can now say Yes to God’s Yes *(CD IV/4, 160–161).* The sanctification and cleansing of humanity is done solely by God, through the work of the Holy Spirit. But water baptism is ‘the twofold answer of man’ to this renewal; it is renunciation and pledge and, as such, an obedient act of free human subjects *(CD IV/4, 162–163).*

As was suggested earlier, the division of water baptism from Spirit baptism allowed Barth to safeguard the subjectivity of both God and humankind in the baptismal event. Moreover, by restricting sacramentality to Spirit baptism alone, Barth attempts to raise the ethical significance of water baptism by making it a genuinely free act of human obedience. Clearly, there are decisive differences between this late doctrine of baptism and those of Barth’s earlier years. Images of witness, attestation and obedience remain, but the doctrine has undergone a radical overhaul. With this in view, we need now to turn to the final and indeed substantive section of the article, and ask the question: what, in the span of this evolution of baptismal thought, is the relationship between baptism and mission?

**Barth, baptism and mission**

It is at this nexus between baptism and mission that we see the significance of the phrase, ‘the abandonment of inauthentic humanity’, which appears in the title of this article. The wording itself comes from John Colwell’s description of baptism. ‘To be baptized,’ he says, ‘is to abandon an inauthentic humanity with all its vain attempts to dominate, to exploit, to transcend…[and] to be re-born into this
authentic humanity identified in Christ.’\textsuperscript{52} That entry into the Christologically defined authenticity that accrues properly to redeemed humanity belongs to the event of baptism is self-evident. But such an entry into authenticity also carries with it overtones of the entry into what Barth describes as the Christian life; the \textit{vita hominis Christiani}. How, though, does the Christian life relate to the obedient act of mission, for which baptism frees us?

To answer this, we first need to know how Barth defines the Christian life. In his 1929 lecture on the basis of ethics, Barth speaks of it as being the openness of a person to the revelation of God through the Holy Spirit, such that the person concerned is \textit{grasped} by God’s grace in that divine occurrence. In consequence, while the person continues to live a truly ‘\textit{created}’ life – indeed, in its creatureliness, it is a truer life now than ever before – they are nonetheless ‘opened, prepared, and made fit by God for God.’\textsuperscript{53} Similarly in his Bonn lectures of 1946, Barth notes that this Christian life is ‘the life of a man who has received the Holy Spirit...’.\textsuperscript{54} But what does this reception of the Spirit mean? Simply, that having received the Holy Spirit and having thus been grasped by the gracious Word of God’s revelation, the Christian can now live only by looking both backwards and forwards: backwards, to the life that has passed under judgment and that stands in the imminence of death and dying; and forwards, to the completion of life in the resurrection. This, for Barth, is what it means to live in \textit{authentic humanity}. To live inauthentically, therefore, is to refuse to see either the judgment of death under which the world of sin necessarily stands, or the promise of resurrection and life that is given in Christ.

Elsewhere Barth seems to impose rather stricter limits on the meaning and content of the Christian life. Can there possibly be more, he asks rhetorically, to the Christian life than the forgiveness of sins?

Were [Luther and Calvin] right in thus narrowing down all Christianity, all the Christian life and faith to one single point, [the forgiveness of sins]? I think the answer should be: Yes, the Creed and the Reformers were right. For the forgiveness of sins is the basis, the sum, the criterion, of all that may be called Christian life or faith.\textsuperscript{55}

Or again from 1935, with regard to the \textit{vita hominis Christiani}, ‘it would be mere pretence and deception, were the decisive content and meaning of the union between Christ and us, and therefore the decisive content of revelation and faith

\textsuperscript{52} J. E. Colwell, \textit{The Rhythm of Doctrine: A Liturgical Sketch of Christian Faith and Faithfulness} (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), 72.

\textsuperscript{53} Barth, \textit{The Holy Spirit}, 6–7.

\textsuperscript{54} Barth, \textit{Dogmatics in Outline}, 153.

not the forgiveness of sins . . .’. What enables us to live, stresses Barth, is that we are forgiven and will be forgiven again.\textsuperscript{56}

But in fact, whether he is speaking of the forgiveness of sin, or of one’s openness to God’s revelation through the Holy Spirit, the single and determinative point of reference is the same:

Jesus Christ as the One who claims us by taking our place and who therefore claims us in free grace. That is the pith and substance of faith in the forgiveness of sins and so of Christian faith and so also of the whole of the \textit{vita hominis Christiani}.\textsuperscript{57}

To enter into authentic humanity and thus to live the Christian life is to be always and ever referred back to Jesus. That is why the Christian life begins most truly, not at our baptism, but with Jesus Christ and his baptism in the Jordan.\textsuperscript{58}

So how does Jesus’ life and baptism set us apart in authenticity to embark upon mission? According to Barth, the event of Jesus’ baptism is not only the beginning of the history of Jesus Christ, but also a summons to the Christian community itself to baptize. As Travis McMaken has put it, the ‘apostles and the church are commanded and commissioned to undertake proclamation . . . [which] assumes the two-fold form of teaching and baptism’.\textsuperscript{59} In a more nuanced way, to belong to Him who was baptized by John, which is necessarily to be included in the commandment of Matthew 28:19, is to be summoned to an act of obedience that is ‘in the first instance, not a baptismal command, but a missionary command’ (\textit{CD IV/4}, 54). In the event of His baptism, says Barth, Jesus began His own missionary work. ‘He undertook to do in the service of God and men that which as God’s work He alone could do . . . [and thus] began the fulfillment of His mission as the Son of His Father’ (\textit{CD IV/4}, 54).

Vitally important to remember here is the fact that, for Barth, Jesus’ own mission is not an external \textit{addendum}, but rather an essential element of his very being that must therefore lie at the heart of any Christology. It is also imperative to keep in mind that neither is mission, for neither Christ nor Barth, simply a matter of evangelistic proclamation. On the contrary, mission also and necessarily includes within it those acts of ethical and political solidarity with others, by which the entirety of human life is made more \textit{human}. It is, in other words, and in echo of Jesus’ life of ministry and service, a commitment to the whole \textit{humanum}.\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{56} Barth, \textit{Credo}, 157, 159.
\textsuperscript{57} Barth, \textit{Credo}, 160.
\textsuperscript{58} Barth, \textit{Table Talk}, 89.
\textsuperscript{60} Thorwald Lorenzen argues this persuasively in his book \textit{Resurrection, Discipleship, Justice: Affirming the Resurrection of Jesus Christ Today} (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2003).
But whether mission is defined narrowly or broadly, does this missionary obedience really belong to Christ alone? Primarily, perhaps, but in a secondary sense, not at all. If Jesus himself is sent for a fundamentally missional purpose, then so too is the community that finds its name and purpose in him. The baptism of Jesus is an entry into ‘His ministry and way of life in a manner typical and decisive for all that was to follow’ (CD IV/4, 64). But it is typical, insofar as it sets the type of action for Christ’s disciples to follow, and it is decisive insofar as it determines the act of obedient mission that they, too, are to enact. Thus, both Jesus’ baptism, and therefore His entry into His own missional life, ‘became exemplary, normative and binding in respect of the form of the beginning of their new life’ (CD IV/4, 68).

In the same way that mission is no mere addendum to Christ’s own life but rather integral to it, so too it is not simply an ethical echo on the part of the Christian community, but an ontologically necessary component of what it means to belong to Christ through baptism. Using the language of conversion, baptism by water is an act of obedient confession that God is God, and that God is my God, and that, as such, it is a conversion that I cannot keep to myself. For the baptismal candidate:

It cannot be for him a mere matter of his own heart and conscience. It cannot remain a private affair. Although, and indeed because, it is a matter of his free and responsible decision, it is no mere affair of his own private outlook, piety or morality. Whether he be important or not, it is of public concern. (CD IV/4, 147)

Baptism thus carries with it the missional command to be salt and light in the world; to confess one’s Christian fellow-humanity, and thus one’s engagement in the Christian community’s ‘mission in the world around itself’ (CD IV/4, 37). Inasmuch as each baptism evidences the crossing of the frontier between light and darkness, each baptized person ‘is now personally responsible for the execution of the missionary command’, and indeed by baptism, consecrated for precisely that ministry (CD IV/4, 200–201).

‘It is,’ claims Barth, ‘the Church of Jesus Christ as this missionary Church which is sent out into the world or not at all. As he takes part in this mission, the Christian is on his way from his baptism into his further future’ (CD IV/4, 200). In other words, only by being freely obedient to the missionary command that the free obedience of baptism eo ipso entails, is the baptized person living into the authenticity of the vita hominis Christiani.

Towards the end of Barth’s final statement on baptism, he says that Christ is both the origin of baptism, and the future that lies beyond it. Just as the only true sacramentality is, for the late Barth, founded in Jesus Christ, so too do the ground and goal of baptism lie in Christ. And yet, in the end, it is not quite so straightforward as that. Throughout the whole of CD IV/4, Barth is at pains to claim two subjectivities: the subjectivity of God in Christ, as the Willer and Doer, who acts (in Christ and in Spirit baptism) extra nos, in nobis and pro nobis; and the subjectivity of the human respondent, whose confession of God in water baptism is no less than
a genuinely independent and free act of thanksgiving. Barth is adamant that the baptizand is no mere ‘passive object’ but rather an active subject and participant in the act of baptism. Why? Because obedience to the missionary task is at stake. To quote McMaken again, ‘Barth wants those who are baptized to be committed to carrying out the mission given to the apostles and the church in Matthew 28 . . . ’61 And so, while Jesus may on the one hand, and ultimately, be the origin of and hope beyond baptism, there is also a human ethical ground and goal of baptism, which takes shape in obedience to the missionary command. In the subjectivity of human responsibility, baptism leads naturally and inevitably to mission, as its ground and presupposition, with mission, on the other hand, leading to and hoping for a culmination in baptism as its goal.

‘The task of every Christian,’ says Barth, ‘on every step of the way assigned to him in baptism’ ‘is his task as a bearer of the Gospel to the others who still stand without’ (CD IV/4, 200). Such a missional response to baptism is nothing other than an obedient fulfilment of the authenticity of the Christian life.

Author biography

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