

# LAW AND GOSPEL IN THE THEOLOGIES OF WOLFHART PANNENBERG AND KARL BARTH: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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## 1. Introduction

THE DISTINCT SYSTEMATIC PROJECTS of Wolfhart Pannenberg and Karl Barth remain the objects of considerable theological discussion in the academy, and any scholarly work striving to assess the state of contemporary theology must account in some way for the contributions of these two eminent thinkers.<sup>1</sup> Widely acknowledged for their vast comprehension in matters of history and theology, Pannenberg and Barth are perhaps remembered most for their individual attempts at recovering a doctrine of the God-world relationship, thereby offering new directives for preserving a relevant cultural witness for Christianity.<sup>2</sup> By all historical accounting, the personal relationship between Pannenberg and Barth—initially that of student to instructor, and later collegial—is best characterized as a mixture of professional deference and fundamental criticism.<sup>3</sup> The prevailing

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1. Studies emphasizing the distinctive contributions of Pannenberg and Barth to modern and postmodern (20th c.) theology include, among many others, G.C. Berkouwer, *A Half Century of Theology: Movements and Motives*, trans. Lewis B. Smedes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977); Timothy Bradshaw, *Trinity and Ontology: A Comparative Study of the Theologies of Karl Barth and Wolfhart Pannenberg* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House Books, 1988); and Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20th-Century Theology: God & the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 65-77, 186-99. Additionally, consult *Mapping Modern Theology: A Thematic and Historical Introduction*, ed. Kelly M. Kopic and Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), a collection of essays demonstrating Pannenberg's and Barth's pervasive imprint upon the development of various doctrinal loci over the last century.

2. Grenz and Olson, *20th-Century Theology*, 77, 193-95, 199, intimate that, while Barth's attempts to preserve God's freedom and transcendence from the world tended to compromise "the human side of the God-human relationship," Pannenberg's "creative understanding of the relation of the world to its transcendent/immanent Source"—in that all creation participates in the divine essence/"force-field"—tended to compromise the distinct ontological existence of God with respect to the created order.

3. Beginning in 1950, Pannenberg studied under Barth in Basel for a very short but impactful period of time. The professional relationship between these two men was highly cordial but not without substantial disagreement. In a rather humorous epistolary exchange with his colleague, Helmut Gollwitzer of Berlin, dated March 12, 1965, Barth recalls reading the young and gifted Pannenberg's *Grundzüge der Christologie*

differences between them stem principally from their unique theological methods, which give rise to the distinct material content of their systematic programs.

One significant area of doctrinal divergence between Pannenberg and Barth concerns the important relationship between the law and the gospel. Put simply, whereas Pannenberg considers the law to be a provisional epoch in the history of salvation, which the gospel replaced in the history and message of Jesus Christ, Barth, conversely, represents the gospel in the form or fashion of the law, such that the gospel and the law are inextricably bound to the electing Word of God, which is Christ.

This essay intends to bring Pannenberg's and Barth's concepts of law and gospel into apposition to demonstrate points of divergence (and some convergence) between them. Navigating the challenging terrain of the law-gospel relationship is a perennial concern of Christian theology in general, though scholarly works in English comparing Pannenberg and Barth on this question appear to be less numerous.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, in the case of these two theological giants, the

without much liking (Barth shared his opinion with Pannenberg personally in a letter dated December 7, 1964, to which Pannenberg responded courteously in May of 1965). Hinting that the likely success of Pannenberg's future scholarship would nevertheless depend upon a gracious intervention ("a radical conversion"), Barth quips about his piece on Christology, "I think that even the ravens I see on the top of a high tree from my seat here, though they do not do 'biblical work,'... do not regard this work on christology as a good book" (Karl Barth, *Letters: 1961-1968*, ed. Jürgen Fangmeier and Hinrich Stoevesandt, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 186, 177-79, 350-51). Pannenberg's *Systematic Theology* as a whole evinces a similar measure of critical appreciation for Barth's theology. Pannenberg once admitted that, already as Barth's student at Basel, he was especially "dissatisfied by the lack of philosophical rigor in his thought," desiring from Barth a more thorough integration of philosophy and the natural sciences with theology (Wolfhart Pannenberg, "An Autobiographical Sketch," in *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Philip Clayton [Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988], 14).

4. For examples of articles on the question of law and gospel, especially on the Reformed (general) view, see I. John Hesselink, "Law and Gospel or Gospel and Law? Calvin's Understanding of the Relationship," in *Calviniana: Ideas and Influence of Jean Calvin*, ed. Robert V. Schnucker (Kirksville: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1988), 13-32; Jesse Couenhoven, "Law and Gospel, or the Law of the Gospel? Karl Barth's Political Theology Compared with Luther and Calvin," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 30.2 (2002): 181-205; and Donald G. Bloesch, "Law and Gospel in Reformed Perspective," *Grace Theological Journal* 12.1 (1991): 179-88 (see this entire volume of the *GTJ* for essays on law and gospel from the perspective of differing ecclesiastical traditions). English studies comparing (briefly) Pannenberg and Barth on the matter of law and gospel are mostly limited—according to my findings at least—to recent introductions to Pannenberg's *Systematic Theology*. See, for example, Stanley J. Grenz, *Reason for Hope: The Systematic Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); and Gunther Wenz, *Introduction to Wolfhart Pannenberg's Systematic Theology* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013). This is the case for perhaps a few reasons. For one, the English translation of Pannenberg's *Systematic Theology* (Volume III), in which Pannenberg offers his most formal exposition of the law-gospel relationship, is still a fairly recent publication (translated from the German and published in 1998). Additionally, Pannenberg's treatment of the law-gospel relationship is

relationship between the law and the gospel has pervasive implications for their theology generally, with specific application to their doctrines of the Trinity, Kingdom, Church, and Christian ethics.

The method of this present study is mostly comparative in nature. It does not intend to offer a comprehensive critical assessment of these two distinct answers to the law-gospel question from the standpoint of any particular theological tradition. Rather, aiming for a high level of objectivity, this essay will attempt to exhibit how Pannenberg's and Barth's notion of law and gospel are symptomatic of the special structure and doctrinal emphases inherent in their respective theological systems. With such a goal in view, Pannenberg's *Systematic Theology*<sup>5</sup> and Barth's *Church Dogmatics*<sup>6</sup>—the mature fruit of their theological method and its application—will inform the main part of this study.

## 2. Law and Gospel in the Theological Programs of Pannenberg and Barth: Location and Basic Claims

This portion of the essay seeks to identify the basic conceptual claims relating to law and gospel in the principal dogmatic works of Pannenberg and Barth. Part 3 will provide the theoretical basis for assessing points of conjunction and disjunction between these two theologians. Several questions occupy our attention here: Where do Pannenberg and Barth locate the law-gospel question within the overall structure of their respective systematic projects? What are their basic claims regarding the relationship between the law and the gospel? How do they relate their understanding of this relationship to the task of Christian ethics, broadly speaking? Part 3 will also take up this last question in more detail. Finally, it best serves our purposes to give initial and slightly greater attention to Pannenberg's *Systematics*, if for no other reason than that his concept of law and gospel emerges from an especially complex doctrinal matrix.

### 2.1. Pannenberg: The Gospel as an Abrogation of the Historical Epoch of Law

Pannenberg initially discusses the relationship between law and gospel in the final section of his *Systematic Theology*, Volume II (Chapter

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mostly contained in §3 of this volume, whereas Barth addresses this topic at various places throughout his *Church Dogmatics*. In any case, it should prove fruitful to observe in more depth than has heretofore been offered how the issue of law and gospel relates in importance within the overall structure of Pannenberg's theology compared to Barth's.

5. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 3 volumes, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991-1998).

6. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 volumes, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936-1969).

11; § 5). His exposition of the law and gospel significantly derives from a matrix of Christian doctrines that concentrates on believers' present participation in eschatological salvation. Beginning with Chapter 11 (§§ 1-4), Pannenberg unfolds the significance of the human distinctiveness of Jesus' work and history for reconciling the world to God through the complementary action of the Holy Spirit.<sup>7</sup> A novel way of relating Jesus' death to the event of reconciliation is proposed here, whereby the significance of Christ's crucifixion is progressively actualized, finding "its inner *telos*" ultimately in the future reconciliation of the world.<sup>8</sup> On this view, "only in the form of anticipation can we say that the reconciliation of the world has already taken place in the cross of Jesus."<sup>9</sup>

The entire *process* of being reconciled to God—a process inaugurated at the cross of Christ and continued effectually through the apostolic ministry and the gospel proclamation of the church—comes to completion in the work of the Spirit, who calls individuals to acknowledge their proper destiny in the paradigm of Jesus' death and resurrection.<sup>10</sup> The Spirit actualizes (internalizes) the "new immediacy" to God that believers obtain through faith in Christ.<sup>11</sup> "Hence the Spirit completes our reconciliation with God by enabling us through faith in Jesus Christ to accept our own finite existence before God."<sup>12</sup>

Pannenberg further argues that the significance of the history of Jesus and the cross event are appropriated subjectively through the ongoing proclamation of the gospel, which has for its content the "in-breaking of the rule of God."<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the crucified and risen Lord Jesus "*became the content of this news* because the salvation of the Kingdom of God is present already in him."<sup>14</sup> Central to the Pauline message, then, according to Pannenberg, is the identification of the saving history of Jesus with the material content of the gospel. The message of reconciliation in the gospel is a "relevant interpretation" of the salvific presence (preliminary) of the "eschatological rule of God linked to the person and history of Jesus."<sup>15</sup> The church's proclama-

7. An important theme at work in this chapter is Pannenberg's insistence that the divine act of reconciliation is necessarily triune. Christ's passion is the coordinated action of the Father, Son, and Spirit, even as Jesus' self-distinction from the Father as the Son in the substitutionary act of reconciliation preserves the independent (distinct) existence of creation and the possibility of human participation in making reconciliation. See *ST*, II, 437-54.

8. *ST*, II, 412.

9. *ST*, II, 413.

10. *ST*, II, 450.

11. *ST*, II, 436. Pannenberg emphasizes that believers participate "ecstatically" in the filial relationship of Jesus to the Father through the Spirit and in faith in Jesus Christ (*ST*, II, 452).

12. *ST*, II, 454.

13. *ST*, II, 455.

14. *ST*, II, 457; emphasis added.

15. *ST*, II, 457.

tion therefore has actualizing power because it is “connected with the presence of the future of God in the coming of Jesus, and also with the imparting of this presence of eschatological salvation by the Spirit, who through the gospel leads to knowledge of the Son in the human history of Jesus.”<sup>16</sup>

As a result of this new orientation of the gospel to eschatological reconciliation, Pannenberg insists that the power ascribed to the gospel cannot correspond to a general notion of the Word of God, such as an Old Testament understanding of the Word as the ministry of the law. One should not consider the gospel a “correlate” of the law, as though the two are inextricably bound together. Rather, Pannenberg interprets the Pauline antithesis between law and gospel to be “*historically conditioned*, inasmuch as the time of the law ended with the coming of the message of eschatological salvation (Gal. 3:23-25; cf. Rom. 10:4).”<sup>17</sup>

The gospel represents an entirely new and independent epoch in salvation history that has replaced the era of the law. According to Pannenberg, on this point the Reformed (Lutheran) law-gospel principle wrongfully constrained the significance of the gospel by advocating a view of the gospel as the *nova lex* or by identifying the gospel simplistically as the forgiveness of sins. In short, Pannenberg maintains that when the gospel is understood properly as the message of the saving presence of God’s rule and as the Spirit’s medium for actualizing the reconciliatory work of Christ, then, as a new epoch in salvation history, the gospel neither has any formal correlation to the law, nor is the law constitutive of the gospel.<sup>18</sup>

Pannenberg concludes Chapter 11 by showing how the message of the gospel—the advent of God’s reign in Jesus Christ—creates the fellowship of believers (the church) who together constitute “a sign and a provisional form of the humanity that is reconciled in the Kingdom of God—the humanity that is the goal of the event of reconciliation in the expiatory death of Jesus Christ.”<sup>19</sup> Chapter 11 serves as a bridge, of sorts, by linking the topic of the person and work of Christ to the saving effects of the Spirit and the provisional appearance of the eschatological Kingdom of God, topics Pannenberg discusses subsequently in Chapter 12 (Vol. III) as those having “constitutive significance” for the doctrine of ecclesiology and the church’s relation to the legal order of the state.<sup>20</sup>

Chapter 12 (§§ 1-2) further develops the doctrinal matrix of Spirit-Kingdom-Church that is so essential to Pannenberg’s theology of reconciliation and to his conception of the law-gospel relationship.

16. *ST*, II, 459.

17. *ST*, II, 459-60; emphasis added.

18. *ST*, II, 460-64.

19. *ST*, II, 463.

20. *ST*, III, 57.

The Kingdom of God is the “context of the church’s existence and of the specific form of the presence of God’s Spirit within it,”<sup>21</sup> just as the relation to the Kingdom of God is the framework in which God consummates salvation history and in which the outpouring of the Spirit progressively testifies that “in Jesus Christ the eschatological consummation of the theme of human life has come already [in principle]....”<sup>22</sup> Because the ultimate order of God’s Kingdom is not yet consummated, however, Pannenberg acknowledges that standing alongside the definitive, yet incomplete, penetration of the Kingdom in Jesus Christ are “the forms of the provisional order of human life in society, the state and law.”<sup>23</sup>

The church, as the “pneumatic presence of the Future of Christ” and as the anticipatory signification of the ultimate future of human communion in the coming Kingdom of God, relates to the provisional existence of the state and its laws in the way of conflict and cooperation.<sup>24</sup> The church has no need for the law, on the one hand, since Jesus Christ has ended it. “Jesus Christ is the end of the law because in him the eschatological future of God’s reign is already present.” In this respect, the community of saints stands in conflict with the lawful order of society. On the other hand, since many people have yet to apprehend the inaugurated future of God’s rule in Jesus Christ, Christians must also live cooperatively within the provisional structure of the social legal order. “Insofar as they are still tied to this perishing world, as citizens of secular societies, peoples, and states they are also subject to their laws.”<sup>25</sup>

Relatedly, Pannenberg argues that the complex relation between the Christian church and the provisional legal order of society “*has found expression in the distinction between law and gospel*, but in a form that is linked to the emancipating of Christian eschatological

21. *ST*, III, 97.

22. *ST*, III, 20.

23. *ST*, III, 95.

24. Wenz, *Introduction*, 168.

25. *ST*, III, 95. “By its difference from the state the church not least of all helps to humanize the political order itself in its relation to individual citizens, because the church’s existence unceasingly reminds the state of the difference between its own order and the definitive actualizing of our social destiny, thereby limiting its claims on individuals” (*ST*, III, 56-57). Pannenberg admits that in one sense he is “not a protagonist of the traditional Lutheran two kingdoms doctrine,” in that he affirms a profound distinction between the church and state, the ultimate and the provisional. However, he wants to maintain, in contrast to some two kingdoms theorists, “that there is (and should be) a positive connection between the Christian faith and the cultural and social system wherever Christians have a chance to shape the order of society and culture” (Pannenberg, “A Response to My American Friends,” in *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*, ed. Braaten and Clayton, 333). For more on Pannenberg’s assessment of the Lutheran two kingdoms doctrine and his proposal for a distinctly Christian presence in secular society, see his *Ethics*, trans. Keith Crim (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981), 7-22, 112-31; and J. Mark Beach, “A Tale of Two Kingdoms: Some Critics of the Lutheran Doctrine of Two Kingdoms,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 25 (2014): 47-53.

awareness from the Jewish form of relating law and religion.”<sup>26</sup> With this statement Pannenberg commences his most critical analysis of the law and the gospel in the *Systematic* (Chapter 12; §3).

Pannenberg’s formal treatment of the law and the gospel acknowledges that, historically, ancient people regularly preserved a close relationship between the legal order of society (government law) and religion.<sup>27</sup> This was no less true respecting the law of God in Israel. According to Pannenberg, however, the original Judaic understanding of divine law, as received and mediated by Moses, was so attached to a particularized belief in Israel’s divine election and the promise of possessing an earthly inheritance that the cosmic significance of God’s law was essentially lost. “The legal tradition of Israel, thus frozen by traditionalist hardening, became in the form of the torah a special feature in the national tradition of the people of Israel instead of representing a universal expression of the righteous will of the one God for all people.” All of this changed at the coming of Jesus, whose message liberated the “core” of Old Testament law by teaching the fulfillment of the divine law “in terms of the eschatological future of God and its inbreaking with this message.”<sup>28</sup> Jesus’ interpretation removed the historical and traditional “crust” of the law to reveal its “universally valid content,” which has essential relation to the broad claim and inaugurated reality of God’s future Kingdom. Pannenberg suggests that it was Paul’s task, ultimately, to proclaim to Christians their “final break” with the jurisdiction of the legal tradition—a transition Jesus achieved through his own death and resurrection. The difference between law and gospel, and consequently the difference between church and state, is thus a matter of Christian disengagement from the nationalistic solidification and formalization of divine law in the Jewish Torah. Jesus’ own message about the dawning of eschatological salvation and the Kingdom of God in his own person and history grounds Christian belief that the Good News abrogates all historically conditioned legal tradition. The gospel represents an entirely new epoch in salvation history.<sup>29</sup>

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26. *ST*, III, 57; emphasis added. For more on Pannenberg’s application of theology to the relationship between church and state, and his eschatologically-conditioned ethics, see Richard John Neuhaus, “Theology for Church and Polis,” in *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*, 226-38; and Ted Peters, “Pannenberg’s Eschatological Ethics,” in *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*, 239-65.

27. It is Pannenberg’s regular practice in his *Systematic Theology* to commence a discussion of the character and action of God by drawing from the history of nature and human culture. This is so because, as John Cooper aptly comments in *Panentheism: The Other God of the Philosophers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 262, “Pannenberg’s philosophical theology as a whole is broadly Hegelian in scope and structure. It considers how God manifests himself implicitly in nature. It traces how nature culminates in humanity. It then follows how human culture and history peak in religion, where God reveals himself explicitly.”

28. *ST*, III, 59.

29. *ST*, III, 60.

Finally, to steer through what Pannenberg considers a confused historical understanding of how the law and gospel relate to each other, he traces out several prominent periods of Christian exposition of the law-gospel question, namely, “the Pauline view, the patristic and medieval interpretations of the gospel as new law (*nova lex*) and the Reformation doctrine of law and gospel.”<sup>30</sup> We have already seen that Pannenberg interprets Paul’s use of the terms *law* and *gospel* to mean two separate epochs in salvation history. Paul claims that Christ has brought the law to an “end” by ushering in the gospel era with its eschatological hope.<sup>31</sup> For Pannenberg, this does not mean the divine requirement of justice has ceased altogether, but rather that formal or fixed law no longer functions as the means for seeking the justice of God’s Kingdom. Christians seek justice in the world in the power of the Spirit through the spontaneous (free) act of love only, and not through strict adherence to the rigid rule of formalized law.<sup>32</sup>

While Pannenberg concedes that the patristic notion of the gospel as *nova lex* in some way recognized the Pauline distinction between subsequent epochs of salvation history (between the “new” and “old” covenants), he is critical of the assertion that a “typological parallel” obtains between the new and old law.<sup>33</sup> He believes that by retaining the orientation of law, as a definitive and normative paradigm for Christian behavior, any appeal to the gospel as a “new law” compromises Jesus’ summation of the Old Testament law of God simply as love for God and neighbor. As the ethic of the new epoch in human history, love cannot be the object of any formal command, “because free spontaneity is a constituent of all turning to others in love.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, Pannenberg maintains that with the epochal transition from law to gospel, the free impulse of love for God and neighbor replaced codified law as the standard for ethical human living.

Pannenberg is likewise critical of the Reformers’ alleged failure to recognize the Pauline distinction of law and gospel as two different realities belonging to two separate epochs of God’s salvation history.<sup>35</sup> Pannenberg does acknowledge a certain abiding worth in Luther’s statements about the “structural difference between the liberating work of the gospel and the functions of the law.”<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, he maintains that the way Luther and other Reformers defined this distinction (*usus theologicus legis*) relied too heavily on the medieval doctrine of penance with its call for lifelong *mortificatio* and *vivificatio*, and thus their view “differed profoundly from what Paul said about

30. *ST*, III, 60.

31. *ST*, III, 61-70.

32. *ST*, III, 68-69.

33. Grenz, *Reason for Hope*, 155.

34. *ST*, III, 78.

35. *ST*, III, 61, 79-80.

36. *ST*, III, 82.



faith's freedom from the law as the basic determination of the Christian life in general."<sup>37</sup> Luther erred by granting to the law a perpetual application to the Christian's life, inadequately acknowledging the strict break between law and gospel that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ initiated. Thus, Pannenberg draws a direct line between the historical transition from law to gospel and the "eschatological turn" by which sinners are reconciled once-for-all to God in the event of Baptism.<sup>38</sup> Accordingly, any New Testament imperatives that are directed at Christians should not be read as "fixed formulations of God's will," but as "expositions of being in Christ."<sup>39</sup>

## 2.2. Barth: The Law as a Form of the Gospel

Distinct from Pannenberg, Karl Barth does not first locate his discussion of the law and the gospel in a formal exposition of reconciliation—a topic he later addresses with particular emphasis in the fourth and final volume(s) of his *Church Dogmatics*. Instead, by way of a decisive break with the dogmatic tradition, Barth identifies the ethical problem of law and gospel as a task belonging to the doctrine of God, specifically the divine command (CD, II/2, §36ff.).<sup>40</sup> Essential for the Christian concept of God, and, consequently, essential to Christian ethics, is the covenant relationship God creates with humankind.<sup>41</sup> This covenant contains two elements: 1) God's *free elec-*

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37. *ST*, III, 82-84. Pannenberg contends that the gospel, contra Luther's penitential view, is wider than the forgiveness of sins. It includes within its scope the breaking in of God's eschatological salvation. Forgiveness of sins, then, is the implication, but not the primary significance of the gospel. It "is one essential element of [the Good News], but only one" (*ST*, II, 462). Cf. *ST*, III, 83ff. Pannenberg reiterates this critical assessment of Luther's penitential piety in a later article entitled, "Luther's Contribution to Christian Spirituality," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 40.4 (Winter 2001): 284-89. Similar to his *ST*, Pannenberg argues that Luther was inconsistent to emphasize, on one hand, that "the immediacy of the assurance of God's promise of salvation served to resist the accusation of the law," while still insisting on "the spiritual need for exposure to the accusing power of the law so that again and again we may take refuge in God's promise in his gospel" (285).

38. *ST*, III, 86-87. "By baptism, which links the baptized to Jesus Christ, there takes place in their lives as a sight—but really—the same eschatological turn that came into human history through Jesus Christ.... [O]ur baptism already anticipates the future of our individual lives as it anticipates the uniting of our future death to the death of Christ and thereby opens up for us also the hope of participation in his resurrection" (*ST*, III, 85).

39. *ST*, III, 89.

40. An ethical thrust is prominent throughout the *Church Dogmatics*. Consistent with the Trinitarian unity of operation assumed in this work, Barth's volumes gradually unfold the unitary *command* of God (Barth's preferred term over "law") linking the distinguishable spheres of activity among the triune persons. On this, see Otto Weber, *Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics*, trans. Arthur C. Cochrane (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), 205.

41. While Barth acknowledges that God is not obligated by any external influences to make covenant with human beings, he nevertheless insists that most basic is God's free and compassionate decision to associate himself with humanity in the God-Man,

tion of grace, which, out of a “free decision of His love,” embraces humankind in Jesus Christ, and 2) God’s *command*, whereby human covenant partners are commissioned (determined) to share in the divine work.<sup>42</sup>

The principle of mutual responsibility plays a central role in Barth’s concept of divine covenant. God from all eternity in Jesus Christ “elects Himself to be gracious toward man” in the temporal execution of predestination. This is the essence of the gospel. On the other hand, as the Lord of the covenant and the Judge of human action, God also requires something from his covenant partners, namely, obedience, service, and witness to Jesus Christ.<sup>43</sup> Thus, “it is in and with man’s determination by God as this takes place in predestination that the question arises of man’s self-determination, his responsibility and decision, his obedience and action.”<sup>44</sup> The being, essence, and activity of God are linked to those of humankind, Barth argues, so that “it is as He makes Himself responsible for man that God makes man, too, responsible.”<sup>45</sup>

On this view of divine covenant, which includes the free grace of election and the command of obedience within the context of reciprocal divine and human obligations, Barth argues for the law as a *form* of the gospel. Because the electing grace of God is by its nature a commanding grace that entails human obligation, the gospel comes to us in the “form and fashion of the Law.”<sup>46</sup> While law and gospel are distinct from one another, they are not two separate and self-contained entities, existing independently from each other. There is only the one Word of God—grounded in Jesus Christ, the sanctifying God and the sanctified man in one person—that is both gospel *and* law.

The one Word of God which is the revelation and work of His grace is also Law. That is, it is a prior decision concerning man’s self-determination. It is the claiming of his freedom. It regulates and judges the use that is made of this freedom. As the one Word of God, which is the revelation and work of His grace, disposes of man, it is also the impulse directing him to a future that is in keeping with this “disposing.”

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Jesus Christ. In this respect, God “does not exist... without the covenant with man which was made and executed in this name [Jesus Christ]. God is not known completely—and therefore not at all—if he is not known as the Maker and Lord of this covenant between Himself and man” (CD, II/2, 509).

42. CD, II/2, 510-11.

43. CD, II/2, 510.

44. CD, II/2, 511.

45. CD, II/2, 511.

46. CD, II/2, 511. Cf. Barth’s 1935 essay, “Gospel and Law,” in *Community, State, and Church*, reprint (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 71-100, in which he also argues that the law is in the gospel.

This future consists of reciprocating the covenant obligations in conformity to the being, essence, and activity of God.<sup>47</sup>

Connecting ethics to the doctrine of God, and not simply to the dogmatic project in general, preserves the integral relationship between the grace of election and the obedience of faith. "Election in Jesus Christ means separation for the purpose of subjection to the lordship of Him who gave Himself for us 'that we which live should not henceforth live unto ourselves, but unto him which died for us, and rose again' (2 Cor. 5:15)."<sup>48</sup> Indeed, for Barth, the goals of human subjection to God in election are salvation, sanctification, and freedom in the Spirit, so that, properly speaking, the concrete manifestation of election is sanctification.<sup>49</sup>

From what has been said about the grounding of Christian ethics in the electing grace of God in Jesus Christ, it is quite evident that Barth's ethics arise from a Christological, rather than an anthropological, starting point. Indeed, for Barth, anthropology requires an apprehension of the second Adam, Christ Jesus, who alone discloses true humanity by being the genuine autonomous subject in his free obedience to the righteousness of God's command. Throughout the *Dogmatics*, Barth stresses that whatever is to be said about human beings and their response to God in ethics must be said with reference to the person and work of Christ. Any human attempt to answer the ethical question apart from God's electing grace in Christ, who *is* in his own person the answer to that question, will only prove fruitless. Indeed,

the man Jesus, who fulfills the commandment of God, does not *give* the answer, but by God's grace he *is* the answer to the ethical question put by God's grace. The sanctification of man, the fact that he is claimed by God, the fulfillment of his predetermination in his self-determination to obedience, the judgment of God on man and His command to him in its actual concrete fulfillment—they all take place here in Jesus Christ.<sup>50</sup>

In this respect, God's commandment takes the form of an event—the Christ event. In the same way that God elects Christ to commit himself to righteousness, so also, through the death and resurrection of Christ, believers are prepared for obedience in virtue of their election in Christ. Only in this respect are the actions of human beings denominated "good"—on the fact that God first acts upon humankind

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47. *CD*, II/2, 511-12; 777ff.

48. *CD*, II/2, 512.

49. Inspired by Calvin, Barth writes, "Election is the sun, sanctification its shining—who is to separate the two?" (*CD*, II/2, 512). See also Bloesch, "Law and Gospel in Reformed Perspective," 182-85.

50. *CD*, II/2, 517. Cf. *CD*, IV/2, 511-33.

in the goodness of his electing grace in Jesus Christ, who is the electing God and the elect man of righteousness.<sup>51</sup>

Section 37 (CD, II/2; Chapter 8) further exposts the divine commandment as God's "claim" upon believers in Jesus Christ. Christians are inextricably bound to God as his covenant partners through the free grace of election. Only in connection with this divine claim, whereby they are included in God's existence through Jesus Christ, do believers enjoy true freedom, negating any imagined human autonomy.<sup>52</sup> This freedom under the divine claim is actualized in Jesus Christ, so that the command or law of God is completely enclosed in the gospel. Again, Barth rejects any separation of the grace of election from the divine call to human obedience. He insists that the law "is not a second thing alongside and beyond the Gospel. It is not a foreign element which precedes or only follows it."<sup>53</sup> Far from being self-contained or existing in contradistinction to the electing grace of God in Christ, the law "is the claim which is addressed to us by the Gospel itself and as such, the Gospel in so far as it has the form of a claim addressed to us, the Gospel which we cannot really hear except as we obey it."<sup>54</sup> For Barth, then, the ethical question always finds its answer in the history of the God-Man, Jesus Christ. He is "the basis on which we may believe in God, the Word in which dwell the light and force to move us to this event. *He Himself is the Gospel*. He Himself is the resolve and the execution of the essential will in which God willed to give Himself to us."<sup>55</sup>

God's rightful claim on humanity, including the obligations affixed to his command, depends upon his accomplishments on our behalf in "the royal man Jesus," who is "the image and reflection of the divine Yes to man and his cosmos."<sup>56</sup> In the adoption of our flesh, Jesus took upon himself the punishment against human sin, proving that God himself is not against human beings but for them, even in

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51. Weber, *Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics*, 107.

52. Barth affirms the notion of "autonomy" specifically as one element of a Protestant dogmatic method, which entails free obedience to the Word of God resulting from a personal encounter with the commanding God of Scripture. Such human freedom exists only within the context of covenantal obedience. Thus, as John Macken aptly comments in *The Autonomy Theme in the 'Church Dogmatics': Karl Barth and His Critics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 34, Barth's notion of autonomy is not "an arbitrary exercise, but it is objective only in the Holy Spirit and in grace.... It must be grasped only in entire inward obedience to the command of God." For a more detailed analysis of Barth's critical response to some notions of autonomy in liberal theology, including Pannenberg's criticism of Barth, see Macken's entire work, especially Chapter 1 (pp. 22-87) and pp. 88-109.

53. CD, II/2, 557.

54. CD, II/2, 557.

55. CD, II/2, 557; emphasis added. For a helpful elucidation of this aspect of Barth's theology, see Adam Neder, *Participation in Christ: An Entry into Karl Barth's 'Church Dogmatics'* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 23-28, 35-39, 54, 80.

56. CD, IV/2, 180.

“all the impossibility of their perversion.”<sup>57</sup> Jesus Christ accomplished the great work of faith in our stead. We have only to approve his representation and endorse by faith his performance of true repentance for us, which accomplished his and our justification and glorification. Renewed and purified human existence, as a free determination in conformity with God’s command, entails a true camaraderie with the Word-made-flesh.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, Barth says the transformation of the human situation has already occurred in Jesus. It “is not really enacted at an undefined point in empty space, but in proximity, fellowship, even brotherhood with the human existence of Jesus Christ and therefore with God’s own human existence.”<sup>59</sup>

In this way, God’s objective claim over human existence is both gracious and demanding without contradiction. “It is the claim of the God in whom we may believe, of the God who is constituted our Lord and demands our obedience in and with the fact that He is gracious to us in Jesus Christ.” God’s command is sought “only where He has revealed Himself as grace and therefore in His truth.”<sup>60</sup> God’s command is bound up with his gracious nature. Far from ordering his claimants to do purposeless acts of submission as a cruel dictator, God’s demands are communicated only within the covenant context of reciprocating responsibilities. Indeed, “what God wills from and for man stands or falls with, and is revealed and revealed only in, what the same God will do and has already done for us and in us.”<sup>61</sup> Thus, there is correspondence between the actualization and revelation of grace in the obedience of Jesus to the Father and the establishment of the law within the divine-human covenant.

God’s commandment requires only the faith by which “we, for our part, accept that God in Jesus Christ is so kind that He accepts us just as we are.”<sup>62</sup> Therefore, the divine command takes the special form of “permission,” the “granting of a very definite freedom.”<sup>63</sup> Human freedom is the intention of God that fuels his desire to rid us from all sinful and anxious notions of autonomy, so that we seek his will gratefully and joyfully, even while we are exempt from the law’s

57. *CD*, IV/2, 180.

58. *CD*, IV/2, 181. “The Gospel alone, which no man has invented or planned or constructed, but which encounters man, if at all, only as God’s free revelation, is the Law in the knowledge of which man finds himself accused and judged and condemned. But the Word made flesh, the grace of God encountering man, his salvation, the Gospel, is Jesus Christ. He and His existence as the Son of God and Son of Man are the light in which man as the man of sin is made known to himself, in which he must see and confess himself as such. Where there is genuine knowledge of sin, it is a matter of the Christian knowledge of God, of revelation and of faith, and therefore of the knowledge of Jesus Christ.”

59. *CD*, II/2, 558. Cf. *CD*, IV/2, 383-403.

60. *CD*, II/2, 559.

61. *CD*, II/2, 562.

62. *CD*, II/2, 588.

63. *CD*, II/2, 585. “The command of God sets man free. The command of God permits. It is only in this way that it commands” (*CD*, II/2, 586).

necessity.<sup>64</sup> We thus avoid the equally dangerous extremes of legalism and lawlessness once we apprehend that God's command "is only the form of the Gospel of God, in virtue of which—not in and by ourselves, but in and by Jesus Christ—we are free."<sup>65</sup> God does not speak abstractly through his command, but "along a definite line."<sup>66</sup> His Word, as law and gospel, entails both freedom and imperative based on God's saving initiative in Jesus Christ. Therefore, the recipients of God's electing grace always hear God's command as a definite and compassionate proclamation:

Do this—not because an outer or inner voice now requires this of you, not because it must be so in virtue of any necessity rooted in the nature and structure of the cosmos or of man [natural theology], but: Do this, because in so doing you may and will again live of and by My grace. Do this, because in so doing you may make it true that your rejection has been rejected in the death of Jesus on the cross [elect and reprobate], that for His sake your sin has been forgiven. Do this, because in Jesus Christ you have been born anew in the image of God.<sup>67</sup>

Only the light of "the liberating lordship of the Son of Man" impels people toward a humble and obedient existence before God.<sup>68</sup>

### 3. Ramifications of Two Distinct Theological Programs

Having identified the wider theological and methodological environment in which Pannenberg's and Barth's theology of law and gospel function, the focus of this essay now shifts to uncovering some implications of these two projects. Section 3 offers a more detailed explanation of the unique doctrinal themes that ground Pannenberg's and Barth's relating of law and gospel. It further notes the importance of their views for discerning the relationship between divine command and Christian freedom, as well as questions of general and special ethics.

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64. *CD*, II/2, 743.

65. *CD*, II/2, 588.

66. *CD*, II/2, 586.

67. *CD*, II/2, 587. Barth continues on this page: "Do it in the freedom to which you have been chosen and called, because in this freedom you may do this, and can do only this. For this, and not for any other reason, do it. You may do it. And: Do not do this... because you, the free man, are exempted from the necessity of doing it—really exempted by the fact that you have been made righteous and glorious in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, that you have actually been cut off by Him from this very possibility. This is how the command of God speaks."

68. *CD*, IV/2, 402.

### 3.1. Pannenberg: Pneumatocentrism and Reconciliation

As we noted in the first half of this essay, Pannenberg derives his concept of the law and the gospel from a rather complicated doctrinal matrix. Chapter 12 (Vol. III), in particular, contains the trajectory that Pannenberg follows to arrive at his notion of the law and the gospel as two self-contained, successive epochs in salvation history. This matrix, which we represented earlier as Kingdom-Spirit-Church, coincides with Pannenberg's underlying project to demonstrate that the entirety of historical development is "the self-communication of God."<sup>69</sup> Unlike Barth's supernatural concept of revelation, which isolates redemptive history (*Heilsgeschichte*) from universal history, Pannenberg's theology presumes that the triune God's self-demonstration coincides with the history of the world and is its *telos*.<sup>70</sup> The truth of this ultimate reality, which Pannenberg believes is already revealed *proleptically* (partially and by way of anticipation) in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and which has provisional acceptance in human hearts by "the convicting ministry of the Spirit of God," reveals itself progressively within world history.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, because Pannenberg "locates the existence of the world within the triune life of God, which he thinks of as an infinite, all-inclusive force field," the progress of salvation history corresponds with God's essential existence, what Pannenberg identifies with the Spirit.<sup>72</sup> These foundational elements in Pannenberg's theology intimate that, even while his systematic project as a whole emphasizes the historical Christ of the resurrection, the specific doctrinal matrix that gives rise to Pannenberg's understanding of the law-gospel relationship is rooted primarily in his Pneumatology.<sup>73</sup>

We can further represent Pannenberg's trajectory of thought, which centers on the pneumatic completion of reconciliation, in the following way:

Jesus Christ's vocation, as the mediator, savior, and lord of creation, stems from his Trinitarian self-differentiation from the Father. The reconciliatory work of the Father and Son, as an act of mutual self-distinction, necessitates the work of the Spirit, who Pannenberg

69. Cooper, *Panentheism*, 264; Cf. *ST*, I, 230-57.

70. *ST*, I, 257. Cf. *ST*, II, 437-54. In his early *Jesus – God and Man*, trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977), 48, Pannenberg insists that the historical Christ must ground all talk of redemption: "Soteriology must follow from Christology, not vice versa. Otherwise, faith in salvation itself loses any real [historical] foundation." Nevertheless, the two must never be separated: "We cannot separate the question of the particularity of Jesus from the soteriological function of his work and his history and therefore his person" (*ST*, II, 397).

71. *ST*, I, 56, 250.

72. Cooper, *Panentheism*, 264-65; Cf. *ST*, I, 382-84.

73. Pannenberg's *Systematic Theology* contains no formal exposition of the doctrine of the Spirit. His pneumatological views are scattered throughout this work and diversely applied.

says “brings the mission of the Son [and the Father] to completion.”<sup>74</sup> Moreover, the Spirit’s mediation of the Trinitarian mutual self-distinction has critical importance for the way Pannenberg relates church and Kingdom. Pannenberg draws a line of comparison between the self-differentiation of the church from the consummated Kingdom of God, of which she is a sign, and the self-differentiation of the Son within the eternal Godhead.

Just as her Lord, in whom she grounds herself by the power of the divine Spirit, is unified with the Godhead of God through self-differentiation, the church is the present signifier of the Kingdom of God not through a self-equating, but through the resolute differentiation of her own presence from the future of the coming Kingdom.<sup>75</sup>

As a Spirit-empowered, anticipatory sign of the Kingdom of God, the church, whose essence is also “constituted by the kingdom,” has the task to promote peace and justice in human society.<sup>76</sup>

On this point, Pannenberg praises Barth “for seeing the kingdom as directed not merely to the church but to the totality of humanity in connection with the divine plan of salvation.”<sup>77</sup> Jesus created the church in connection with his mission of world reconciliation, and thus the church serves as the custodian of the justice of God’s reign. Pannenberg criticizes Barth, however, because ultimately his view is too Christocentric, identifying the Kingdom with Christ. “Pannenberg seeks to offer a far more *pneumatocentric* theology in which the kingdom is understood as made present through the Spirit” in the ecclesiastical community.<sup>78</sup>

One of the church’s primary social tasks, as a signification of the coming Kingdom of peace, is to remind the state and all other social orders of their provisional existence compared to the definitive nature of God’s eschatological Kingdom. In this way, the church’s relation to the transient legal nature of the state correlates with the overcoming of the law-era for those who are in Christ by faith, having thus entered into the epoch of grace. The Spirit, who completes the self-distinction of the Son and the Father in the eternal Godhead, and who grounds the distinct existence of the church within the Kingdom of God, is the same Spirit who preserves the independent existence of those who have faith in Christ by making them participants in the “eschatological shift” from death to life in the paradigm of Jesus’

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74. *ST*, II, 436-37.

75. Wenz, *Introduction*, 169. Cf. *ST*, III, 45.

76. Grenz, *Reason for Hope*, 153.

77. Grenz, *Reason for Hope*, 154.

78. Grenz, *Reason for Hope*, 154; emphasis added. Cf. *ST*, II, 457-58, fn. 157; *CD*, IV/2, 198.



death and resurrection.<sup>79</sup> Thus, it is Pannenberg's pneumatocentric narrative (built upon his philosophical theology of God's self-communication in nature and history) that grounds his understanding of the law and gospel as two divergent epochs in salvation history.

### 3.2. Barth: Christocentrism and Election

Distinct from Pannenberg, we observed that Barth's theology as a whole begins with the Christ of election—the elect and electing God. Most important is Barth's understanding of the historical Christ (history as revelation and salvation) as the primary term of God's electing grace.<sup>80</sup> Human destiny, generally speaking, has its *telos* already in Jesus Christ, who is in some way both the elect and the reprobate in his one person. In this way, the cosmic reign of God and the destiny of the church—the gospel and the law—are fulfilled in Christ. Unlike Pannenberg, then, Barth does not consider the law-gospel relationship simply to be an implication of a pneumatocentric doctrinal matrix. Rather, the gospel, in the form of the law, is an essential element of God's gracious election and covenant claim in Christ, and thus a matter of first concern in Barth's *Dogmatics*.<sup>81</sup>

The pneumatic element that is so prominent in Pannenberg's thought is less primary in Barth's, perhaps in part because Barth was eager to react against modern attempts to re-interpret the Spirit of God as the subjective spirit in humankind through which people ascend to God in the act of "absolute dependence."<sup>82</sup> Rejecting this subjectivist starting point, Barth holds that the Christian faith necessarily begins with the revelation of God, the Word, which is Christ. Human awareness of personal dependence on the divine does not arise from the subjective spirit. God alone reveals himself to the hu-

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79. *ST*, II, 413, 459.

80. Pannenberg criticizes Barth for defining reconciliation as an act of God's sovereignty—a "self-contained and completed event... because God in Christ was its subject" (*CD*, IV/1, 76). Pannenberg's criticism is not of Barth's commitment to the centrality of Christ in reconciliation. Rather, it is the summing up of reconciliation in the event of Jesus' crucifixion that Pannenberg opposes on the view that eschatological salvation transcends reconciliation and has still to be apprehended through the work of the Spirit in the apostolic ministry and gospel proclamation (*ST*, II, 413).

81. Barth develops his understanding of the law as the form or fashion of the gospel across several volumes of his *Church Dogmatics*, indicating its comprehensive importance. Pannenberg's formal exposition of this topic, however, is largely relegated to the third volume of his *Systematics* as an expression of the relationship between the church and the political order in light of God's rule (see *ST*, III, 57). Pannenberg makes no conscious attempt to diminish the importance of the law and the gospel, but this matter does have less priority in the overall structure of his systematic program compared to Barth's.

82. Robert Paul Roth, "The Holy Spirit," in *Christian Faith and Modern Theology*, ed. Carl F. Henry (New York: Channel Press, 1964), 300.

man subject when he graciously causes his Word to speak to us in Jesus Christ.

Hence Barth shifts all theology from the *analogia entis* to the *analogia relationis*. Instead of deriving a doctrine of the Holy Spirit by examining the human spirit, he seeks to listen to Christ and learn from this hearing in faith who is the Spirit. The Spirit becomes known through the relation of His revelation to us.<sup>83</sup>

Likewise, Barth derives his Trinitarian doctrine from the nature of revelation, which centers on Christ as the center of redemptive history. This is different than Pannenberg, who makes the Spirit's self-differentiation, as the glorifier of the Son in relation to the Father, the "condition and medium of their fellowship," which is the model for independent human participation in the divine essence.<sup>84</sup> As we have seen, Pannenberg's theology of the Trinity has great implications for his broader doctrinal narrative—including the doctrines of the Kingdom, Spirit, and Church—because it depends on the pneumatic completion and application of divine reconciliation in the lives of believers who have made the transition from law to grace. Christians share in the reconciling act of Jesus—they enter into it "as a liberation to their own identity"—through the work of the Spirit.<sup>85</sup> Jesus' message of the present and coming lordship of God is "gospel" because it actualizes that lordship whenever it is proclaimed and believed. With the Spirit's attendance, it actually ushers people into a new era of distinct fellowship with the divine Being.

Barth's understanding of human participation with God is less pneumatocentric and relates more closely to the personal encounter between the electing God and his Son, who is elect from all eternity. In accord with his *analogia relationis*, Barth "declares that man is related to God through an I-Thou encounter which is derived from the self-encounter which takes place in God Himself between Father and Son."<sup>86</sup> Since the way God encounters man is always through the revelation of Christ, who is the substance and fulfillment of the divine command, Barth cannot share Pannenberg's conception of law as something that the gospel replaces. The gospel itself includes both the promise and the command or claim of God, which Christ has already fulfilled as the sanctified and sanctifying Son of God and Son of

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83. Roth, "The Holy Spirit," 301. Cf. Bruce L. McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 310-12.

84. *ST*, I, 316.

85. *ST*, II, 450.

86. Roth, "The Holy Spirit," 301. Cf. Barth, *Ethics*, ed. Dietrich Braun, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (New York: The Seabury Press, 1981), 337-49; and George Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 148-85, esp. 184.

Man. The one Word of God, which is law and gospel, is the source of human participation with the divine.

### 3.3. Command and Freedom: Law, Gospel, and Christian Ethics

#### 3.3.1. Pannenberg

Pannenberg's concept of Christian ethics conforms to his belief that the law can never be a correlate of the gospel since the law has only an historical (epochal) significance as a preparation for the gospel.<sup>87</sup> The gospel represents a once-for-all shift from death to life (consistent with baptism), in which human separation from God is conquered. Thus, any conception of the law's continual application to the believer's life *as law* represents a dangerous carryover from medieval penitential piety. Instead, Pannenberg insists that "participating in God's reign means the forgiveness of sins and *the new commandment of love*."<sup>88</sup> Christians who participate in God's lordship through the power of the Spirit have passed from death to life, from law to grace, and their obedience conforms naturally to the ethic of love. Although he rejects Luther's view of the law as a continual pedagogy of sin, Pannenberg does not deny that it is incumbent upon Christians to obey God's will. Thus, he develops wider dimensions for Christian obedience, connecting it to the overall justice of the Kingdom of God – "justice understood primarily as a living reality of the community life rather than a formalized norm."<sup>89</sup> Pannenberg insists that love is superior to the law. It attains the completion of natural justice in diverse situations not adequately anticipated by codified law.

The law binds one to a specific form of conduct. Love has the power to give new life to what is right by developing in extraordinary circumstances, and without disrupting the nexus of social life, new solutions and modes of action that do better justice to the situation. Love with its many creative possibilities thus stands in contrast to a legal form of life that is regulated in the same way for each case.... The tendency of formulated law is to help establish a traditional order of life. Love is more flexible and can bring new solutions to new situations.<sup>90</sup>

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87. "As Paul sees it, the law is not the timelessly valid form of the divine will or of God's demand on us. It is a 'positive historical entity,' namely, OT law, or, in general, the whole OT viewed as law" (ST, III, 61).

88. ST, II, 461; emphasis added.

89. Grenz, *Reason for Hope*, 155.

90. ST, III, 76. Cf. ST, III, 585. See also Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969), 79-80, 117-18.

To Pannenberg's liking, Barth also takes care to distinguish "special ethics" (apostolic direction/*paraclesis*) from the casuistic application of formalized law. Barth recognizes that while casuistry also deals with the concrete and communal application of divine law to special ethical cases, it erroneously encroaches on the freedom of human obedience. Casuistry

openly interposes something other and alien between the command of God and the man who is called to obey Him. It replaces the concrete and specific command of God's free grace and therefore the authentic will of God which man must freely and voluntarily choose, affirm, approve and grasp, by the interpretation and application, invented by himself or others, of a *universal moral truth fixed and proclaimed with supreme arbitrariness*.<sup>91</sup>

In a way similar to Pannenberg, then, Barth shies away from advocating a formalized notion of law, wanting to maintain the idea of free human self-offering.

Pannenberg nevertheless finds Barth confusing because he connects the paracletic significance of ethics to the idea of law as a form of the gospel—law as the command of grace, which has analogy with the Reformation doctrine of the *tertius usus legis* and the Calvinistic relating of justification and sanctification. Pannenberg's main concern is that by identifying apostolic paraclesis with law, Barth does not adequately escape problems of the Protestant battle over the third use. Any talk of law as a normative standard for Christian living, even as the work of faith, compromises the Pauline message that salvation is not by works of law but solely by faith. We avoid the potential error of reverting back to a concept of righteousness based partially on law-obedience, according to Pannenberg, "only if we do not think of the eternal will of God as the eternal law expressed in natural law but as identical with love that is the fulfilling of the law without itself having to be a form of obedience to law."<sup>92</sup>

In sum, Pannenberg insists that formalized law—in its "abstract generality"—"cannot be the ultimate determinative form of the just human fellowship whose fulfillment is the content of the Jewish and Christian hope of the kingdom of God."<sup>93</sup> Rather, the Spirit of reconciliation, who effects individual and communal participation with Christ, determines just human fellowship as the anticipation of the Kingdom of God. Thus,

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91. *CD*, III/4, 13; emphasis added.

92. *ST*, III, 91. Cf. Pannenberg, "On the Theology of Law," in *Ethics*, 31-38.

93. *ST*, III, 94.

the eschatological consummation of human fellowship in God's kingdom no longer needs either law or state power. Jesus Christ is the end of the law because in him the eschatological future of God's reign is already present. In each of us *participation in the love and kindness of God that are therein manifested should trigger an impulse to do what is right.*<sup>94</sup>

### 3.3.2. Barth

When tracing out the differences between Pannenberg and Barth on the question of divine command and Christian freedom, one should remember that Barth's theological ethics considers the *one Word of God* as God's command.<sup>95</sup> In his *Church Dogmatics*, III/4 (§ 52), Barth views God's command both in terms of general ethics, "in which the command is seen as God's claim, decision, and judgment," and as special ethics, "in which the command comes to man in his concrete situation, this time as creature of God."<sup>96</sup> While there is surface agreement between Barth and Pannenberg, in that Christian ethics should be characterized by free self-giving, rather than a slavish adherence to formalized legal norms, for Barth this does not mean compromising the total and specific character of the Christian ethical obligation.

Barth's answer to the ethical question embraces, as in *CD*, II/2, the mutual covenant obligations of the Creator and the creature, and affirms the definite action of the electing and sanctifying God in Christ over various spheres of divine act and human response. The God of creation is the God who elects graciously in Jesus Christ. The God who commands is the God who creates and re-creates. And the command of God presupposes the sanctification of man's obedience and disobedience in Jesus Christ.<sup>97</sup> Thus, Barth, in describing God's command as a "specific divine decision," rejects alternative answers to the ethical question that depend on a general "idea of the good," Kant's so-called "categorical imperative," and independent appeals to

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94. *ST*, III, 95; emphasis added. It is noteworthy that Pannenberg's notion of creative human love as the outworking of Christian ethics relates to a fundamental presupposition of his entire theology, namely, "the central notion that God is an infinite triune force field of creative love." Cooper detects implicit pantheistic emphases in Pannenberg, such as "the incorporation of creatures... into the unity of the Trinitarian life" (Cooper, *Pantheism*, 267-73). See *ST*, III, 646. For Pannenberg, the ethical impulse of love is tied to the doctrine of reconciliation and union with the divine essence (see Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God*, 64-67). Barth, of course, lacks this pantheistic emphasis as he grounds his ethic in the obedience/sanctification of the elect and electing Christ.

95. *CD*, III/4, 4.

96. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *An Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 156-57.

97. *CD*, III/4, 4, 38-46. In this way, the command to obey comes in the form of "permission" for those who are already sanctified in Jesus Christ (*CD*, II/2, 585).

the human conscience alongside God's command.<sup>98</sup> God's command always reaches people within their concrete historical situation as something to be met according to their "election (the election of Jesus Christ) as a believer or an unbeliever."<sup>99</sup>

The definite and gracious context of the divine command grounds Barth's conviction that modern-day ethics should still embrace the biblical summaries of the law, such as the Ten Commandments and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, since in these decrees "God declares Himself to be the Subject of all these special summons, the One who has the power and right to confront the individual in these specific addresses with binding commands and prohibitions because He is the Lord..."<sup>100</sup> Historically-conditioned summations of the divine law relate directly and specifically to modern Christians, not merely by way of analogy, but on account of the personal covenant God who always speaks and acts in his Word.

If the Bible is the living speech of God... it follows, then, that by the biblical witness we are not only called and set, as already formulated, in an analogous position to the biblical relationship and occurrence between God and man. We are not only invited to be contemporaneous and likeminded with the biblical men. We are not only exhorted to hear the command of God as they heard it. But at once the God who has spoken and acted in relation to them also becomes our God in virtue of their witness. And so the command given to them and heard by them becomes directly the command given to us and to be heard by us. Their task becomes our task.<sup>101</sup>

Barth denies that affirming the continuing validity of the law necessarily degenerates into a form of legalism. The divine claim, Barth argues, "never stands alone. It is never uttered *in abstracto*, either as that which in some way precedes the occurrence and proclamation of the grace of God, and is therefore primary, or as that which can only follow it, and is therefore secondary. On the contrary, *it is always the form, or shape, or garment of grace.*"<sup>102</sup> Neither is the law replaced by a spontaneous human impulse to do what is good in some general sense. Barth insists that we should regard the law as that which God accomplished in Jesus Christ, and in this way as a definite event entailing specific obligations.<sup>103</sup> Christ is the final standard for all ethical reflection, and because God's command to humans is inseparable

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98. *CD*, II/2, 665-69.

99. *CD*, II/2, 669. See also John Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 99-115.

100. *CD*, II/2, 682.

101. *CD*, II/2, 706.

102. *CD*, II/2, 563; emphasis added.

103. *CD*, IV/2, 579-84.

from his definitive and good decision in Jesus Christ that is total and yet specific, therefore, our response to God's command must likewise be total and specific.

God does not set forth a general command that people must interpret and apply independently, which wrongly makes anthropology the starting point of the ethical question.<sup>104</sup> Nor is the Christian's vital action exhausted in receiving the reconciliation of Christ by faith. Rather, it involves "the decision for a definite direction in the life-movement of man" according to the example of Christ's self-giving love.<sup>105</sup> Barth, like Pannenberg, emphasizes the abiding ethic of Christian love as a free, creative, and spontaneous act of human self-giving.<sup>106</sup> Barth always understands this love, however, to be the human response to "the Word in which God loves" and turns to sinners in Jesus Christ—a Word that is both law and gospel, and which coincides with the eternal being and nature of the electing God himself.<sup>107</sup>

To summarize, Barth believes in the continuing validity of the divine law because

the God who is the basis of the ethical claim... [is] the God who is gracious to us in Jesus Christ. He is the God who, without ceasing to be God, has made Himself man's own and has made man His own.... He is the God who has summoned man by Himself becoming man and as such not only demanding obedience but rendering it. He has spoken of the good by doing it.... The Law is valid because God himself is the doer of the Law, because God orders and only orders on the basis of the fact that He Himself has given and realised and fulfilled what He orders.... That is why He has the right to claim man for Himself.<sup>108</sup>

God does not require his subjects to fulfill any part of the law that he has not himself already observed through his own commitment to the covenant of grace in Jesus Christ.<sup>109</sup>

#### 4. Summary of Conclusions

The theologies of Pannenberg and Barth represent two very distinct systematic approaches to the relationship between the law and the gospel. Pannenberg's exposition results from a complicated matrix of

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104. *CD*, II/2, 631, 636, 661-708.

105. *CD*, IV/2, 729-30.

106. *CD*, IV/2, 776-83, 837.

107. *CD*, IV/2, 752.

108. *CD*, II/2, 565.

109. *CD*, IV/2, 534-37.

Christian doctrines that relies on a novel interpretation of believers' present participation in eschatological salvation. In particular, his theology includes "a pronounced *pneumatological orientation* to the doctrine of the church [and kingdom], based on the groundbreaking idea of the continuity of the Spirit's work in creation, sustenance of life, new birth, and the church."<sup>110</sup> Pannenberg argues that the same Spirit who determines the self-distinction of the Son and the Father in the eternal Godhead, and who establishes the distinct existence of the church relative to the divine Kingdom, also sustains the independent existence of sinners who participate in the "eschatological turn" from death to life through baptism – a transition corresponding to the historical procession from law to grace in the history and message of Jesus Christ.<sup>111</sup> This pneumatocentric narrative, which depends upon Pannenberg's philosophical theology of God's self-communication in nature and history, grounds his notion of the law and gospel as two diverse epochs in salvation history, although some critics of Pannenberg's position suggest it has failed to maintain sufficiently the unity between God's command and divine promise (gospel), the proclamation of which incorporates the imperatives of personal and communal holiness.<sup>112</sup>

Barth's understanding of the law and the gospel, on the other hand, depends on his view of divine covenant, which includes the free grace of election and the divine command or claim. Precisely because the electing grace of God is a commanding grace, the gospel always comes to us in the form or fashion of the law. Barth maintains there is only one Word of God—Jesus Christ, the sole source of divine Revelation—that is both gospel and law. Jesus Christ, the elect and the reprobate, in whom all people meet their proper destiny, is in his own person the answer to the ethical question put forward by God's grace; he is the concrete fulfillment of God's judgment and command on behalf of the elect. Barth, unlike Pannenberg, does not view the law-gospel relationship through the lens of a pneumatocentric doctrinal matrix, in which the gospel replaces the law. Instead, the gospel—in the form of the law—is always an essential element of God's gracious election and covenant command or claim in Christ. Barth's prevalent Christocentrism, however, has led some theologians to accuse him of leaving "gaps of the Spirit" in his theology by adopting a too narrow view of the Spirit's activity in the world, even

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110. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, "Ecclesiology," in *Mapping Modern Theology*, 357; emphasis added.

111. *ST*, II, 413, 459.

112. Bloesch, "Law and Gospel in Reformed Perspective," 185. Bloesch is critical of Pannenberg's notion that a general law of creation progresses toward the gospel of redemption. Contrarily, he argues that the gospel furnishes an understanding of the inherent moral order in creation, and thus the law and gospel together comprise the prime criterion for Christian faith.



treating the Spirit's part in revelation or reconciliation as a mere accessory of the Son's saving work.<sup>113</sup>

Pannenberg's and Barth's distinctive conceptual claims regarding the law-gospel relationship also have implications for their understanding of Christian freedom and the ethical question. Pannenberg emphasizes Jesus' summary of Old Testament law as love for God and one's neighbor. Love, as the ethic of the new era of human history, cannot be the object of any formal legal command. It is instead characterized by a free spontaneity. With the epochal transition from law to grace, the free impulse of love replaced formalized law as the standard for ethical human living.

For Barth, election in Jesus Christ entails separation from human autonomy for the purpose of subjection to God's lordship, which is true salvation, sanctification, and freedom. This subjection comes from God's definite and gracious decision in Jesus Christ, which corresponds to a definite change in the life-movement of human beings who are called to imitate Christ's self-giving love. While Christian obedience does not conform to an abstract law-principle, and is therefore a free act of human self-offering, the Christian ethic of love is specifically a response to Christ's electing love—a Word that is both law and gospel.

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113. Telford Work identifies several critics of Barth's "narrow" doctrine of the Holy Spirit in his essay on Pneumatology in *Mapping Modern Theology*, 246.