

STILL NO PEEKING:<sup>1</sup>  
KARL BARTH'S CONTEST WITH FEDERAL THEOLOGY—AN  
ANALYSIS AND ASSESSMENT OF HIS CRITIQUE  
OF FEDERALISM

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Introduction

IT IS WELL KNOWN that Karl Barth's theology presents a revised paradigm from the standard, confessional Reformed consensus regarding how to conceive of God's posture toward human beings—both in our present state of fallenness, under rescue in Jesus Christ, and in the original paradisaical situation as narrated in the early chapters of Genesis. This revised paradigm is not always fully grasped by defenders of confessional Reformed orthodoxy and the theology often attendant with it, namely Reformed federal theology. While Barth's Christocentric shift is well-noted, its implications are not as well perceived. Many counter-criticisms against Barth's censure of traditional Reformed thought fail to plumb the depths of the Swiss writer's critique of typical Christian thinking vis-à-vis God in himself and therefore God in relation to his creation.

In many ways, besides his revised doctrine of election, Barth's critique of federal theology exposes this paradigm shift, which reaches down into the Godhead and God's fundamental relation to or posture toward his creation, specifically as centered upon his human creatures.<sup>2</sup> We wish to analyze and assess Barth's critique of federal

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<sup>1</sup> I owe this phrase, as applied to Karl Barth's theology, to Reverend Joel Irwin, pastor of Heart City Church in Elkhart, IN (PCA), a former student, who penned this phrase in a paper he wrote in 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Select secondary literature on federal theology includes Geerhardus Vos, "The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed., Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., trans. S. Voorwinde and W. Van Gemeren, revised trans. Richard B. Gaffin ([1939] Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), 234–267; John Murray, "Covenant Theology," in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), 216–240; Willem J. van Asselt, *The Federal Theology of Johannes Cocceius (1603–1669)*. *Studies in the History of Christian Thought*, ed., Robert J. Bast (Leiden: Brill, 2001); J. Mark Beach, *Christ and the Covenant: Francis Turretin's Federal Theology as a Defense of the Doctrine of Grace*. *Reformed Historical Theology*, vol. 1, ed., Herman J. Selderhuis (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck &

theology, with the aim of examining the implications of that critique for the biblical message, indeed, the gospel itself, which means we must also weigh the strengths and weaknesses of Barth's approach relative to the gospel.<sup>3</sup>

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Ruprecht, 2007; Richard A. Muller, "The Covenant of Works and the Stability of Divine Law in Seventeenth-Century Reformed Orthodoxy: A Study in the Theology of Herman Witsius and Wilhelmus À Brakel," *Calvin Theological Journal* 29 (April 1994): 75–100; Peter A. Lillback, "Ursinus' Development of the Covenant of Creation: A Debt to Melancthon or Calvin?" *Westminster Theological Journal* 43 (1981): 247–288; idem, *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology*, Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought, ed., Richard A. Muller (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001); Jan van Vliet, "Decretal Theology and the Development of Covenant Thought: An Assessment of Cornelius Graafland's Thesis with a Particular View to Federal Architects William Ames and Johannes Cocceius," *Westminster Theological Journal* 63 (2001): 393–420. Regarding the diverse interpretations of federal theology and its rise within Reformed thought, see Beach, *Christ and the Covenant*, 22–64. Barth's understanding of this theology largely follows Gottlob Schrenk, *Gottesreich und Bund im älteren Protestantismus, vornehmlich bei Johannes Cocceius* (Gütersloh, 1923). Barth views federalism as a devolution from Calvin's theology but an advancement over Protestant Scholastic theology.

On Karl Barth, select secondary sources include Keith L. Johnson, *The Essential Karl Barth: A Reader and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019); George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: the Shape of His Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); George Hunsinger and Keith L. Johnson, eds., *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Karl Barth*, 2 vols., Barth and Dogmatics, vol. 1; Barth in Dialogue, vol. 2 (Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2020); Paul Dafydd Jones and Paul T. Nimmo, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Karl Barth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); John Webster, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Eberhard Busch, *The Great Passion: An Introduction to Karl Barth's Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004); Bruce L. McCormack and Clifford B. Anderson, eds., *Karl Barth and American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011); G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. Harry R. Boer (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956); Richard Burnett, ed., *The Westminster Handbook to Karl Barth* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013); John Webster, *Karl Barth*, second edition (New York: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> This essay acknowledges the work of A.T.B. McGowan, "Karl Barth and Covenant Theology," in *Engaging with Barth: Contemporary Evangelical Critiques*, eds., David Gibson and Daniel Strange (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2008), 113–135; Rinse H. Reeling Brouwer, "Johannes Cocceius and Karl Barth," in *Karl Barth and Post-Reformation Orthodoxy*, Barth Studies Series, eds., John Webster, George Hunsinger, and Hans-Anton Drewes (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), 107–147; F.V. Fesko, *The Covenant of Redemption: Origins, Development, and Reception*, Reformed Historical Theology, vol. 35, ed., Herman J. Selderhuis (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016), 184–187, 189–198, 200–204; idem, *The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption* (Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 2016), 195–210, 214–215, 223–233, 236–239; Mark I. McDowell, "Covenant Theology in Barth and the Torrances," in *Covenant Theology: Biblical, Theological, and Historical Perspectives*, eds. Guy Prentiss Waters, J. Nicholas Reid, and John R. Muether (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 401–425; and also James J. Cassidy, "Francis Turretin and Barthianism: The Covenant of Works in Historical Perspective," *The Confessional Presbyterian* 5 (2009): 199–213, 323. This essay, however, travels its own path in exploring the depth of Barth's critique of federal theology, as it seeks to target Barth's own paradigm of grace in the way of criticism.

For this purpose, I will present Barth's analysis of federal thinking, along with his stringent criticisms against it. This will be followed by an extended synoptic analysis of Barth's criticisms with the aim of clarifying his censure of the federal approach and its understanding of the gospel. This section will also include my assessment of Barth's opposition to federal theology under multiple topics. In conclusion, I will offer some summary remarks regarding how the paradigm of grace in federal theology contests Barth's paradigm and how each view cannot escape looking through a glass dimly. What follows is intended to engage Barth as a theological review.

## 1. Barth's Analysis and Assessment of Reformed Federal Theology

Barth directly engages federal theology when he arrives at his doctrine of reconciliation, volume four of the *Church Dogmatics*.<sup>4</sup> Early on, in part one of that volume, he pauses to analyze the federal project before he proceeds to his survey of the doctrine of reconciliation (der Versöhnungslehre). For his part, Barth argues that the idea of the covenant functions "as the presupposition of the reconciliation that took place in Jesus Christ," with reconciliation itself being the fulfillment of that covenant.<sup>5</sup> For Barth, the covenant is the internal basis of creation; and creation is the external basis of the covenant.<sup>6</sup> In other words, the covenant is the reason for the creation, for creation never has a purpose independent of God's gracious purpose in Jesus Christ; and creation is the arena for and means by which the covenant in Jesus Christ can play out in human history. As Barth writes:

But if Jesus Christ is the content and form of the first and eternal Word of God, then that means further that the beginning of all things, of the being of all men and of the whole world, even the divine willing of creation, is preceded by God's covenant with man as its basis and purpose: His promise, in which He binds and pledges Himself to man, and His command by which He pledges and binds man to Himself.<sup>7</sup>

Jesus Christ is very God and very man, and as such, he is "the pre-existent *Deus pro nobis*." He is "the basis and purpose of the covenant," even as he alone is "the content of the eternal will of God which precedes the whole being of man and of the world." He alone is the content of "the eternal covenant between God and man. He is this as the Word of God to us and the work of God for us." This involves the absolute requirement, on our part, that we constantly "perceive and maintain" that "the content and form of the eternal divine counsel" is never different from but always the same as that counsel "fulfilled and revealed in time."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols., eds. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936–1969), IV/1, 54–66.

<sup>5</sup> *CD*, IV/1, 67.

<sup>6</sup> *CD*, III/1, §41.

<sup>7</sup> *CD*, IV/1, 53.

<sup>8</sup> *CD*, IV/1, 54.

Barth's evaluation of federal theology is not peripheral. That is, it is rather paradigmatic in its implications, for his criticisms are grounded in a different articulation of how the gospel message, given in the Bible, should find theological expression. That is, Barth's theological understanding of the gospel stands in back of his censure of federal theology—a theology, which, at bottom, perceives the gospel message to have a scope distinct from what Barth proposes.

Barth critiques federal theology under five points.

### 1.1. Federal Theology's Mistaken "Starting Point" and Its Historicism vis-à-vis Divine Revelation

As Barth sees it, the federal scheme, though an improvement over the medieval heritage, and over the Protestant scholasticism that preceded it (since it tried to understand Holy Scripture dynamically versus statically, as event versus self-contained truths forming a system), still suffers a mistaken starting point. Reformed federalism conceived its theology as offering a "bold review of a history of God and man which unfolds itself from creation to the day of judgment." This history of the covenant, later called the history of redemption, was first sketched by Calvin,<sup>9</sup> but this was made exact under federal theology. The question of "standpoint" emerged as decisive—i.e., the standpoint from which to understand this redemptive unfolding in history.<sup>10</sup> Barth asks (by way of critique): "What happens when the work, the Word of God, is first isolated and then reconnected, according to the teaching of pragmatic theology, with a whole series of events which are purposefully strung out but which belong together?" He further queries: "Does this really correspond to the state of affairs as it is prescribed for theology in Scripture?"<sup>11</sup> In asking the question, Barth is answering the query as a negative critique. As Barth sees it, federalism has "historicized" God's activity and revelation.<sup>12</sup> That is to say, federalism rendered

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<sup>9</sup> See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed., John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), II.ix–xi.

<sup>10</sup> *CD*, IV/1, 55.

<sup>11</sup> *CD*, IV/1, 55.

<sup>12</sup> Historicism, most simply stated, is the view that history is determined by immutable laws and not by human agency. It posits that events or happenings in history *are determined by events or happenings in history* (it is self-enclosed). Or, otherwise, defined, historicism can mean that we interpret things, events, situations from what can be discerned from history on natural or ordinary terms or common human observation and experience, i.e., by shared naturalistic standards of normalcy. Truth is reduced to what humans discern to be true according to such shared standards of judgment. As such, history itself (conceived in this way) is the standard of value. Historicism, understood in this way, argues that the commonplace happenings in human affairs (or what humans discern in a shared way in human life) and what is in accord with scientific laws is what composes history and what may rightly be affirmed as history (meeting the tests of scientific historiography). A clear illustration of this latter idea, for Barth, is Christ's death on the cross. That Christians *believe* that Christ's death brings forth an atoning sacrifice for our sins can be discerned from "history" (that is to say, it is easy enough to study events and conclude that believers in Jesus believe that!); but how—apart from special revelation (and accepting special revelation as divine revelation!)—could a historian ever claim that Christ's death on the cross actually accomplishes or effects the forgiveness of human sin? For Barth, an

God's revelation static, as an object or commodity to be commandeered or ignored according to human whim. We must remember that, for Barth, revelation is always an event—and revelation means God's activity to engage, even to save and sanctify, human beings. Revelation is never a static thing hanging out there for the taking or the leaving. It is God's action *performing* his salvific work.

Thus, Barth maintains, the federal theologians sought "to read the Bible as a divinely inspired source-book," which revealed "the whole drama of the relationship between God and man, act by act." This seems innocent enough, except what was missed, entirely, is that this drama, "this narrative," is, finally, "testimony, proclamation, evangel, attestation" versus being a source-book of information.<sup>13</sup> In other words, this narrative is a gospel narrative, calling us to faith in the gospel; it is a testimony of God's saving love and redemptive actions; it is a witness and a proclamation wherein we are to hear "the evangel" in Jesus Christ. The "content" of this narrative and the "subject" of this drama is singular; there is "only a single event," which in every form is about "the single and complete decision" of God, calling us to a complete and single decision. There is only one story here; it is the *gospel* story of Jesus Christ. This is a story about him, about God's grace in him.

For Barth, God's grace in Jesus Christ is the starting point, the standing point, and the vantage point. But, for Reformed federalism, the narrative of the history of the covenant proceeds from a different standpoint, which changes the character of the one event of Christ's redemptive action. A dissimilar and "higher vantage point" is assumed. And this higher vantage point (higher than that of God's will in Jesus Christ) proves decisive, for from this Mount the federal theologians believed they could see the meaning of what Christ has done for us relative to "all the other stages" of God's work of salvation, and how these all relate, with "the concept of the covenant" being the unifying theme (again, innocent enough), except they failed to define the covenant concept from God's saving work in Jesus Christ. The definition of covenant was imported from the outside; they (the federal writers) likewise imported that concept into the one event of salvation in Jesus Christ. This imported definition of covenant was regarded as "the supposed essence" of each and every stage of the covenant.<sup>14</sup> This brings Barth, in censure of federalism, to declare: "Federal theology was a theological historicism to the extent that it did not allow itself to be bound to Scripture and confined to the event attested in Scripture in accordance with its reformation inheritance." To be sure, federalism aimed to be true to Scripture with its analyses and synthesis. Still, with its definition of covenant from outside of Scripture, a covenant absent Jesus Christ and his work, this theology was more autonomous than it would admit to itself. An extra-biblical, foreign import has been introduced; and this would eventually result in other theologians refusing to be confined in such a haphazard manner, for others would look for more foreign imports to define the biblical narrative, "a wider outlook from that vantage point, and a transition to a philosophy of general

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historicist approach to the history of redemption fails to see *that very history* as witness to and the occasion for divine revelation.

<sup>13</sup> CD, IV/1, 56.

<sup>14</sup> CD, IV/1, 56.

religious history” is the result; and with this comes forth “the perception and portrayal of a gradual ‘education of the human race.’”<sup>15</sup>

## 1.2. Federal Theology’s Exclusionary Posture vis-à-vis the Classic Doctrine of Predestination

Next, Barth observes how the covenant idea was introduced into Reformed theology, first to defend infant baptism, by writers like U. Zwingli and H. Bullinger. Over against the Anabaptists, Zwingli argued that God made a covenant valid from the foundation of the world to its end. Christ is the mediator and redeemer of all who are saved, from first to last. Indeed, both of these Swiss theologians introduced a form of federal theology to Reformed thinking. It is not our interest to access the accuracy or validity of Barth’s analysis of either of these thinkers, neither of whom come under the degree of censure that Barth has for the later and mature development of Reformed federal theology. For Barth, this is due to the universal openness he detects in the earlier version of federal thinking versus the closed-off, later predestinarian version of federalism that followed.<sup>16</sup> Barth does *not* side with the historiography that sought to pit Reformed federalism against a predestinarian Calvinism (one version of Calvin against the Calvinists—and there are multiple versions of that!).<sup>17</sup> The classic Reformed doctrine of predestination, wherein Christ did not die for all people but only for the elect, was wedded to federal theology, so that “from all eternity and in its temporal fulfilment a kind of separate arrangement between God and these particular men,” the elect, forms the gracious covenant arrangement, “which means in practice the true adherents of the true Israelitish-Christian religion.” Barth has no sympathy for a “closed off” doctrine of predestination or covenant, wherein Christ is a Christ only *for some*. As is well known, Barth argues for a definite number of the elect. Still, it is open-ended relative to our knowledge of that final outcome, whether all shall be saved by grace in Christ or, should that number be less than that, we leave that to God—that

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<sup>15</sup> *CD*, IV/1, 56. That is, this opened the pathway to neo-Protestantism (classic liberalism or modernism), a higher-critical approach which reduced Christianity to a religion among others—the Religionsgeschichtliche Schule (the History of Religions School), a late 19th-century German school of thought, which originated the systematic study of religion as a socio-cultural phenomenon. It depicted religion as evolving with human culture, from primitive polytheism to ethical monotheism.

<sup>16</sup> *CD*, IV/1, 56–57.

<sup>17</sup> On the question of Calvin’s legacy relative to Calvinism, see Richard A. Muller, “Calvin and the ‘Calvinists’: Assessing Continuities and Discontinuities between the Reformation and Orthodoxy, Part 1”: 63–80; and “Calvin and the ‘Calvinists’: Assessing Continuities and Discontinuities between the Reformation and Orthodoxy, Part 2”: 81–102 in *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Carl R. Trueman and R. S. Clark, eds., *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1999); Willem J. van Asselt and Eef Dekker, eds., *Reformation and Scholasticism: An Ecumenical Enterprise*. Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought, ed., Richard A. Muller (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001); Willem J. van Asselt, *Introduction to Reformed Scholasticism*, trans. Albert Gootjes. Reformation Historical-Theological Studies, eds. Joel R. Beeke and Jay T. Collier. Foreword by Richard A. Muller (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011).

is, God decides whether it shall prove larger than what is now discernable this side of glory. For Barth, what we may say, biblically, is that all people are included *de jure* in Christ's work of reconciliation, but only those who embrace Christ by faith are included in it *de facto*.<sup>18</sup>

The way this plays out, relative to his critique of federal theology, is that federalism could not portray God as being any more "gracious" toward all people than the predestination theology in back of it. Yes, the covenant is front and center, but "the atonement [reconciliation] made in Jesus Christ was no longer accepted as the revelation of it. Scripture was not understood as the witness of this one event." That is, the gospel event in Jesus Christ, his saving work, does not define the covenant. The covenant is defined independent of him, and he answers to *that* definition. In this way, the gospel witness was muffled in federal theology, with its biblical histories. Instead, we are

. . . offered examples in which certain men as distinct from others emerged as genuine hearers of the Word of God and partners in His work. They, and others like them, must obviously be regarded as the covenant-partners of God, and only they. In this way the conception of the covenant led into a blind alley in which it could not embrace and apply to all but only to some; those who could be regarded as the elect in virtue of their personal relationship with God as determined one way or another—as though this is not necessarily contradicted by the calling and attitude of all genuine hearers of the Word of God and partners in His work; as though in relation to the God active and revealed in Jesus Christ we cannot, and must not, see that all other men are under the sign of the covenant set up by Him, so that far from any particularism we have to look on them with hope.<sup>19</sup>

Here Barth challenges a fundamental conception of (or approach to understanding) the gospel message itself, and therefore to a covenant conception that, as he sees it, does not have Jesus Christ at its essential content. Rather than seeing God's gracious purpose in Christ as the content of covenant history—a single history—the federal writers posited multiple histories and avenues along which the law (the central content) aims to be fulfilled. Grace is present *for some*. But this isn't good news for the world. And Jesus Christ himself, who fulfills the law, is also Jesus Christ only *for some*. Thus, Barth continues:

But if we do not look exclusively to Jesus Christ and therefore to God we lose the capacity on this basis to think inclusively. Historicism in theology

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<sup>18</sup> For example, *CD*, II/2: 479, 511, 526; IV/1: 279, 403, and 722. This feature of Barth's thinking is often not observed or acknowledged, or otherwise overlooked in criticisms directed against his position. This important distinction in Barth's thought, especially in relation to his doctrine of divine election and Christ's work of reconciliation, declares that all persons are elect in Christ and are reconciled to God *de jure* (by right), but *de facto* (in reality, as a fact) involves crossing from the frontier of unbelief to faith—from living in unreality to the reality of Christ's redemptive achievement.

<sup>19</sup> *CD*, IV/1, 58.

always involves psychologism, and with those who try to be serious Christians in spite of their historicism it will be a gloomy and pessimistic and unfriendly type; although at any moment, and this is what happened in the 18th century, it can transform itself without difficulty into its very opposite, a cheap universalism.<sup>20</sup>

What Barth is saying is that a gospel, as proclaimed by a classic predestinarian theology (some selected; others rejected), along with the federal theology circumscribed by the same, cannot be good news for all people.

### 1.3. Federal Theology's Dualistic Notion of a Twofold Covenant Arrangement

If Barth's criticisms of federal theology under points one and two seem mildly vague, what he is driving at becomes more explicit under point three. He presents a summary analysis of a mature federal view, which displays what, for him, is federal theology's defective understanding of "the meaning and character of the covenant."<sup>21</sup>

Says Barth: What began "quite unequivocally" in Zwingli and Bullinger, and in Calvin as well, as a covenant of grace, "of which Christ was not only the fulfilment but the eternal basis," so that even the Old Testament patriarchs and we share in the same covenant as to its "substance" (though there are distinct administrations of that covenant), nonetheless, in later federal theology this gave way to a twofold covenant scheme (the covenant of works and the covenant of grace), with sinister consequences. Barth observes that a "general covenant" (natural) over against a "special covenant" (supernatural) was set forth early on by W. Musculus and S. Szegedin. This anticipated Zacharias Ursinus, who subsequently posited "the covenant of nature." The covenant of nature "promises eternal life to those who obey, but threatens eternal punishment to those who disobey." That over against "the covenant of grace," which (unlike the prior covenant) must be supernaturally made know to human beings and declares that our restoration comes by way of Christ fulfilling the law for us and promising eternal life as a gift to those who believe in him.<sup>22</sup>

We will not trace out Barth's interesting summary of the federal schema as articulated by the famed German-born Dutch university theologian Johannes Cocceius (1603–1669),<sup>23</sup> whom Barth judges to offer "not only the most perfect, but also the ripest and strongest and most impressive" presentation of federal theology.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> CD, IV/1, 58.

<sup>21</sup> CD, IV/1, 58.

<sup>22</sup> CD, IV/1, 58–59.

<sup>23</sup> See his *The Doctrine of the Covenant and Testament of God* [1648, 1654, 1660], trans. Casey Carmichael, introduced by Willem J. van Asselt. *Classic Reformed Theology*, vol. 3, ed., R. Scott Clark (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2016). This book consists of 374 pages in the English translation. The reader should note well the fine biographical and historical introduction to this volume by Willem J. van Asselt, "Covenant, Kingdom, and Friendship: Johannes Cocceius's Federal Framework for Theology," xv–xxxviii.

<sup>24</sup> See CD IV/1, 59–60. In particular, Barth traces out Cocceius's notion of a natural covenant in paradise (i.e., the covenant of works), as well as Cocceius's peculiar notion of the gradual



However, we will note Barth's criticisms as they are directed against Cocceius in particular and federal theology in general.

First, Barth asserts that the twofold covenant scheme posits a dualism (the covenant of works and the covenant of grace) that it cannot overcome—though it gained confessional status in chapter 7 of the Westminster Confession of Faith. The ruling principle in this framework is the covenant of works, which “is based on the Law with its promise and threats.” With this starting point—the law with its promises and threats—everything that follows is shaped accordingly. Thus, the covenant of grace comes next, but it is conceived “only in antithesis to” the original covenant of works. This means that “[t]he doctrine of the covenant of grace was developed in relation, but only in this negative relation, to a covenant of works.” To be sure, the two covenants were thought to have been brought together but “only in an antithetical form.” The partial attempted solution, to ground the covenant of grace in something beyond its being a remedy to the covenant of works, was to posit an eternal intratrinitarian covenant, a covenant within the Godhead, called the *pactum salutis* or otherwise labeled the Counsel of Peace or the Covenant of Redemption (the nomenclature varies). This eternal *pactum* is between God the Father and God the Son for the redemption of the elect and forms the foundation for the covenant of grace. Of course, the eternal *pactum* (granting the covenant of works as the first of God's ways with human beings) had no corresponding relationship to the covenant of works.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the *original* and *prior* covenant (the covenant of works) is devoid of an intratrinitarian pact. At this point, then, the covenant of grace is no longer being traced out and interpreted by what can be discerned in biblical history (the prior historicism); now, the federal writers resort to God's divine eternity. This fits with reducing the work of Christ to “a particular stage in [a] series of events, but ‘only’ as the fulfilling or replacing of the Old Testament economy [.]” Yes, the federal writers rightly wanted to see the Old and New Testaments as not in antithesis as such, but “to present the Old Testament as the witness to the promise of Jesus Christ and the New as the witness to its fulfilment.” And, yes, this theology (Cocceius as representative) was also impressed that the covenant of grace is so very central to the gospel—pushing its foundation back into the Godhead. But, with this instinct, Barth asks how they came to first posit the covenant of works. How was law and works of law made principal, so that the covenant of grace is “only in antithesis” to a covenant of works, so that finally, ultimately, the covenant of grace is only a “fulfilment and confirmation” of that prior covenant?<sup>26</sup>

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abrogation of the covenant of works (meaning: its gradual abolition) in the history of redemption, with the gradual and fuller emergence (or ascendancy) of the covenant of grace in that same history. Barth acknowledges that this feature of Cocceius's federalism did not find the support of most of his successors. For Cocceius, the covenant of grace was understood solely in its negative relation to the covenant of works. Indeed, only as a “second thought” was God seen to turn to man in grace and offer a mediator of salvation, in the way of faith, as divine gift. *CD*, IV/1, 58–63. On Barth's engagement with Cocceius's covenant ideas in particular, see Brouwer, *Karl Barth and Post-Reformation Orthodoxy*, 107–136.

<sup>25</sup> *CD*, IV/1, 61.

<sup>26</sup> *CD*, IV/1, 61, 62.

Barth's question focuses actually on God himself, for in making natural law part and parcel of the covenant of works, in making this covenant the schema by which to understand God's way with humans, needing his gracious action to follow-up on this path, in making the covenant of grace travel through history to abrogate the first covenant, so that works and law are finally fulfilled, how could there ever be an intratrinitarian covenant grounding a covenant of works? In short, the law and its fulfillment are still more basic than the intratrinitarian covenant of *grace*.<sup>27</sup> This, notes

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<sup>27</sup> Here we face the most basic of all questions, namely, in what sort of relationship does God create human beings—to know him in and through Jesus Christ or without him? Barth's revision of the doctrine of divine election, which some call Barth's revised or purified supralapsarianism, declares that God's original intention was always that we know him in his Son, the Incarnate One, Jesus Christ—not without him. Therefore, the covenant of works (and a relationship with God strictly on those terms) cannot be more fundamental than God's eternal decision that we know him in his Son, Jesus Christ in the flesh—*ensarkos* for our sakes. Barth's revised or purified supralapsarianism aims to be christologically centered, and thinks of God concretely as revealed in Jesus Christ. Unlike classic supralapsarianism, it does not conceive of God's aim and purpose (what is last in outcome) as an abstract glory of God in his choosing some humans and rejecting others (conceived of as uncreated and unfallen)—the elect being saved in Christ, the reprobate being condemned for their sin. Barth's supralapsarianism is centered on Christ as God's elected One and rejected One for all humanity. This is God's glory, which is last in execution and first in intention. Thus, what is last in execution, God's glory in *Jesus Christ*, is first in order. Barth seeks to deliver the doctrine of election from the notion that God abstractly, absent Christ, wills the salvation of some persons, and proceeds in the order of willing to create them for that purpose, with the Christ coming in as a means to that end. For the same reason, Barth cannot walk the path of the classic infralapsarian conception, where Jesus Christ (and God's love for the elect in him) is not the first thought and the first intention of God's plan for humanity. For Barth, as he conceives of the infralapsarian view, divine love and grace come to expression only upon the fall of man into sin, such that humanity is conceived as a fallen and damnable lump out of which God makes his electing choice, and such that Jesus Christ is an after-thought. For Barth, such a view gives us a God who is God on the one hand and who is God also, incidentally and reactively, in Jesus Christ. On the contrary, from all eternity God willed—and ever wills—to be God with us in Jesus Christ. There isn't another God than that One. For Barth's review of the infralapsarian and supralapsarian discussion, see *CD*, II/2, 127–145.

For Barth's doctrine of election, see *CD*, II/2, §§ 32–35. For secondary literature on Barth's doctrine of election, see Matthew J. Aragon Bruce, "Election," in *The Oxford Handbook of Karl Barth*, 309–324; David Gibson, "Barth on Divine Election," *The Wiley Blackwell Companion* 47–58; idem, *Reading the Decree: Exegesis, Election, and Christology in Calvin and Barth*. T&T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2009); Bruce McCormack, "Grace and Being: The Role of God's Gracious Election in Karl Barth's Theological Ontology," in John Webster, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, 92–110; idem, "That He May Be Merciful to All," in *Karl Barth and American Evangelicalism*, 227–249; idem, "Christ and the Decree: An Unsettled Question for the Reformed Churches Today," in *Reformed Theology in Contemporary Perspective—Westminster: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow?* ed., Lynn Quigley (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 2006), 124–142; Michael O'Neil, "Karl Barth's Doctrine of Election," *Evangelical Quarterly* 76 (2004): 311–326; Oliver Crisp, "On Barth's Denial of Universalism," *Themelios* 29/1 (2003): 18–29; Cornelis van der Kooij, *As in a Mirror: John Calvin and Karl Barth on Knowing God—a Diptych*. Studies in the History of Christian Traditions, ed., Robert J. Bast (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 363–386; Suzanne McDonald, "Evangelical Questioning of Election in Barth: A Pneumatological Perspective from the Reformed Heritage,"

Barth, should have been a clue for the federal theologians to discern the misstep their theology had taken in making the covenant of works the vantage-point for understanding God's way with human beings, wherein Christ is a means to an end (law fulfillment) instead of himself being the vantage-point and the end itself.<sup>28</sup>

Barth believes the explanation for this move, exegetically, with all its attention to the texture of the biblical narrative, rested on a wrong foundation, namely that it began "as the history of man and his works, man who is good by nature and who is therefore in covenant with God—a God who is pledged to him by virtue of his goodness. To this mode of thinking it became more and more foreign to think of the history as conversely the history of *God* and *His works*, the God who originally (from the start) turns to man in grace, and therefore as, from the very first, the history of the covenant of grace."<sup>29</sup> To be sure, Cocceius and other federal writers sought, in line with Calvin

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in *Karl Barth and American Evangelicalism*, 250–268; idem, *Re-Imaging Election: Divine Election as Representing God to Others and Others to God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 31–84; 175–194; Stephen N. Williams, *The Election of Grace: A Riddle without a Resolution?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 179–210, forming an appendix on Barth's doctrine of election; Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 89–122.

<sup>28</sup> CD, IV/1, 62.

<sup>29</sup> This idea is grounded in Barth's view of divine ontology, which has generated a good deal of discussion among Barth scholars surrounding the McCormack thesis, which involves Barth's understanding of the ontology of God and the Holy Trinity (see Michael T. Dempsey, ed., *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011)). On the "revisionist side" of the debate are principally Bruce McCormack, Paul Nimmo, and Paul Dafydd Jones (see McCormack's articles "Grace and Being: The Role of God's Gracious Election in Karl Barth's Theological Ontology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, 92–110; and "The Actuality of God," in *Engaging the Doctrine of God*, ed., Bruce L. McCormack [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008], 185–242). On the "classical side" of the discussion are chiefly George Hunsinger, Paul Molnar, and Edwin Chr. van Driel (see especially Hunsinger's *Reading Barth with Charity: A Hermeneutical Proposal* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015], and his article "Election and the Trinity: Twenty-five Theses on the Theology of Karl Barth (Revised)" in George Hunsinger, *Evangelical, Catholic, and Reformed: Doctrinal Essays on Barth and Related Themes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 32–55, as well as Molnar's *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002], 61–81; and *Faith, Freedom and the Spirit: The Economic Trinity in Barth, Torrance and Contemporary Theology* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015], 127–186, 242–312). McCormack argues that, for Barth, Christ's *incarnation* should be construed as being (logically) *constitutive* of God's eternal being as triune. McCormack argues: "If election is an eternal decision, then, it has never not taken place" ("Grace and Being," 101). Barth's point, says McCormack, is "that at the beginning of all the ways of God with the world stood not a *Logos asarkos* (i.e., a 'Logos outwith the flesh' in Brunner's abstract and absolute sense) but the God-human, Jesus Christ" ("Grace and being," 93). The difference between Barth and Protestant orthodoxy is that the latter maintained a distinction between *Logos incarnandus* (the Logos "to be incarnate") and *Logos incarnatus* (the Logos "incarnate")—this Logos being one and the same. For Barth, according to McCormack, the distinction must be collapsed so that we speak of the Logos *ensarkos* as the Subject of election. This means that the eternal Logos must not be viewed "as One whose identity is *not yet* determined by the decision of the incarnation"; and so he must not be conceived as "*incarnandus* only as a result of the subsequent decision; prior to making it, His being and existence are *undetermined*" ("Grace and being," 94). Barth's aim, according to McCormack, is "to speak of Jesus Christ [not as an abstractly

and Olevianus, to “think this second thought.” That is, for all of them, they sought to think this “second thought” of divine grace. But “the mode of thought,” claims Barth, started for them “exclusively with man.” Therefore,

The first place is taken by the strange spectacle of man in Paradise to whom eternal life is promised as a reward which he has earned, whose works can perfectly fulfil the command of God (even if his obedience is not yet secure), to whom God is just as much bound by this fulfilment as he is to God,

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conceived *Logos asarkos* but] as the Subject of election.” To do so, “he must deny the Logos a mode or state of being above and prior to the decision to be incarnate in time. . . . [T]here is no Logos in and for himself in distinction from God’s act of turning toward the world and humanity in predestination; the Logos is *incarnandus* in and for himself, in eternity” (“Grace and being,” 94–95). Again, Barth doesn’t obliterate the distinction between *the Word-without-the-flesh* and *the Word-in-the-flesh* in history. But he wants to guard against the danger that we conceive of the eternal Logos as a God other than the incarnate Word, whose nature and essence may be known and defined “on some other basis than in and from the perception of his presence and action as incarnate Word” (*CD IV/1*, 181; cf. *IV/1*, 52). McCormack, therefore, in seeking to express Barth’s actualistic ontology over against (what McCormack calls) an essentialist ontology, argues that an unknowable God always lies in back of the revealed God when an essentialist ontology has the field; however, with Barth’s actualistic ontology we only know God in his actual activity in Jesus Christ, and this is God’s being. God is none other than this One (“Grace and being,” 98). Thus, while Barth knows of a divine essence, his essence is constituted in the eternal act of his electing grace. There is no God standing behind this God; God has no being different or other than this being—indeed, this is God’s being-in-act; and it is being in this pure and singular act. This being-in-act in eternity corresponds exactly to God’s being-in-act in time. God’s being is actualized in the eternal decision for activity in time. This is Barth’s actualism, says McCormack. In this way, God’s essence posits no hidden God behind the revealed God. God’s essence isn’t somehow different than God’s revelation of himself in Jesus Christ—in fact, his revelation of himself in Jesus Christ in time is constitutive of the being of God in eternity. This is not Hegel, since, for Hegel, God and the world live in a reciprocal relationship from necessity, and the world expresses God; even more, the world itself enables God to come to full consciousness of himself. God’s being *becomes*, develops, unfolds in and through historical processes, for Hegel.

Meanwhile, for Hunsinger and classical interpreters of Barth, God is logically, antecedently triune in his eternity which is the presupposition of the eternal will of God concerning the incarnation. The divine election of Jesus Christ (*ensarkos*) doesn’t constitute God as triune; rather, God being eternally triune (and being who he is as that God) makes the eternal election of Jesus Christ (*ensarkos*) an actuality. God’s being (his being triune) is not composed by his electing will concerning Jesus Christ (*ensarkos*). On the contrary, God, being the triune God of love and freedom, eternally wills or elects Jesus Christ, the Son of God *ensarkos*. Hunsinger argues that Barth’s theology has both Anselmian and Hegelian elements which play into Barth’s essentialism and actualism, and so it is mistaken to jettison either of these elements from his thinking. Barth thus embraced a version of Anselmian “Perfect-Being” theology, even as he pilfered aspects of Hegel’s actualism. Similarly, Barth affirms a basically Chalcedonian understanding of the incarnation, but with actualistic traits—again, he makes this move to help us think about it concretely and actively (as ever-present divine activity) versus abstractly and statically. The content and definition of the Son of God *asarkos* is none other than the revelation of himself in Jesus Christ, *ensarkos*.

between whom and God the relationship is clearly that of *do ut des* [*“tit-for-tat”*] or literally: “I give so that you may give”.<sup>30</sup>

Barth is scandalized by this arrangement—as if that “relationship is supposed to be the original form of the covenant.” This flimsy (human-centered) arrangement is broken by the power of human disobedience or sin. Thus, sin is now the most pressing problem—which is once again centered on man. And sin is ever “measured by the Law” of the first covenant. As the response to that, Christ’s function is as the mediator and second Adam, “to fulfil in our place the law of the covenant of nature and works which was transgressed by Adam and all of us, and in that way to become our guarantor with God.”<sup>31</sup> The first covenant is, finally, only superseded in the *Eschaton*. Meanwhile, the law of the first covenant, even in the New Testament economy,

is the guiding thread which runs through the whole development, indeed it controls that development. Grace itself, whether as justification or sanctification, is always the fulfilling of that Law (perfect in Christ, imperfect in us). There is no escape from the relationship of *do ut des* [*“tit-for-tat”*], no liberation from the insecurity of the whole connexion between man and God, the fear of punishment and the expectation of reward, no radical cessation of the unfortunate control of God to which this inevitably gives rise. This is impossible even in the covenant of grace connected with the covenant of works and oriented by it. This covenant of grace could not be clearly and convincingly portrayed as such.<sup>32</sup>

Barth believes this scheme serves up a number of questionable features: (1) it places “grace” in a kind of third place, after law and sin; (2) it is man-centered, wherein that law defines grace, and law is the spine that runs down the back of redemptive history (the question front and center is perpetually: ‘how can the law be fulfilled?’); further (3) sin is measure by its relation to law, not to grace, which in so doing dissolves the utterly scandalous nature of sin (as sin *against grace*); and (4) this scheme declares that the original relationship God has with man in Paradise is Christless and graceless.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *CD*, IV/1, 62. That is, ‘I (man) give obedience so that you (God) may give (as reward) eternal life.’

<sup>31</sup> *CD*, IV/1, 62.

<sup>32</sup> *CD*, IV/1, 63.

<sup>33</sup> *CD*, IV/1, 63. This criticism of Barth has been endorsed and pressed by others, see F. W. Dillistone, *The Structure of the Divine Society* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1951), 131-135; James B. Torrance, “Calvin and Puritanism in England and Scotland—Some Basic Concepts in the Development of ‘Federal Theology’” in *Calvinus Reformator: His Contribution to Theology, Church and Society* (Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, 1982), 267-269; idem, “The Strengths and Weaknesses of the Westminster Theology,” in *The Westminster Confession in the Church Today*, ed., Alasdair I. C. Heron (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew, 1982), 48ff. These articles repeat almost everything Torrance had argued in his earlier article “Covenant or Contract? A Study of the Theological Background of Worship in Seventeenth-Century Scotland,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23 (February 1970):

#### 1.4. The Notion of a *Pactum Salutis* and the Covenant of Works

Barth next focuses upon what became something of a commonplace relative to the twofold covenant scheme, namely the emergence of the doctrine of the *pactum salutis*, which is a “pretemporal intratrinitarian happening, a pact between God the Father and God the Son.”<sup>34</sup> This doctrine emerged as a later development within Reformed federalism, with one of the early proponents being Johannes Cloppenburg (1592–1652). Many other names can be included, such as Samuel Rutherford (1600–1661), David Dickson (1583–1663), Patrick Gillespie (1617–1675), and Herman Witsius (1636–1708).<sup>35</sup> Although the idea of the intratrinitarian *pactum* came to be a

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51–76. Other representatives of this assessment of federal theology are David N. J. Poole, *The History of the Covenant Concept from the Bible to Johannes Cloppenburg: De Foedere Dei* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992), 255; Donald J. Bruggink, “Calvin and Federal Theology,” *Reformed Review* 13 (September 1959): 15–22; W. Wilson Benton, Jr., “Federal Theology: Review for Revision,” in *Through Christ’s Word: A Festschrift for Dr. Philip E. Hughes*, ed., W. Robert Godfrey and Jesse L. Boyd III (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1985), 180–204. A similar assessment of federal theology, following in the line of Barth, Dillistone, Torrance, and Rolston, is evident in Nico T. Bakker, *Miskende Gratie—Van Calvin tot Witsius: Een vergelijkende lezing, balans van 150 jaar gereformeerde orthodoxie* (Kampen: Uitgeversmaatschappij J.H. Kok, 1991), 125–130, 170–177. For a summary of his view, see J. Mark Beach, “The Doctrine of the *Pactum Salutis* in the Covenant Theology of Herman Witsius,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 13 (2002): 107–109.

<sup>34</sup> CD, VI/1, 63.

<sup>35</sup> On the origins of the *pactum salutis*, see Richard A. Muller, “Toward the *Pactum Salutis*: Locating the Origins of a Concept,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 18 (2007): 11–65; J. Mark Beach, “The Doctrine of the *Pactum Salutis* in the Covenant Theology of Herman Witsius,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* (2002): 101–142; idem, *Christ and the Covenant*, 23–43; F. V. Fesko, *The Covenant of Redemption*, 29–81; idem, *The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption*, 3–48. For classic presentations of this doctrine, see, for example, Johannes Cloppenburg, *Disputationes theologicae xi de foedere Dei, et testamento, veteri & novo*, III.xvii, in *Opera theologica*, 2 vols. (Amsterdam: 1684); David Dickson, *Therapeutica sacra, seu de curandis casibus conscientiae circa regenerationem, per foderum divinatorum prudentem applicationem, libri tres* (London: 1656); David Dickson, *Therapeutica Sacra* (Edinburgh, 1664); Johannes Cocceius, *The Doctrine of the Covenant and Testament of God*, chapter 5, §§ 88–98; Samuel Rutherford, *The Covenant of Life Opened, Or, A Treatise of the Covenant of Grace* (Edinburgh, 1655), Part II, chapters V, VI, VII, pp. 282–308, 355ff.; Herman Witsius, *De Œconomia Foederum Dei cum Hominibus, Libri Quatuor*, [1677] editio quarta (Herborna, 1712), in English, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man: Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity*, trans. William Crookshank, to which is prefixed the Life of the Author, 2 vols. (London: R. Baynes, 1822); reprinted with an essay by J. I. Packer, “Introduction: On Covenant Theology” (Escondido, California: The den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1990), Bk 2, 163–280; John Owen, “An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews,” in *The Works of John Owen* (including exposition of *Hebrews*), 23 vols. (1850–55; reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1968, 1991), XVIII, 77–97; XXI, 493–512; Thomas Brooks, *The Covenant of Grace Proved and Opened* (London, 1675) in *The Works of Thomas Brooks*, ed., Alexander B. Grosart, 6 vols. (1861–67; reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1980), 5: 329–403; Patrick Gillespie, *The Ark of the Covenant Opened; or, A treatise of the covenant of redemption between God and Christ, as the foundation to the covenant of grace*,

commonplace in the federal scheme and much subsequent Reformed theology, it never reached confessional status among the Reformed.<sup>36</sup> Cocceius's name, however, has often been closely associated with this doctrine.<sup>37</sup>

Barth notes that this doctrine is not grounded "in the proclamation of the proto-Gospel, or in the Noahic or Abrahamic covenants," and, in fact, it is not a covenant "between God and man at all." Rather, it exists "in eternity before all worlds, in the bosom of the Godhead itself." What is most to the point regarding this idea is that

God forgives sinful man and gives him a new righteousness on the one condition of faith and repentance. Ultimately this rests on the free disposing of God the Father, by virtue of which He has once and for all ascribed to a chosen portion of sinful humanity righteousness and eternal life in His Son. There is a corresponding disposing of the Son of God in virtue of which He for His part has undertaken once and for all the cause of those sinful men who are elected to sonship. The two together result in the covenant.<sup>38</sup>

As Franz Burmann (1628–1679) defines it, this covenant is a "mutual pact between Father and Son, by which the Father gives the Son as *lutrw, thj* [redeemer] and the head of a foreknown people and the Son in turn sets himself to complete that *avpolu, trwsij* [redemption]." <sup>39</sup> What this means, then, is that Christ's work of reconciliation is *the historical enactment* of what was commissioned with God the Father in the eternal *pactum*. Barth observes that earlier Reformed theology was content with the idea of God's eternal decree, which served to explain the work of Christ for his people—the decree being an *opus Dei internum ad extra* ["an internal work of God to the outside" (outside Himself)]. Like every part of the divine decree, this is fulfilled in time. The content of this decree relative to Christ's work of reconciliation was "the eternal divine election of grace." Federal theology viewed the eternal intratrinitarian *pactum*, including the eternal testament and Christ as our eternal

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*The Second Part* (London, 1677); Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* [1679–85], trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed., James T. Dennison, Jr., 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992–1996), XII.Q.2.xiii–xvii; Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretico-practica theologia* (Utrecht: van de Water, Poolsum, Wagens & Paddenburg, 1714; Editio nova, 1724), V.i.6–11. Examples of recent proponents are Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th revised and enlarged edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1939, 1941), 265–271; Fesko, *The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption*, 51–124; Joel Beeke, *Reformed Systematic Theology, vol. 2: Man and Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 584–609.

<sup>36</sup> For example, it finds no explicit articulation in the Westminster Standards; while there is only a whiff of it in the Formula Consensus Helvetica, XIII. It is worth noting, however, that the Reformed Congregationalists and Particular Baptists, each revised the Westminster Standards to include this doctrine, see The Savoy Declaration and A Confession of Faith respectively, VIII.i.

<sup>37</sup> See Cocceius's *The Doctrine of the Covenant and Testament of God*, chapter 5, §§ 88–176.

<sup>38</sup> CD, IV/1, 63.

<sup>39</sup> Franciscus Burmannus, *Synopsis Theologiae et speciatim oeconomiae foederum Dei ab Initio Saeculorum usque ad Consummationem eorum* (Amsterdam: 1699), II: 15, 2, as quoted in Heinrich Heppel, *Reformed Dogmatics: Set out and Illustrated from the Sources*, revised and ed., Ernst Bizer, trans. G. T. Thomson (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1950), 376.

Sponsor or Surety, “as an aspect of the decree of predestination (in so far as this has positive reference to election to salvation in Christ).”<sup>40</sup> Barth wonders, at this point, how, given the eternal *pactum*, a covenant of works could gain ascendancy over the covenant of grace as that which is first and principal. For does not the eternal *pactum*, forming the eternal foundation for the covenant of grace, already supersede and “render superfluous” the covenant of works, which was at once shattered by human sin, a covenant that is rendered obsolete and vanishes in the *Eschaton*? Given the eternal *pactum*, why allow the covenant of works to constitute “the guiding thread which actually runs through the whole occurrence of salvation and by which it is measured right up to the very end?” After all, this covenant of nature or works cannot be grounded in an intratrinitarian agreement; neither can it be explained by the divine decree—a plan of God (eternal life as the reward for obedience) that is *not really the plan of God*, not according to the eternal *pactum*. In fact, the covenant of grace, being grounded in the Godhead, disallows and negates the dualism posited by the twofold covenant scheme: a covenant of nature and a covenant of grace. Even in speaking of a covenant of works as first in order, given the eternal pact between the Father and the Son, how could one see, even in the covenant of works, anything else but the covenant of grace in operation, for it “had been instituted in eternity,” and therefore it “had come into force . . . in and with the beginning of human history, which at once embraced man and claimed him, which man had, of course, broken, but which God in faithfulness to Himself and His partner had not abrogated but maintained and ratified?”<sup>41</sup>

Barth continues his extended criticism of federal theology (under this point) by asking an extended series of questions as censure. The questions often, implicitly, exhibit Barth’s counter staked-out position. (We present them under a series of bullet points, which Barth himself did not do.)

- Why was it thought necessary to see man in any other light than that of the pledge which God Himself had made for him in His Son even before he ever existed?
- Why was it thought necessary to see him in any other way than the one who in the eternal will of God was predestinated to be the brother of this Son and therefore to divine sonship?
- Why is there ascribed to him a status in which he did not need the Mediator and which, if he had lasted, would have made superfluous the appearance of the Mediator and therefore the fulfilment of the eternal (!) covenant of grace?
- Why was sin robbed of its true and frightful seriousness as a transgression of the law given to man as the predestinated brother of the Son and child of the Father, as a falling away from special grace which the Creator had shown him from all eternity?
- Why instead was the grace of God made a second or a third thing, a wretched expedient of God in face of the obvious failure of a plan in

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<sup>40</sup> *CD*, IV/1, 63.

<sup>41</sup> *CD*, IV/1, 64.



relation to man which had originally had quite a different intention and form?

- Why again was it not possible completely to banish all thought of this other plan in relation to the historical promise and fulfilment, the Old and the New Testament economy?
- Why had the history of the covenant of grace to be presented as though it had to do only with the execution of that original plan?—of that plan concerning whose divine meaning and basis there was nothing that could be said because nothing was or could be known of it from the Gospel they were trying to expound?
- Why on this side of the *eschaton* is everything always measured by a form of the relationship between God and man which had been maintained as the beginning of all things only with a *sic volo sic iubeo* ["I command as I will"].
- How was that even possible? How was it possible to know of the eternal basis of the covenant of grace and then not think exclusively in the light of it, to understand and present it as the one covenant of God, as though there were some other eternity in God or elsewhere, an eternity of human nature and its connexion with God and its law and the works of the law?<sup>42</sup>

### 1.5. The Problem with the Notion of a *Pactum Salutis*

As Barth seeks to solve what he considers the riddle of the federal scheme (i.e., though it wanted to champion grace, instead, it served up a God of works), he believes he finds a solution to the riddle by examining the doctrine of the intratrinitarian covenant, the *pactum salutis*.

Barth finds what he calls three doubtful traits in federal theology (again, the federal theology he directly engages is that of J. Cocceius). The doubtful traits he specifies have to do with "the eternal basis of the covenant of grace." Thus, as noted, his critique is aimed at "the covenant of redemption," also called "the counsel of peace" (or "the *pactum salutis*"), wherein the triune God entered into a "legally binding mutual obligation between God the Father and God the Son."<sup>43</sup>

Barth has already examined the essential features of this doctrine. For our purposes, we remind ourselves of what it involves, using a definition offered by Richard Muller (in his theological dictionary): It is

the pretemporal, intratrinitarian agreement of the Father and the Son concerning the covenant of grace and its ratification in and through the work of the Son incarnate. In the unity of the Godhead, the Son covenants with the Father to be the temporal *sponsor* [guarantor or surety] of the Father's *testamentum* in and through the work of the Mediator. In that work, the Son

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<sup>42</sup> *CD*, IV/1, 64.

<sup>43</sup> *CD*, IV/1, 64.

fulfills his *sponsio* [suretyship] or *fideiussio* [guarantee], i.e., his guarantee of payment of the debt of sin in ratification of the Father's *testamentum*.<sup>44</sup>

(1) Barth exposes the first doubtful trait by way of a question: Why is such a doctrine needed? Can't God be gracious to human beings without an intratrinitarian covenant? Can't God unite his mercy and righteousness without resort to a "covenant" among members of the Godhead? It suggests that God needed to do something beyond who God already is—as if God is first a God in one way, but then to be a gracious God, he has to be God in another way—so that to be gracious, God has to covenant within himself to *become and be* such a God. In other words, the doctrine posits a God who is righteous *in abstracto* and isn't "free to be gracious from the very first," who, in order to be gracious, has to posit certain conditions upon man, and only upon fulfillment of those conditions, can he be gracious to man. Non-fulfillment of said conditions must be punished. Thus, according to Barth, federalism argues and assumes that God only "ceases to be a righteous God *in abstracto*," that is, he can become a righteous God who is also merciful and gracious only at the conclusion of "this contract with Himself."<sup>45</sup> But this graciousness of God is not God concretely and, as such, in the "inner depth of His being." Without a *pactum* in the Godhead, then, God can't be gracious. This doctrine, with the accompanying covenant of works, betrays an "anxiety" that God in his essence is a righteous God, and he has to resort to covenanting in order to be a gracious God, so that "His righteousness and His mercy are secretly and at bottom two separate things." Because federal theologians first conceived of God as righteous *in abstracto* (this is who God truly and most definitively is), rather than view God *in concreto* as revealed in Jesus Christ (who is "the full and final revelation of the being of God"), there first must be a covenant of works (a righteousness to be fulfilled by man as a condition of fellowship with this just, but not yet merciful, God). Barth opposes this notion of God, maintaining that we must instead know God in Jesus Christ.

In the eternal decree of God revealed in Jesus Christ the being of God would have been seen as righteous mercy and merciful righteousness from the very first. It would have been quite impossible therefore to conceive of any special plan [a *covenant of salvation*] of a God who is righteous *in abstracto*, and the whole idea of an original covenant of works would have fallen to the ground.<sup>46</sup>

(2) The second doubtful feature Barth detects in federal theology is the notion of an intratrinitarian covenant/contract between the Father and the Son as such. "Can we really think of the first and second persons of the triune Godhead as two divine subjects and therefore as two legal subjects who can have dealings and enter into

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<sup>44</sup> Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), s.v. *pactum salutis*.

<sup>45</sup> *CD*, IV/1, 64–5.

<sup>46</sup> *CD*, IV/1, 65.

obligations one with another?" Barth brands this "mythology." This belongs nowhere in a biblical doctrine of the Trinity. What has become of the one God in this scheme? How does this consist with the doctrine of the Trinity as formulated by Reformed orthodoxy? God isn't a God of three subjects, with three wills. He is one divine Subject, with one divine will. God would never need to contract with himself to do or be anything! There are partners in the covenant of grace, to be sure, but those partners are the Triune God on the one side, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and man on the other side. "When the covenant of grace was based on a pact between two divine persons, a wider dualism was introduced into the Godhead—again in defiance of the gospel as the revelation of the Father by the Son and of the Son by the Father, which took place in Jesus Christ." This brought with it a sinister result, producing anxiety and uncertainty, which "relativised the unconditional validity of the covenant of grace," for now we doubt this covenant as revealed to us in Scripture inasmuch as we must ask ourselves are we dealing with the "one will" of the "one God." For God to be gracious, an agreement had to be reached, a pact had to be formulated, and two or more subjects had to be united to action in this matter of being gracious to man. This hardly conveys certainty that God is one and his will is one, at least, not without conditions being met. This makes us look for a God beyond or outside of Jesus Christ; we need to look past Jesus to find the "at bottom" God, the more definitive God, who only conditionally can be moved to a will of grace. A God of law precedes a God of grace; a God of righteousness or justice underlies the covenant of grace. A covenant of works, of law, precedes all else, for this is the definitive God, which fits a portrait of God after "the analogy of human ordinances." This is a portrait of God other than what we see in his Son Incarnate, who shows us "the Law of His grace." In other words, the portrait of the eternal Son is likewise compromised, for he is no longer conceived, definitively, as the Son who eternally wills to be incarnate for our sakes; behind that revelation of the eternal Logos is a Logos *in abstracto*, the eternal Son who exists *other than* as the One who eternally wills to save us. "[T]he eternal Son or Word of God in Himself and as such, in His pure Godhead," is conceived, following the federal scheme, as Word of God behind the revealed Word of God, the Word of God's grace. The "unequivocal and binding will of God" revealed to us as the "eternal" will of God in Jesus Christ, and the very basis and content of the covenant of grace is no longer unequivocal or binding in God himself. We must take our eyes off of him to find how God can be merciful as the Righteous God, the true God behind the subsequent gracious God—that is, we wonder about a God of who posits "a law which is different from the Law of grace."<sup>47</sup>

(3) The third and last doubtful trait Barth detects in Reformed federalism, which he calls "decisive," is that while the notion of an intratrinitarian covenant is certainly a "sublime and uplifting" thought, it is much too sublime and uplifting to be "a Christian thought," for what is at stake here is not "a relationship of God with Himself"—as the *pactum salutis* would have it; rather, what is at stake is "the foundation of a relationship between God and man." No matter how beautiful the idea of an intratrinitarian covenant may be, it is still an idea concerning God with himself.

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<sup>47</sup> CD, IV/1, 65–66.

Man, the only proper *other* party of the covenant (which is what it takes to have a covenant—two parties), is absent. Yet man is the interested party in this matter. God doesn't need to get "united" in himself by way of a "pact." "God would not be God if He were not God in this unity." A *pactum* within the Godhead is not suitable or apropos. What is apropos is what we may call "a decree, an *opus Dei internum ad extra*" [an internal work of God directed outward], and this is "not self-evident but a new thing," namely that God, in the unity of his being, wills from eternity to be "the God of man," and so wills from eternity "to make and have man as His man." This is something God owes neither to himself nor to man. Call this, if you wish, a pact, but it is not a pact of God with himself but with man. God determines to be God *for us*—that is, in his "free election of grace," as old or long as eternity, God "does not rest content with Himself"; he does not will to be a solitary God in the beauty of "His perfections" or solitary in "His own inner life as Father, Son and Holy Spirit." Instead:

In this free act of the election of grace there is already present, and presumed, and assumed into unity with His own existence as God, the existence of the man whom He intends and loves from the very first [that is, Jesus Christ] and in whom He intends and loves all other men, of the man [Jesus Christ] in whom He wills to bind Himself with all other men and all other men with Himself.<sup>48</sup>

More particularly, what this means, for Barth, is this: "In this free act of the election of grace the Son of the Father is no longer just the eternal Logos, but as such, as very God from all eternity He is also the very God and very man He will become in time." What Barth means by this is that the content or meaning of the Son of God, the eternal divine Logos, is not minus his eternal intention and destiny to take on human flesh, to be the Mediator between God and man. There is not a different eternal Logos than this One; there is not a Son of God who is other than the One who from eternity loved us as our Savior to come in time. Therefore: "In the divine *act of predestination* there *pre-exists* the Jesus Christ who as the Son of the eternal Father and the child of the Virgin Mary will become and be the Mediator of the covenant between God and man, the One who accomplishes the act of atonement [reconciliation]" [Versöhnungs].<sup>49</sup>

Like Reformed federal theology, Barth believes the covenant of grace must have a foundation in eternity, but he does not place that foundation in an intratrinitarian agreement; rather, he traces it to the One "in whom the covenant of grace is fulfilled and revealed in history." Jesus Christ himself is the "eternal foundation" of the covenant of grace—for there is not a different God in back of this God revealed in Jesus Christ; just as there is not a different will of God behind God's will in Jesus Christ—the One whom Scripture attests "to be very God and very man is also the eternal *testamentum* [testament], the eternal *sponsio* [guarantee], the eternal *pactum* [pact or bond], between God and man."<sup>50</sup> But federal theology fails to see this, and in

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<sup>48</sup> CD, VI/1, 66.

<sup>49</sup> CD, VI/1, 66.

<sup>50</sup> CD, VI/1, 66.

this failure, their doctrine of predestination likewise suffers, wherein God's way with man, in election as in the covenant, is not, from the beginning, his way in Jesus Christ. The One who is at the beginning and from the beginning with God, who became flesh, this One, Jesus Christ, is not at the beginning of God's ways with man. He is not the "unequivocal or binding answer to the question of the form of the eternal divine decree as the beginning of all things." Instead, he is secondary—so that the federal writers (no doubt seeking to be loyal to Scripture), nonetheless, "inherited the notion that the covenant of grace fulfilled and revealed in history in Jesus Christ was perhaps only a secondary and subsequent divine arrangement . . . and not the beginning of all the ways of God."<sup>51</sup>

"Their view of the covenant became dualistic. The idea of a basic and always determinative and concurrent covenant of nature or works was superimposed on their conception of the covenant of grace." For Barth, the eternal basis or foundation of God's eternal will and work can be known "in the work itself, in its temporal occurrence," which is, then, to know it as "the eternal divine Logos in His incarnation." Thus, two more weaknesses of their dualistic doctrine are exposed: (4) The original covenant begins in a universalistic fashion with Adam (involving all people in the covenant of works), but then narrows down and shrinks with Christ (involving much fewer persons in the covenant of grace)—resulting in a loss of universalism. And (5) a radical historicism relative to their understanding of Scripture.<sup>52</sup> Apparently, what Barth has in mind here (in reference to, as earlier observed, this historicism) is deducing theological affirmations or denials by way of what humans judge from historical observation. As a generalization, historicism<sup>53</sup> asserts that history itself is sufficient to explain any event or happening in history. Thus, it seems that what Barth is saying is that in conceiving of the covenants as unfolding in history, the federal theologians viewed that history itself as a sufficient explanation of its meaning and our grasping of its meaning. From his earlier comments about the historicizing in federal theology, it seems Barth means to say that the Christ-centered gospel message of Scripture is lost to a covenant history wherein what can be perceived *from history* defines the scope of God's grace and *their response* defines who can be God's covenant partner.

## 2. An Analysis and Evaluation of Barth's Censure of Reformed Federalism

As noted earlier, Barth's critique of the federal model is paradigmatic in its implications vis-à-vis the gospel. This has become clear from our exposition of Barth's assessment of Reformed federal thinking.

Now we turn to present an extended analysis of the above-mentioned assessment. We will take this up under three points. Which is to say, we offer an expanded analysis, given Barth's paradigm shift, of why he negatively assesses federal theology in the

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<sup>51</sup> *CD*, VI/1, 66.

<sup>52</sup> *CD*, VI/1, 66.

<sup>53</sup> See footnotes 27 and 29.

way he does, followed by an evaluation of Barth's opposition to the federal model under each point.

### 2.1. Federal Theology's Alleged Historicism

We begin with Barth's charge that the federal writers succumb to a theological historicism. Historicism, as noted, is the notion that history itself is sufficient to explain any event or happening in history. Barth sharply rejects the notion of historicizing the revelatory activity of God. Thus, what Barth disapproves of in the federal writers is their failure to conceive of divine revelation as a miraculous event, as God's active and saving speech, as God's activity to save—which, in turn, means that revelation is not something that can become a commodity, written down on a page, to be commandeered on a whim or by human decision. Revelation, for Barth, cannot be boxed and packaged in a written history, for revelation is a divine miracle. (Indeed, no miracle can be boxed and packaged.) The history of the covenant, the history of salvation recorded in the Bible, is not revelation as such; rather, it is witness to revelation.

In order to grasp Barth's point in making such charges, we must further visit his doctrine of divine revelation.

From Barth's conception of divine revelation, only God's direct salvific activity unto humans may be reckoned appropriately as the "Word of God."<sup>54</sup> Scripture, therefore, is witness to this saving activity of God. Scripture is not the direct saving activity of God (people don't simply read the Bible and get saved). No, God must act. That activity of God is "the Word of God"—like unto what Reformed Orthodox theology would call divine illumination. For Barth, the witness of Scripture in the Old Testament, with its narrative of stories, episodes, happenings, and such, is conceived as a witness to the "Word of God," a punctiliar happening—salvation in Jesus Christ. What Barth's view entails is that "Word of God"—given that it refers to God's revelatory action to enlighten, transform, and save a person or persons—has Jesus Christ as its content; he (Jesus Christ) is the agent and the action and the narrative. The diverse narratives of the Old Testament are witness to and occasions for God's renewed activity to reveal himself and save sinners, which as "Word of God" has Jesus Christ as the message and the content.

In that light, Barth views federal theology as treating Scripture, particularly the narratives contained in the Old Testament, as information about salvation from which we deduce the nature and scope of God's salvific work. That is, federal theologians thought they could reach conclusions about God's work of salvation from what is discernable from the narratives in the Bible. Barth dislikes what he regards as federal theology's premature conclusions about the *de facto* scope of God's saving mercy—conclusions reached from the historical record/narrative on the pages of what the Christian church calls the Old Testament. Barth believes that the biblical testimony is opened ended regarding the final scope of God's salvific work in Jesus Christ (at least

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<sup>54</sup> Given this definition, the idea of a general or natural revelation is excluded, unless one wishes to posit a salvific revelation independent of the gospel and Jesus Christ.

concerning what we as humans may now discern). *De jure* Christ is the Christ for all people; the invitation to life in him is open to all humans since all are elect in him, the Elect One. We may not draw *de facto* conclusions about the final scope of God's saving actions in Jesus Christ from historical givens. That is, we may not (in the way of historicism) draw conclusions about heavenly realities from realities discernable from history alone. This is to engage in what Barth brands as "historical metaphysics."<sup>55</sup> In short, since the biblical storyline bears witness that some walk with God, while others do not; some believe, whereas others do not; and some are God's servants or children, while others are God's enemies, it is easy—following out what is discernable from historical givens—to come to conclusions about heavenly realities, namely that God will not and cannot also bring these enemies into the blessings of Christ, who *de jure* is theirs if not *de facto*.

Barth works with a different paradigm than the federal writers. He views Scripture, and the history of redemption contained within it, as a witness to God's Word, which also occasions God's revelatory activity anew. Seen in this way, the history of salvation (in the Bible) witnesses in a singular way to a singular message, namely the gospel of Jesus Christ. That gospel, however, as revelation, is God's own activity to save and to sanctify. Barth, therefore, censures the federal theologians, not for their recognizing an unfolding of the covenant of grace in history, but for their viewing that history as sufficient in itself (the historicism) to capture the covenant relationship of God to humans, with our ability to have God's revelation, in hand, to assess and measure its meaning and implications. For Barth, the Christ-centered gospel message of Scripture is lost to a covenant history wherein what can be perceived *from history* defines the scope of God's grace, and *human response* defines who may be counted as God's covenant partner. The history of salvation becomes a history of man and his works instead of, what it is, a history of God and his works.

Barth also disapproves of the notion that the history of redemption is a strung-out story that only eventually arrives at Jesus Christ—as if the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ is solely a New Testament entity. On the contrary, as Barth sees it, the Old Testament also bears witness to the singular good news of Jesus Christ, and, consequently, it must be recognized as the work and Word of God at every moment of redemptive history. Since Barth conceives of the "Word of God" as a divine activity, and a *salvific* activity at that, and since salvation is in Jesus Christ, the Word of God is a divine accomplishment—God's effectual act to save human beings. "Word of God" is dynamic and active because God's speaking is dynamic and active, and as such, it happens—and when it happens, it saves, it effectuates, it achieves, it succeeds. "Word of God," as an activity of God, as an event, cannot be isolated into moments and stages and conceived of as a commodity to be embraced or ignored according to human decision. Rather, God's Word is the singular message about Jesus Christ and all he accomplishes on our behalf; and, more, it is Word of God in commandeering its recipients, bringing them to faith, conquering their unbelief, and hitting the target of their hearts, such that they believe. Word of God is not, then, a story of redemption which we chop up into stages or dispensations and then eventually piece back together

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<sup>55</sup> *CD*, II/2, 417–18.

as culminating in the gospel of Jesus Christ. No, the gospel of Jesus Christ is that story—that history of redemption, which is the gospel of the Word-become-flesh.<sup>56</sup>

The historicism that Barth charges against the federal theologians is not unrelated, as earlier noted, to what he calls, in critiquing the classic Reformed doctrine of election, “historical metaphysics.” Historical metaphysics means that theologians think themselves able to discern from historical observation who belongs (and who doesn’t belong) within God’s circle of salvation in Jesus Christ; such discernment is *from here below*, by what we can historically assess and determine. Thus, the theological enterprise, engaged in this way, thinks itself able to discern how humans meet the covenant’s demands, *now*, in order to be *counted* within that circle. This, for Barth, shrinks the narrative of grace down from its gospel openness and its continual call to all human beings to repent and believe. It is prematurely exclusive, not inclusive, and that exclusivity he believes is contrary to the New Testament message itself (at least, according to his paradigm of grace).

Historicism, then, involves theological affirmations or denials in deducing the nature of God’s salvific work from historical observation. That is, what *human beings determine* from historical information contained in the Bible is reckoned as God’s revelation itself. Revelation is thought of and treated statically—a commodity that can be taken up or ignored as one pleases. Lost, according to him, is seeing salvation history as witness to God’s saving activity, an activity that can never be commoditized. Reading salvation history as information from which we can discern the scope and effect of God’s saving work (as Barth alleges the federal theologians did) fails to view this salvation history as the gospel of Jesus Christ, with Christ himself as the content of the covenant.

Barth further argues, as noted above, that this historicism gave way to psychologism (or what we might call a certain form of pietism and subjectivism), for in view of the shriveled scope of God’s saving intentions, believers needed to discern whether they met the demands of the covenant sufficiently as to be counted among “the saved.” The net effect of this psychologism was to produce a negative sort of Christianity—judgmental, gloomy, pessimistic, closed off, and unfriendly. An unwelcoming and censorious sort of piety prevailed. Later, alleges Barth, in the hands of modernist theologians, this history of redemption came to reduce all religion to a history of religion or psychologism.

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How should we assess Barth’s charge that the federal writers succumb to “historicism,” and in back of that, inasmuch as they adhered to a Dortian understanding of divine election, serve up a kind of “historical metaphysics”?

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<sup>56</sup> For Barth’s doctrine of revelation, see *CD*, I/1, §§3, 4, 5. Secondary literature includes Trevor Hart, “Revelation,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, 37–56; Matthew J.A. Bruce, “Barth on Revelation,” 59–69; and Katherine Sonderegger, “Barth on Holy Scripture,” 71–81, in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Karl Barth, vol. 1*; David L. Mueller, *Karl Barth. Makers of the Modern Theological Mind*, ed., Bob E. Patterson (Waco, TX: Word, 1972), 49–93; and George Hunsinger, ed., *Thy Word Is Truth: Barth on Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012).



To counter Barth's charge, classic Reformed theologians need only dispute Barth's take on "Word of God" and Scripture as the *witness to* "Word of God" ("Word of God" being God's past, present, and future "saving activity"). That is, the short answer is to dispute Barth's definition of revelation—that revelation is to be defined only as God's action actually and effectually to reveal himself, at a given time and place, to specific people or a specific person. Neither the Reformed orthodox nor the federal writers denied that without divine illumination the message of the Bible (including the history of God's covenant relationship with human beings) cannot find purchase in human hearts. Without the miraculous operation of the Holy Spirit, working in tandem with Holy Scripture, revelation is without salvific or sanctifying effect. *In that sense*, given the necessity that divine illumination accompany Scripture for its message to have a saving effect in the human heart, the classic Reformed position can agree that the Bible does not *directly* convey its benefits (i.e., *ipso facto*).

Furthermore, classic Reformed and federal writers hardly think of Scripture—and certainly not the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit in the human heart—as a commodity, which humans can commandeer by an act of will and wield effectually to bless those whose ears hear its message. God remains God! Indeed, only God can reveal God and does. But *divine revelation* has textures of meaning—salvific and non-salvific.

That said, Scripture does *directly convey* to all hearers of it the Word of God, understood as the divine message, conveyed by its words, to human ears. Such can be the case without saving effect. This tracks with Scripture itself. Even Barth does not deny but strongly affirms that humans (elect in Christ) resist and deny and live contrary to that definitive reality about themselves. Such persons sin against grace. They harden themselves against the good news of salvation. They reject Jesus Christ—and thereby live in unreality. But what, we may ask, are they rejecting? The gospel? Yes! Christ? Yes! And is Christ, somehow, as presented to us on the pages of the Bible (the scriptural witness), no longer "the Word of God," the Word in the flesh? In other words, contrary to Barth's view, Scripture allows for and requires a form of "divine revelation" and of Scripture as "Word of God" that does not necessitate a blessed efficacy as such. Revelation need not be defined solely as to its salvific efficacy as God's saving activity. Revelation (and Word of God) can be revelatory of God even when it does not find purchase in human hearts.

Given that, the charge of historicism against federal theology seems relatively wide of the mark, for gaining information about God's relationship to sinners in the way of his covenant, as recorded on the pages of the Old Testament, hardly dismisses the utter requisite of God's miraculous intervention to illumine the human heart and to effect a redemptive blessing. What is more, as for using the narrative of covenant history as presented in the Old Testament to reach conclusions about the saving scope of God's grace in Jesus Christ, the scriptural witness does that very thing. Barth's open-ended gospel paradigm will be addressed below. At this point, suffice it to say that his (revised) paradigm cannot be traced along the lines of Scripture.

As for the accusation that federal theology—in its embrace of a classic Reformed conception of predestination—gave in to "historical metaphysics," this will be taken up under the third point, so we will forgo addressing that allegation here.

Finally, regarding Barth's contention that federal theology opened the door for a psychologism in theology and church that displaced dependency on God's revelation, here we reply that the devolution of Christian thought and piety into psychologism is a complex and multi-textured story; and it may not simply be placed at the feet of Reformed federalism. The decline of Christian thought from a devout adherence to Scripture into psychologism (including various forms of pietism and subjectivism) involves the displacement of biblical authority, the simultaneous rise of rationalism, the entire movement of the Enlightenment, and reaction to it. Arguably, on the contrary, federal theology, at least in its more consensus form, resisted the above-mentioned developments. What is more, pietism and subjectivism were on the rise before the emergence of federal theology, with its alleged historicism. In addition, pietism and subjectivism were not confined to the Reformed tradition; rather, Lutheranism, which has no federal theology at all, for its own reasons, proved to be fertile ground for this development.

This is relevant, as well, to Barth's allegation that federal theology opened the door to a censorious, unwelcoming, or negative Christianity. While it is true that such exhibits of the Christian faith are rife, that sort of devolution of Christian thought and practice hardly rides the wave of federalism. A censorious Christianity—Reformed and non-Reformed—exists without federal theology, just as psychologism does.

## 2.2. The Twofold Covenant Scheme and the Question of Starting Point

Barth critiques federalism for positing a different starting point in the biblical witness than Jesus Christ. That is, it advances a different and higher starting point (or what he calls a vantage point) than the Incarnate Christ. The more principal starting point for federal theology, allegedly, is the righteousness of obedience to God's law. The covenant of works is first according to the federal scheme; it is first and Christless. As such, says Barth, it is absent the gospel. On this path, it can only be about human ability and achievement before God, with Christ nowhere in the picture. Federal theology posits a starting point that fails to see God's original and eternal posture toward his human creatures, which is God's turning to humans, from the beginning, in Jesus Christ—as if the covenant of works is the original and first intention of God in how he wishes to relate to his human creatures; as if Christ, then, is a Plan B to fulfill a Plan A, just a means to another end, a higher vantage point and aim.<sup>57</sup>

As is evident, Barth dislikes the twofold covenant scheme, since, as just observed, this sets up Christ as a Plan B within the purpose of God, whereas, according to God's eternal will, Christ was always and ever is Plan A. Barth also believes that the covenant works idea sets up a graceless and loveless and Christless pathway for human fellowship with God. This, then, places law in front of gospel and makes the gospel itself, in Christ Jesus, secondary. It also makes the law the principal and more fundamental relationship that humans have with God, such that the gospel becomes a stopgap, something that gets the law back to its proper place—in a manner in which

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<sup>57</sup> Barth doesn't use the terms "Plan A" and "Plan B," but they well express his view in critique of federal theology.

Christ's incarnation is work that can be discarded upon completion. He believes this contradicts the New Testament message of Christ being the Word in the beginning with God, by whom everything is made, and who is God himself, and the "for whom" of all things (cf. John 1; Col. 1). This One became flesh, and such was and is and always will be the eternal will of God—a will of grace and favor toward humans from eternity. This means, for Barth, that God eternally chose to be God-with-us in Christ. God eternally chose to be God in relationship with human beings in his Son.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, the paradisaical situation was unto Jesus Christ. In this light, Barth also argues for a mono-covenant scheme—an eternal covenant of grace in Jesus Christ. The circumstance in paradise was not and never was *so that* (or *as if*) Adam might proceed without God's mercy in Jesus Christ. Rather, if anything, it is a circumstance in which we are shown why we need the definitive Adam, the second Adam, Christ himself, from the beginning, for he is the eternal purpose of God (not Adam without Christ).

Therefore, the twofold covenant scheme in federalism entails, says Barth, an inescapable dualism, with a covenant in general (the covenant of works, primarily grounded in nature and natural law) and then a gracious covenant that is special and supernatural. The first and principal covenant, in federalism, is the covenant of works. Barth observes: although the federal writers relate the covenant of works and the covenant of grace in an antithetical way—and only in that way—it is the covenant of works that defines the divine/human relationship, since the covenant of grace, with Christ as the divine gift and mediator of salvation, only functions as a new remedy to fulfill the covenant of works—the principal covenant. Moreover, in rebuke of federalism, Barth notes that the covenant of works involves humans engaging God in a *tit-for-tat* relationship. In short, it is about humans and their works before God rather than what a covenant relationship with God really is, namely about God and his grace in Jesus Christ toward man. Barth wholly disapproves of this twofold covenant scheme, for as Barth assesses it, law is above gospel; God's righteousness is more basic than God's love and mercy. Christ is an after-thought, not the first thought in God's ways with human beings. For federal theology (as Barth understands it), the storyline is that of getting the law fulfilled, fulfilling righteousness, rather than that of the good news of God's grace in Jesus Christ. We do well to elaborate on this point further.

An important tenet for Barth is that covenant history or the history of salvation, being a gospel story of divine grace and of God's work, is not a story about how divine law can get fulfilled, one way or the other. Barth believes that federal theology relates the narrative of the history of redemption (the history of the covenants) as a complex of God's multiple pathways to get to "law fulfillment"—*that* is the story; *that* is the narrative; *that* is the message. Jesus Christ is the requisite means to *that end*. For federal theology, law and its fulfillment is the standpoint, and starting-point, and therefore vantage-point for this scheme. So, the big story, in its outcome, is about the law. That is the "standpoint" from which redemptive history is defined and understood. By making the covenant center on the law, with the law's fulfillment being what defines the covenants, the higher vantage point from which redemptive

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<sup>58</sup> See footnotes 27 and 29.

history is understood is no longer Jesus Christ, but the law and its fulfillment. The fulfillment of the law is the higher vantage-point—this notion poisons the federal schema. As such, Jesus Christ, and his work of reconciliation, is no longer the standpoint (or the higher vantage-point) from which this history of salvation is attested and proclaimed—yet all Scripture testifies and bears witness to Christ. Divine glory is about Christ as God’s gift of grace to us. But in federalism, law-fulfillment is the big story. Jesus Christ is just *the means* to finally bring about that outcome—he is, so to speak, a chapter in *that* story.

In light of the above, and by way of contrast as Barth sees it, the history of redemption is a gospel narrative, which calls sinners to faith in Jesus Christ from the outset, for it is a witness to God’s saving love. The history of redemption is singular in being about the evangel. Christ is the content of that narrative, even as he is the subject of it. That narrative, therefore, is about God’s sole and entire decision to save in his Son. It is a gospel story about God’s grace in Jesus Christ to human beings. As Barth sizes up federal theology, the gospel story is down the way, comes along an arduous path where Christ is not the first and sole theme, where Christ is not needed from the outset, where Christ comes along later to meet a specific need for us, to help meet a prior need. In short, in federal theology, Christ is not the starting point and beginning of God’s ways with human beings. He is a means for a prior and more fundamental end.

To the contrary and for his part, Barth seeks to shift the entire paradigm of God’s redemptive grace, which consequently cannot endorse the federal scheme or even the presuppositions of the way of salvation that are commonplace in much of Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. This goes back to his revised supralapsarianism, wherein what is last in outcome is first in order.<sup>59</sup> And, for Barth, what is last in outcome is the glory of God in Jesus Christ’s work of salvation. The beginning of God’s way with human beings is *his grace in Jesus Christ*. This isn’t an after-thought; this isn’t a Plan B; this isn’t a stopgap, nor a piece of “patchwork” to some other original plan (a Plan A) in order to get *it* back on track. God’s grace in Jesus Christ is *the original* plan, God’s eternal plan, and all else fits that original, eternal plan. God eternally willed to be this God toward us, and, so, the eternal Son of God, eternally willed as the Son of the Father, to be Incarnate One. For Barth, we must stop thinking of the second person of the Trinity in abstraction from his incarnation. We know the Son as he is revealed to us *in the flesh*. Who is this One who isn’t *that One*? As that One (the Incarnate One), he is God’s eternal will and purpose; he is God’s resolve.

God eternally willed, then, to be graciously disposed to us, to enter into human history, to be humble in this way, as God in the flesh, and this is the beginning of God’s ways with human beings. For Barth, what this means is that grace and God’s benevolent disposition of love, reaching out in fellowship, is God’s first purpose. This also means that God’s holiness and righteousness, his justice and truth, are not perfections that precede his love or goodness or kindness or graciousness. Accordingly, the divine relationship to our creaturely humanness is not first defined by an abstract creation, as such—whereby law and righteousness and demands to

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<sup>59</sup> See footnote 27.

holiness are *first in order*. Rather, our creaturely humanness is first set in a relationship in which God's grace and goodness, his love and mercy—and all of that in Jesus Christ—circumscribe God's relationship to human beings. According to God's freedom, this is his eternal will. This, in turn, shapes Barth's doctrine of creation and the fall into sin, which is unto the revelation of God's grace in his Son incarnate, in the saving mercies accomplished in him. This is Plan A (and there is no Plan B); this is God's eternal decree (if you will); this is God's original and eternal purpose: gospel, which issues forth in a law that conforms to God's holiness and righteousness.

It is clear, then, why Barth cannot abide the twofold covenant scheme (at least as he sizes up what it involves). As Barth sees it, the covenant of works serves up a Plan A, without Christ, followed by the covenant of grace, a Plan B, with Christ. This twofold covenant arrangement, characteristic of the federal scheme, meets with Barth's vigorous disapproval. He cannot abide the notion that God's way with humans is without Christ from the beginning—as if it had ever been God's intention to establish a relationship with his human image-bearer dependent upon such fallible creatures to meet the requirements of legal righteousness (Plan A), and that *without* Jesus Christ—as if God, then, decides to change that plan in the way of a grace which is, nonetheless, still ordered by the original starting point and plan of a legal righteousness and the fulfillment of God's law. Plan B, therefore, really only serves Plan A, with the fulfillment of law now coming through Jesus Christ, the mediator for select sinners.

As part of the misstep that Barth believes he detects in Reformed federal theology and integral to the above, he censures it for importing a definition of covenant without Christ and his saving work. Stated another way, this theology was not properly Christocentric in how it conceived of the idea of the covenant. Or stated in yet another way, federal writers adopted the notion that God's covenant with human beings can be understood as like covenants between humans with one another, perhaps parroting the cultural givens of the ancient biblical setting. Once more, for Barth, this fails to read Scripture as divine witness to the Word of God, which has Christ as its content and message. Alleges Barth, the supposed essence of the covenant, at its various stages, was not Christ or God's grace in Christ; rather, it was the righteousness of God (as law), which had to be fulfilled—if not by ourselves (try as we may), then by another, by One God himself provides, Jesus the Savior. Yes, we arrive at Christ—but only as a final remedy, not as the original way of God with human beings, and not as the content and essence of the covenant of grace as the beginning of God's way with humans—from the pre-fall paradise forward.

For Barth, with the eternal Son revealed to us and known by us as *ensarkos*, as our mediator (not as *asarkos*), God's plan was always and only (according to his freedom) to be God unto man and for man. This is the starting point and the vantage point from which we read the history of redemption. Consequently, Barth sees creation *unto* Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ *unto* creation. God's way with human beings is the covenant of grace in Jesus Christ. For Barth, the creation is the external basis (or presupposition) of the covenant; and the covenant is the internal basis (or

presupposition) of creation.<sup>60</sup> In other words, God's purpose in creating human beings is to fellowship with them, giving himself to them, in Jesus Christ (never apart from him). And all this as a gracious covenant relationship. God cannot do that without the creation. So the creation is the external basis of the covenant. However, the covenant is the internal basis of creation because creation does not exist independent of this eternal purpose of God; creation is not a Plan A, with redemption being a Plan B. Rather, creation is part of the Plan A of God in Jesus Christ. Again, given that, creation cannot be a Plan A if it is absent Jesus Christ as the goal and outcome, if it is absent the One by whom and for whom all things were made, who became flesh. Christ is not a sub-purpose of God, an after-thought, a Plan B. No, God's grace in Jesus Christ is his one and only plan; and creation is for that purpose. As a result, covenant, which is Christ as the content or substance of that covenant, is the driving purpose, the internal basis, of creation. Barth expresses his own view succinctly in his *Dogmatics in Outline*, a book wherein he expounds the Apostles' Creed:

[T]he covenant between God and man is the meaning and the glory, the ground and the goal of heaven and earth and so of the whole creation. . . . For by covenant we mean Jesus Christ. But it is not the case that the covenant between God and man is so to speak a second fact, something additional, but the covenant is as old as creation itself. When the existence of creation begins, God's dealing with man also begins. For all that exists points towards man, in so far as it makes God's purpose visible, moving towards His revealed and effective action in the covenant with Jesus Christ. The covenant is not only quite as old as the creation; it is older than it. Before the world was, before heaven and earth were, the resolve or decree of God exists in view of this event in which God willed to hold communion with man, as it became inconceivably true and real in Jesus Christ. And when we think about the meaning of existence and creation, about their ground and goal, we have to think of this covenant between God and man.<sup>61</sup>

In tandem with this accent in Barth's thought—that is, Jesus Christ as the beginning of God's ways with man—he also argues for a gospel/law paradigm to go alongside a law/gospel paradigm. His reasoning for that is not to subvert the law, to render it null and void. Instead, in this way (gospel preceding law), the law finds fulfillment in Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ in us. There is, in short, no fulfillment of law except in him. Thus, as already noted, Barth (in criticizing the federal schema of a twofold covenant) worries that, following this route of a prior covenant of works, we think that God relates to humans independent of his eternal purpose in Jesus Christ; so that law or the righteousness of God becomes more fundamental than the love or grace of God in his incarnate Son.

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<sup>60</sup> *CD*, III/1, §41.

<sup>61</sup> Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. G. T. Thomson (London: SCM Press, 1949), 63–64.

As a brief reminder, earlier in his career, Barth, in his article "Gospel and Law,"<sup>62</sup> forthrightly rejects natural theology of any sort; and therefore one may not speak of law first, for that would define God without Christ—i.e., a God of law absent Christ; and that God is not the God of Scripture. Barth's doctrine of gospel and law (in that order) means, in part, that Christ (gospel) is the first word of God for us and to us. This fits precisely with Barth's modified supralapsarianism in which Christ is first as well, along with being the content and goal of God's eternal purpose.<sup>63</sup>

For Barth, it matters that the Abrahamic covenant (gospel) precedes the Mosaic law. Indeed, Galatians 3:17 makes clear that the law follows the promise. But *fulfillment* of the promise comes after law (hence, there is a legitimate ordering also of law and gospel). As *God's* law, it is hidden in the Ark of the Covenant (gospel). But, then, the gospel is not the gospel without the law contained within it, for the law is *in* the gospel, is *from* the gospel, and *points to* the gospel. Therefore, we must begin with the gospel (Christ) in order to know about the law.

The Word of God (Christ) is always a word of *grace* and speaks both gospel and law to us—to heal and to judge, etc. The duality is *united* in him, for God's speaking to us at all is pure grace, both in speaking the gospel to us and in speaking the law to us. To *hear* (being confronted and converted by the Word of God—Christ) is to be confronted and converted by grace; yes, the law is contained in it. The Word become flesh means his abasement and bearing of wrath *for us*—God's gracious answer to our sin, our autonomy and godlessness, our flight from God's grace. To *hear* the Word of God is our salvation!

The Word of God is, then, gospel and law, and that word is the one "Word of truth." As God's gracious Word to us (as gospel or law), we discover that we are haters of divine grace. But grace specifically seeks victory over this resistance and sinful spurning. All that Christ Jesus has done for us in the flesh confirms God's just judgment against it, even as it serves to overcome our sinful resistance. He bore our punishment. Our justification and acceptance is accomplished really in the *resurrection* of Christ from the *dead*. Grace triumphs—through the path of undergoing the divine wrath, he gains the victory and reveals the victory. As for ourselves, the future promises only the infirmity of old age, the hospital, the battlefield, the cemetery, decay, or ashes." However, given Christ's suffering and victory in our humanity, we much more definitely see nothing else before us but resurrection and life. We are accepted in him, and he is the content of the gospel. Grace is Christ's saving work and intercession for us.<sup>64</sup>

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In response to Barth on the issue pertaining to vantage point, several critical observations are in order.

First, Barth may be commended for raising an interesting and important question relative to how we conceive of God's relationship to human beings and how creation

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<sup>62</sup> In *Community, State and Church: Three Essays by Karl Barth, with an introduction by Will Herberg* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1960, first published in 1935), 71–100.

<sup>63</sup> See footnote 27.

<sup>64</sup> Barth, "Gospel and Law," 71–76.

relates to sin and redemption. That said, as stated, Barth rather caricatures federal theology as advancing a dichotomy between law and gospel *at the beginning* of God's way with man, his image-bearer. Barth, of course, wants to advocate for a gospel-first paradigm without jettisoning the law while arguing that federal theology affirms a law-first paradigm, which subsequently needs the gospel as a means to its fulfillment.

To be sure, federal theology does not advocate for a paradigm of gospel and then law—so, yes, gospel comes after law. However, that is not to say that federal theology placed *divine grace* after law at the beginning of God's way with man. On the contrary, federal theologians (at least, following consensus seventeenth-century federal theology) recognized and affirmed that the covenant of works was itself grounded in God's condescending to humans, graciously, in a benevolent manner. Before the fall into sin, that paradisaical covenant was not merely or strictly a "works-based" or "law fulfillment" covenant. It was not that for the following reasons: (1) Human beings do not need a covenant with God in order (as moral beings) to owe God all that is due God as God. That is, they owe him devotion, trust, subservience, and loving (versus begrudging) obedience merely by the fact that they are his rational-moral creatures. Such is due God as God; therefore, merit in any strict sense is excluded. (2) Law fulfillment does not merit reward inasmuch as creatures have nothing to give to God that has not been bestowed upon them by God—thus, both condign merit (full merit) and congruent merit (half merit) are excluded. (3) Blessedness in the way of law-fulfillment requires that the reward be proportional or equal to the obedience rendered—but, such is not the case and, again, the obedience rendered (*if it had been rendered*) is owed to God anyway. There is, then, no strict reward. (4) If the alleged law paradigm applied to federal theology in the way Barth suggests, then God would be obliged, *from justice*, to bless or reward obedience to him as a matter of equity. But this is not so—in fact, the covenant of works simply states that God, who owes us nothing, rewards obedience rendered to him not from strict justice but his benevolent favor; and so blessedness *following after* obedience to God (trusting and loving and obeying God) is purely gratuitous and unearned and unmerited. That God would bless such *trust and love and obedience* is only according to his own kindly or gracious or loving covenantal arrangement. This is what is referred to in federal theology as *ex pacto* merit or pactional blessedness—blessedness which *follows after* human obedience to God, according to God's gracious arrangement. It is not a matter of God being indebted to humans but God benevolently rewarding obedience in keeping with his promise. (God is true to himself.) Such obedience (to be genuine obedience) includes trusting God, believing him and believing *in* him, and loving him. Obedience is not abstracted from a living relationship of friendship and fellowship with God. It certainly is not a matter of raw and cold conformity to a raw and cold set of requirements—the law.

Barth depicts the covenant of works—this being the original and law-driven vantage point—as if the covenant with Adam were an act of arbitrary power without any grace or kindness in it. That, however, is not an accurate description of the covenant of works. Instead, that covenant was itself, an act of grace (undeserved), placing humans in a new relationship to God's will, such that now an avenue was open for an eschatological blessedness, infallible and eternal. The covenant of works was



not God acting toward man as a begrudging ogre; rather, it shows God stooping to open a way of fruitfulness and fellowship with God—a way that applies in the glory to come in Christ Jesus as well (walking with God in love, trust, devotion, obedience, holiness, dependency, and worship). That fruitfulness is not found in the first Adam but in the second. Covenant is the divine gift by which God opens the pathway to blessedness with him otherwise unknown and impossible. It is the path that requires God himself condescending to enact such an arrangement (a covenant of sorts). Being a covenant arrangement, it includes his promise, from free grace, to bless trusting-in-him-obedience, already owed and otherwise unblessed.

The original vantage point, for federal theology, therefore, is neither absent God's grace nor his kindly disposition to man; likewise, it is not absent God's law (his holy will), which expresses his holy nature. Since the law of God is holy, righteous, and good—it is not something sinister. And it was never the case that the covenant of works was an arrangement where Adam, rendering perfect obedience to God, could do without faith in God, without trusting in his Word, or without walking with him in dependent fellowship. In fact, for federal theology (and this is decisive), the constructing of the doctrine of the covenant of works required reading Scripture from the New Testament to the Old Testament, from Christological considerations (i.e., from Christ's person and work and his mandate to fulfill all righteousness for us as the second Adam) to a deeper consideration of the first Adam's mandate for his progeny in the original situation in paradise. It was not a raw arrangement of works righteousness *in abstracto*—nothing of the sort! It is a doctrine wrought in light of Christ as the fulfillment of all righteousness. Christ is woven into the starting point and vantage point of the twofold covenant scheme. It could not be a matter of raw law, for the law of God is never abstracted from God himself, who is holy, righteous, and good.

Second, while even this corrected understanding of the covenant of works would likely not meet Barth's standard of Christ as the original and only way of God with man (his proposed Christological vantage point), Barth's paradigm meets with its own set of problems, such as: Why does the Christ of God suffer for us, die for us, mediate for us, intercede for us, atone for us and reconcile us to God *if divine law and human sin are not presupposed* as needing each and all of the aforementioned redemptive activities?<sup>65</sup> Yes, verbally, it is easy to propose this Christological move. Still, conceptually Barth opens himself to an abstraction of his own, namely positing a Christ as Savior *abstracted* from God's law and human disobedience, *abstracted* from divine holiness and human depravity; that is, Barth proposes Christ to us, as God's original *gracious* thought, *abstracted* from God's holiness and righteousness. Indeed, Barth offers a beautiful thought as vantage point, but that vantage point (the incarnate Christ as Savior) is hardly sensible abstracted from human fallenness, depravity,

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<sup>65</sup> In this connection, see Shao Kai Tseng, *Karl Barth's Infralapsarian Theology: Origins and Development 1920–1953*. New Explorations in Theology. Foreword by George Hunsinger (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016, wherein the author argues, p. 29 *et passim*, that Barth's purified or revised supralapsarianism cannot do without an infralapsarian theory, and “in fact a dialectical combination of both lapsarian positions” characterize Barth's mature theology.

misery, along with the divine sentence of accursedness and condemnation. In fact, we discover that Barth's paradigm (to use one example) works in the opposite direction of the apostle Paul's assumption (vantage point) that humans are all by nature children of wrath, under the power of sin, followed by his joyful celebration, "but God" (Eph. 2:1–5)—that sounding forth of the miraculous gospel word. Barth serves a starting point and a vantage point that blurs the clean lines between creation, fall, and redemption. Traditional Christian theology views creation, as such, as not needing redemption (this is commonplace)—but it always needs God's care, ordering, supervision, provision, and love, even as it must be divinely directed to an eschatological outcome. Such are not graceless activities, but such are not strictly redemptive activities either. They are also not activities minus the Word through whom all things were made, and through whom all things hold together—the eternal Logos to become incarnate and who became incarnate (cf. Colossians 1).

Third, following the above, Barth wishes to keep gospel/law in tandem—a gospel with law, a law with gospel (each grounded in Christ himself). But if law comes later down the line, after gospel, as Barth wants it, then why must Christ, the definitive Adam, fulfill all righteousness and live under the sanction of the law? Why does Christ act on our behalf for reconciliation? Why do these standards of righteousness apply to Christ if they didn't apply to or were irrelevant for the first Adam in paradise?

In the thinking of federal theologians, even in the paradisaical situation, the law never functioned as an end in itself, for a covenant of works is not bare law (obedience is due God without a covenant of works). Rather, God graciously condescends to establish a blessed relationship with man, rewarding obedience—obedience already owed without reward. The law is simply an expression of God's nature, for who can sin against God with impunity? The law's appearance is no more sinister in the original paradise than its abiding function, giving us a portrait of divine holiness, in paradise restored or the glory to come.

To be sure, the scriptural witness presents us with law and gospel; but it never presents us with a law of God minus his grace and goodness, nor a gospel of God minus his righteousness and holiness. This is to say that humans can only think and talk about one thing at a time—but such need not create a dualism, nor require that the first thing mentioned function to trump what comes after or automatically functions as more principal and important than what follows after it. Simply stated: the covenant of works, mentioned first, is not, for Reformed federalism, the eternal melody in glory. In *the order of teaching* (in the order of the storyline of Scripture), the paradisaical situation is prior to the fall situation, which is prior to the announcement of the mother promise, that promise of salvation in the seed of the woman, fulfilled in the Christ. To follow that storyline is neither to fall into historicism nor to succumb to a Plan A paradigm of law-over-grace as chief and most decisive, followed by a Plan B remedy that reduces Christ to a means to an end. Instead, federal theologians simply traced the biblical witness. Therefore, it is wide of the mark to say that federal theology only aimed to see the law of God come to fulfillment. That is not the story of redemption—that story is about Christ *for sinners* and includes an eternal song to him as the Lamb of God sacrificed for sinners.

Fourth, this means that federal theology can make room for *a version of Barth's* revised supralapsarianism—that which is last in execution is first in intention. Indeed, Barth can help classic Reformed thought reconsider what is last in execution, namely Christ in glory, the Savior of his very own. Truly, that is what is last in execution, and, so, accordingly, the same is first in God's intention. But that is not to affirm with Barth that Christ's salvific work is inclusive of all fallen sinners—not unless that is the final outcome. But, given that such an outcome does not follow the scriptural witness, federal theology does not track with Barth's view, for his view sees Christ's redemptive work to be *inclusive* of all (*de jure* and perhaps *de facto*) while allowing for the possibility that the Spirit's work will be *exclusive* of some. That is, the efficacious grace of the Spirit, according to Barth's paradigm, may prove to be in final outcome more truncated than that of Christ's sacrifice for sinners.

That hardly bodes well for Barth's staked-out vantage point for comprehending the history of redemption. His view opens the door to the possibility that the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, is less gracious than the Son, the Incarnate Logos, Jesus Christ. This has ominous consequences for his scheme. The Holy Spirit may, perhaps, fail to effectually bring Christ's work of reconciliation to its full salvific fruits (at least such is a possibility, for Barth). And this possibility has menacing implications for the unity of God's eternal purpose in Jesus Christ—the unity of God's will and work as the triune God. It also means that, for all his objections to the classic Reformed doctrine of predestination, with its doctrine of a hidden decree of God lurking behind the revealed gospel, Barth himself has a doctrine of election and a paradigm of grace wherein the salvific scope and final outcome of Christ's work of reconciliation is still hidden. He gives us a Christ *for all* and a Holy Spirit who is *perhaps for all*. Barth's paradigm of grace allows for a split between the work of Christ and the work of the Spirit—the outcome of the Spirit's work is left juggling in the air. There exists a split (as a possibility) between divine intentionality and divine efficacy, between *de jure* and *de facto*. Without the *de facto* outcome of all humans saved in Christ, Barth's Christological vantage point falters, obscured by the potency of human rebellion. Under Barth's arrangement: either divine grace (to save) is conquering and to conquer *all*, or human willfulness and depravity becomes a vantage point from which to explain the history of redemption, that is, the exclusion *of some*. Barth rejects Pelagian and Semi-Pelagian (and Arminian) accounts of human depravity and divine rescue. But his view, with a wishful universalism, proves to be a wobbly vantage point that cannot get God's good plan of salvation in Jesus Christ into focus.

By contrast, Reformed federal theology readily acknowledges that the divine plan *from the beginning* is God's glory in Christ Jesus as the Savior of elect sinners—this being last in outcome but first in intention. However, that need not form a vantage point that counts all human beings in Christ. (We will expand on this statement in our reply to Barth's critique of the doctrine of the *pactum salutis* under part 2.3.)

### 2.3. Federal Theology's Doctrine of an Intratrinitarian *Pactum* with Its Exclusion of Non-elect Sinners

Finally, we consider Barth's indictment of federal theology's espousal of an eternal intratrinitarian covenant (the so-called *pactum salutis*). Given our prior extended analysis of Barth's denunciation of other features of federal theology (as he conceives of them), here we can be much briefer as we analyze his critique of the covenant of redemption.

He judges this doctrine to be both without biblical warrant and theological cogency—a mythology. For Barth, the doctrine of an eternal covenant within the Godhead, i.e., among the persons of the Trinity (or between the Father and the Son), is an entirely erroneous idea. Says Barth, this doctrine is inconsistent with the primal covenant in the God/human relationship that federal theology posits, namely the covenant of works. Or stated another way, since God's grace in Jesus Christ is eternally arranged within the Godhead, which is what the *pactum* proposes, it makes little sense to make a covenant of works foundational to God's relationship with human beings. That covenant is, by definition, superfluous and destined to obsolescence. The covenant of works (Plan A), in light of the *pactum*, is no plan at all.

Just as decisive a reason for rejecting the notion of the *pactum*, for Barth, is what this doctrine suggests regarding the divine Trinity, along with other dubious implications. As Barth ascertains the Covenant of Redemption between the Father and the Son, he judges it to be (1) unneeded, for God is *de facto* a gracious God to man. (2) The notion of such a covenant misconceives the nature of God as Triune, for the three persons of the Trinity do not need to come to a unity of will or purpose of function by way of a covenant relationship. Besides, are we to think of God as favoring us only upon conditions being met? Is the eternal Logos only disposed to become Incarnate by way of an intratrinitarian covenant? (3) Barth reckons this covenant to be "too sublime and uplifting" to be "a Christian thought." It turns the idea of the covenant in on itself, i.e., it turns God in on himself—it is about God's relationship with God. In contrast, the biblical idea of the covenant is about God's relationship with human beings. Barth's point is that God *as God* doesn't need a *pactum*, and the Son, the eternal Logos, is never anyone other than the One who eternally exists as the One to become (in time) the Incarnate One. In order to ground grace in God, says Barth, we need only look to the covenant of grace in history, for Christ revealed-in-the-flesh is the eternal foundation and display of the eternal grace of God. The God of history is the God of eternity. There is no God (hiding) in back of the God *revealed in Jesus Christ*. Such is the case, for Jesus Christ is the beginning of God's way with human beings.

These remarks work in tandem with Barth's chastisement of federal theology's exclusionary posture toward non-elect sinners.

Barth scolds federal theology for conceiving the covenant of grace in an exclusionary or closed-off manner, which entails a doctrine of election in which Christ is reckoned as disposed only toward some, a select group of elect persons for whom he died. This closed-off conception of the covenant of grace mirrors the closed-off doctrine of predestination in back of it. In such a scheme, says Barth, the good news

of salvation in Jesus Christ is good news only for some. By contrast, Barth believes that the final tally of who are ultimately counted as saved is in God's hands—and, this side of glory, we may not prematurely regard all persons as counted among the community of faith. Nonetheless, the good news is, as such, open-ended and issues a call inclusive of all people. Barth's disagreement with the classic Reformed conception of predestination and Christ's work of reconciliation as articulated, say, in the Canons of Dort, brings Barth's disapproval of federal theology precisely where it follows the path of that understanding of divine election.

Thus, for Barth, a gospel, as proclaimed by the classic Reformed understanding of predestination (some selected; others rejected), and so the federal theology circumscribed by the same understanding of divine election, cannot be good news for all people. Which is to say, it cannot be inclusive or oriented to be inclusive. By definition, it is exclusive (saving grace is for some, not for others). Federal theology, therefore, in deciding, practically, who are excluded and who are included, makes inclusion in Christ's work of reconciliation dependent upon a divine decision in back of (or behind) God's revelation of himself to sinners in Jesus Christ. A bigger, more definitive, will of God stands in back of God's revealed will in Jesus Christ.

Moreover, to count oneself under the blessings of Christ atoning work as elect, one must respond to the overtures of grace (these histories of the covenant). As such, responders can only assess themselves (indeed, had to assess themselves) to be assured that they were indeed responders (hence the psychologism). Inevitably, the same selected and blessed persons ever had to assess others in the same way. With this, since fulfillment of the law is what drives this whole message, even with Christ Jesus being the great law-fulfiller for the sake of the elect, here, too, *they are only truly his if they are law-doers*.

With this federal paradigm of grace, says Barth, the gospel, try as it may, has difficulty piercing through this principal premise of legal righteousness. This is also why, as Barth sees it, the Christianity that flows from it is unhappy, negative, and unwelcoming. In advance, the more fundamental message—i.e., more fundamental than that of Jesus Christ and God's grace in him—is the message of God's disfavor and human exclusion for failure to live up to the standards of the law. This is a Christianity with a disposition of fear, for God is ill-disposed to love the creatures he has made. As Barth perceives it, this is what a primal doctrine of a covenant of works produces.

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What validity should be assigned to Barth's sharp rebuke of federal theology's adoption of a doctrine of the *pactum salutis*?

At the outset, we note that a biblical defense of that theological construct is not our present interest, though a modest case in its defense is possible.<sup>66</sup> More important to our purpose is to follow out the intent and burden of this doctrine, which sought to ground the covenant of grace in God's trinitarian fellowship—especially given the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity.

Our response to Barth comes under five points.

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<sup>66</sup> See footnote 35.

First, contrary to Barth's allegation, it is not the case (for federal theology) that God can only *become* a gracious God if he covenants with himself by way of the *pactum* to be such a God—with the Son consenting to be the Incarnate Savior of sinners. Reformed federal theology was not absent-minded of God's eternal decree. Federal theologians embraced standard Reformed theology, including the doctrine of the divine decree. This means that they affirmed that the decree expresses God's eternal will—and God's eternal will is nothing less than God's essence willing what he wills. God never exists will-lessly, and God, being God, eternally and freely, wills what he wills. Therefore, he exists only as the willing God (as God exercising his will). The federal theologians understood that God is the God who ever and always (and freely) wills what he wills; so, he eternally decrees a creation, according to which, God calls into being everything outside of God, and all that through the Word (the eternal Logos) to become flesh (John 1:1–3, 14). He eternally decrees/wills man as his image-bearer, Christ as the definitive image-bearer; he eternally decrees/wills to create man as fallible and corruptible, and who is allowed, according to that decree, to fall and to corrupt himself and all his progeny. God eternally decrees/wills to be the God of gracious rescue for sinners, even selected sinners. God eternally (ever and always and freely) willed to be the God who saves sinners in his Son. That God is the eternal God who eternally willed (wills) what he wills. That decree is what he ever and always wills (to speak humanly: from eternity past to the present to eternity future). That decree (the eternal God willing this eternally) includes his Son taking on human flesh and human sin and bearing sin's penalty on behalf of his people, given to him from the Father. Which is to say, God eternally willed to be a gracious God, a creator God, a redeemer God, an incarnate God, while he also eternally willed to be a righteous God, a gracious God who fulfills justice, and a righteous God who is merciful. God is eternally the God who wills this (he never has and never does not will this).

This means, then, that for federal theology, God doesn't need an intratrinitarian agreement *in order to be* a gracious God or a rescuing God. God eternally is this God *as God*. He is immutable, according to Reformed orthodoxy. He never *becomes* such a God; he *is* such a God.

However, the federal writers, tracing out some particular texts of Scripture,<sup>67</sup> discerned that it was not the entire Trinity, in the strict sense, who becomes incarnate and sacrificed for human sin but the Son only. Because of the covenantal terminology showing up in these texts, federal theology posited an intratrinitarian *pactum*—not so that God could agree within himself to be gracious but to reveal to us the unique role of the Son as mediator for sinners, as the Incarnate One.<sup>68</sup> Nothing about the *pactum*

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<sup>67</sup> Keys texts include (but not limited to): Psalms 2; 8; 16:2–3, 6–7; 40:7, 13; Isaiah 42:1, 6; 53:10–11; Zechariah 6:13; Luke 22:29; Hebrews 7:22, besides other related scriptural materials.

<sup>68</sup> Arguably, the federal theologians, unlike Barth, allowed for a nuanced, even elastic, use of the word "covenant." This fits Scripture itself, for the covenant idea was a standard concept in ANE literature. The federal theologians maintained that God is certainly capable of adapting, without totally adopting, this concept to his relationship to human beings, even as God can speak in metaphorical ways about himself, using covenantal language. An intratrinitarian *pactum* simply sought to honor the biblical texts that reflect Jesus Christ's role as the "sent" Messiah, as the One under mandate and fulfilling a mission from the Father as Mediator and Sponsor—acting on behalf of his own. A sampling of scriptural texts of this sort are Mark 9:37 (Matt.

*salutis* floated free from God's eternal decree. Rather, the *pactum* provides content to the eternal Logos being the One for sinners as their Sponsor and mediator in the flesh, which is likewise part of God eternally willing his will as the God who creates and saves his creation for his glory. The *pactum* is in the unity of God's singular and eternal will.

We have seen that federal theologians used a diversity of titles to refer to this redemptive project as a shared labor of the distinct persons of the Trinity, including *pactum salutis*, the covenant of redemption, or counsel of peace. Whatever the nomenclature, the federal writers definitely were not presenting a portrait of God negotiating with himself as the Triune God. These theologians never conceived of the intratrinitarian covenant as though God had multiple wills (two or three) wherein the divine persons as individuals, with their distinct desires and aims, agreed to will the same will. According to federalism, the *pactum*, grounded in the Reformed orthodox conception of God (which included a predominately Western understanding of the Holy Trinity), could not have conceived of the eternal intratrinitarian *pactum* as anything less than God being God according to his one, singular, eternal will. Barth's criticisms would hit the mark against federal theology if that theology had no doctrine of the eternal divine decree, which it, of course, jealously championed, or if it proposed a doctrine of a tri-willed Trinity, which it did not do.

Replying further to the above-noted criticism, this reproach misses what was at work within the *pactum* idea, namely the concern to bring *assurance* to the covenanted human party. Stated another way, the *pactum* took the eyes of believers off themselves and onto Jesus the Savior (their Guarantor). (Note well: this is the opposite of psychologism and subjectivism.) The *pactum* reveals for the covenanted, according to the stipulations of the covenant of grace, that they ought to seek their solace in the One who is their Surety, who is the very One who acts fully on their behalf and secures all blessings for them in his own person and work. This is very Christocentric in focus, being altogether centered on Christ as *the Christ for sinners*. It also *positions* the decisive pivot point of the covenant of grace off of the human party of the covenant—the strength of their faith or their faithfulness—and onto Christ and the testamentary character of the covenant of grace, namely that salvation is a bequeathal, that it is *completely accomplished for the believer*, that Christ is our all. All is done for us. The covenant is finally a testament.

Second, *contra* Barth, the *pactum* idea runs opposite a “contract” idea—which a number of Barth's followers charge against federal theology. The contract charge fits Barth's claim that the covenant of works, for example, ushered in a kind of works righteousness or bargaining relationship between God and humans, a *tit-for-tat* relationship between God and human beings. This trajectory of criticism (very Barthian in origin),<sup>69</sup> which Barth makes himself in his particular way, is quite mistaken, for the *pactum* achieves the opposite. Christ is our Sponsor. The Word Incarnate is the One in whom are all blessings. The Son-become-flesh does all on

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10:40; Luke 9:48); Matthew 15:24; 21:37; Luke 4:43; 10:16; John 4:34; 5:24, 30, 36–37; 6:38–40, 44, 57; 7:16, 28–29, 33; 8:16, 18, 26, 28–29, 42; 9:4; chapter 17; *et passim* in the Gospel of John; Hebrews 7:22; 1 John 4:9–10, 14.

<sup>69</sup> See footnote 33.

behalf of the covenanted. This eternal *pactum* hardly arrives as a Plan B inasmuch as it is grounded in God himself from eternity.

Third, Barth fails to reckon adequately with the nature of the divine decree, at least as the federal theologians integrated the decree into their federalism, with their embrace of Reformed orthodoxy. Barth, for his part, parses federalism and its theology of the divine decree as if the ordering of the divine decree—whether infralapsarian or supralapsarian—is temporally sequential instead of logical. “Vantage point” and “starting point” language lends itself to that understanding—as though God, sequentially, willed one thing, followed next by another will or desire or aim, etc. But the so-called ordering of the divine decree is nothing of the sort. At best, it is a human way of conceiving and talking about the fullness of God’s eternal will. For federal theologians (embracing orthodox theology), God himself knows all things in a single intuition (not sequentially or deductively) and wills accordingly. Again, in tracing out the history of redemption, the federal writers sought to follow the unfolding of the history of revelation—all of which is according to God’s singular and unified divine decree. It isn’t multiple wills—it has no Plan A versus a Plan B. There is only God’s one plan according to his one will.

Fourth, in opposition to Barth’s dismissal of federal thinking, it may be fairly argued that Barth’s paradigm—of a grace inclusive of all, *de jure* if not finally *de facto*—sets up a false dichotomy between God’s righteousness/justice and God’s love or graciousness, for Barth posits an either/or: *either* Jesus Christ and divine grace in him is the starting point and vantage point from which everything proceeds, this being the single story of the history of salvation, *or* human obedience and conformity to divine law, without Christ, is the starting point and the mount from which all else proceeds; and human fulfillment of God’s law becomes the theme of Scripture and the story of redemption. In this latter option, human righteousness as obedience to divine law is the main thing. But this has never been the main thing—God’s glorious grace in Jesus Christ is the main thing. Yet Barth’s paradigm, the first option, as seductive and inviting as it is, and for all its concern to think of God *in concreto* in Jesus Christ, imagines a Christ *in abstracto*, for to need a Savior and mediator for sin logically *before* we are sinners, to need a reconciler and Victor logically *before* humans are alienated and under divine penalty or punishment, is to imagine a Christ abstracted from the misery that needs remedy.

Barth’s revised supralapsarian scheme may offer a way forward—that is, a way forward from his version of a Christ *in abstracto*. However, it is not a way forward so long as he fudges on the efficacious scope of Christ’s work of reconciliation—the *de jure* scope of Christ’s saving work awaiting the same *de facto* outcome. For Barth, *what is last in execution* is first in intention. But in this paradigm, what is last in execution dangles as an unknown, a maybe, a hope. How then can it be known as first in intention? Barth’s advocacy of Christ *for all*, Christ himself elected *for all*, reprobated *for all*, may prove, finally, to be a Christ *for some*. If federal theology, and Reformed orthodox theology in general, proffers a divine decree with a hidden will of God as part of it, Barth’s theology proffers a hidden eschatological outcome. He bids us to hope—hope with a silver lining, but it is not without dark clouds.



Fifth, we offer a response to Barth's chastising Reformed federalism for giving us, in its positing the notion of a *pactum salutis*, much too sublime an idea to be a Christian thought.

Arguably, it is Barth's paradigm of a Christ who died for all, who redemptively loves all, who reconciles all to God—*de jure* if not *de facto*—that, contrary to the witness of Scripture, serves up a thought much too sublime to be a Christian thought. It is “the Christ” who declares to the goats on his left: “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness” (Matt. 7:23 ESV). It is “the Christ” who declares to the Pharisees: “You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires” (John 8:44 NIV). It is “the Christ” who teaches, by means of a parable, that the king bids the unrighteous: “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matt. 25:41 ESV). It is “the Christ” who renders the verdict that Jerusalem, despite the overtures of divine grace, is a house left desolate (Matt. 23:38), for it is that same Christ who weeps over Jerusalem, desiring to gather her like a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but she is unwilling. That grace, whatever its form, does not conquer all—and a grace that conquers all is truly a sublime thought, but it isn't a thought the Christ shares. And, finally, it is “the Christ” of God, the incarnate One, the *ensarkos*, who says about Judas Iscariot, his betrayer, that it would have been better for such a one not to have been born (Matt. 26:24).

Notwithstanding Barth's fascinating analysis of Judas in the concluding section of his doctrine of election in volume II/2 of the *Church Dogmatics*, his take on Judas is much too sublime to be a Christian thought—at least if such thinking is to track with the clear witness of the apostles.

Barth's theology bears the marks of a scheme—a gloriously inclusive, open-ended, sweet scheme of an abiding grace for all sinners, of a God of grace for all sinners, of a God who, ever and always, from the very first, disposes himself toward sinners in Jesus Christ, a God who is patient, merciful, kind, loving, and determined. There can be no question about the gospel character of Barth's theology or its Christ-focused paradigm. But Barth's paradigm (dare we say) is seemingly more gracious than that of the New Testament witness or the message penned by the apostles themselves. Barth posits a revealed will of God in Jesus Christ *in abstracto*, with a grace inclusive of all, for it fails to reckon with the ministry of Jesus Christ *in concreto*, a grace that excludes some. Jesus Christ, God's revealed Word *ensarkos*, does not revealed himself as a Christ-for-all. John, like the other apostles, testifies of the One who “was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life” (1 John 1:1 NIV). That same John can write that there is sin that leads to death (1 John 5:16, 17), even as he can speak of those whose names are not found in the book of life and are, subsequently, cast into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:15). Barth's paradigm of grace cannot distinctly sound these clear notes of the scriptural witness, whereas the paradigm of grace found in federal theology can play them, if only as a sober bass rhythm in the hallelujah chorus to God's glory in Jesus Christ.

While Barth rightly puts on the breaks and steers clear of an outright universalism, doing so to preserve the utterly gracious character of grace and to withstand the human

tendency to presume upon grace, his doctrine does not reckon adequately with the multiplicity of biblical texts that teach divine punishment, and that teach *eternal* divine punishment as the destiny of those who die in unbelief, i.e., those who reject the overtures of the gospel or otherwise walk in unbelief and idolatry.

The aforementioned texts we cited demonstrate this, and they can be multiplied—texts that draw a different portrait than Barth's. For example, Jesus' teaching regarding the wide gate and road that leads to destruction, and many are on it (Matt. 7:13–14); that Sodom and Gomorrah were more righteous than the cities that walk in unbelief despite Christ's miracles performed in them (Matt. 10:15; 11:22–23); the testimony of Jesus that those who deny him before the world, he will deny before his Father in heaven (Matt. 10:33); that the sin against the Holy Spirit is the unforgivable sin, in this life and the life to come (Matt. 12:32). All these passages seem to point opposite of a second chance sort of doctrine, issuing forth in a possible widening circle of salvation.

Similar texts also come to mind. Consider the parable of the wedding banquet, where the guest without wedding clothes is cast into the outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 22:13); or the parable of the ten virgins, where those who were unprepared are declared unwelcomed and unknown (Matt. 25:12); or the parable of the rich fool, who must give an accounting upon his dying unexpectedly, and no mercy seems to await him (Luke 12:15–21); or the events in Luke 13 where the call goes forth to repent or perish, for upon death the final verdict seems final; the parable of the rich man and Lazarus also appears to point opposite of Barth's hope. Matthew 25:31–46, where the nations are portrayed as being divided as sheep and goats, likewise appears to be incongruous with the import of Barth's doctrine. In the Gospel of John, condemnation is the verdict upon those who have not believed on God's Son (John 3:18). Paul's words to the Athenians suggest that judgment awaits the unrepentant (Acts 17:30–32). The destiny for those who live as enemies of the cross of Christ is, says the apostle, "destruction" (Phil. 3:19). Those who do not know God or obey the gospel of Jesus Christ shall suffer "eternal destruction" (2 Thess. 1:9). Those who abide in sin perish under God's "wrath" (1 Cor. 6:9b, 10; Eph. 5:5, 6). Pivotal texts also include 2 Peter 2, which seriously cautions believers away from the path of false teachers, using the example of fallen angels who are sent to hell (2 Pet. 2:4ff.) and other like warnings. Likewise, Jude contrasts the ungodly (vv. 4–16, 18–19) with the godly (vv. 1b, 20ff.), a contrast that applies to divine disfavor and favor. The book of Revelation is filled with judgment scenes, including the final judgment scene of Rev. 20:11–15, besides the (earlier mentioned) scene of "the book of life."

Similarly, the depiction of the new heaven and the new earth, and the holy city of God is contrasted with those who are called the cowardly and unbelieving, the vile, the murderous, the sexually immoral, the practitioners of the magic arts, the idolaters, and liars—all these were consigned to "the second death," that is, the "lake that burns with fire and sulfur" (Rev. 21:8; cf. Rev. 22:15). Moreover, the wrath of God is depicted as the wrath of the Lamb of God, the Lord Jesus Christ (Rev. 6:16–17); it is he who is feared. The nations of the earth will mourn because of him, for they behold the One who judges all flesh, the One who comes on the clouds of glory to judge the living and the dead (Rev. 1:7; cf. Matt. 24:30; Mark 14:62).

These texts—which are cited with no glee—are enough to make the blatant point that Barth's doctrine, which tilts toward a widening of the circle of God's electing and saving grace, does not take these prominent themes of Scripture with sufficient seriousness.

No doubt, Barth might reply that precisely because he does reckon these texts with full seriousness that, should there be a widening of grace, ultimately inclusive of all persons, it would be a surprise of mercy, for mercy, God's mercy, always is experienced as unexpected. Precisely because (the threatened) damnation of such persons is expected as a genuine threat, grace comes as a miracle—unanticipated and unearned. This should be our prayer for others; this should be our hope. No doubt, too, Barth would gather together all the universalistic tilting texts of Scripture to permit believers this disposition of hope for a final widening of divine grace.<sup>70</sup> That said: for him, it is important to view this matter as a hope, not a certainty, and also to be quite content should God limit the extent and reach of his mercy as reflected in the numerous texts that announce a final and eternal condemnation of sinners whom never come to Christ.<sup>71</sup>

That is as it should be. But Barth's paradigm of grace, with its doctrine of a universalistic atonement, suffers the same objections that all such conceptions suffer, namely, should Christ's work of reconciliation *for all* prove to be inefficacious *for some*, then he suffers for persons in vain. He saves others, but he cannot save some. That is, he dies for some who, nevertheless, meet eternal damnation. He is a Savior *for them*, none the better. In Barth's paradigm, only if there is a final opening up of grace at the end does Christ's atoning work for all find proper fulfillment; and only then does the work of the Holy Spirit and the work of Christ cohere. Thus, without universalism, Barth's doctrine is burdened with a redemption that, though fully accomplished, is not fully applied. Christ's work of salvation for fallen humans gets short-circuited and fails to come to its complete victory. That hardly seems conceivable, for how can a human word veto God's Word in the flesh? How can a human word of rebellion have the last word over the triumphant Word of God that is Jesus Christ the Victor? All of this is to note that, given Barth's conception, unless all people are finally saved, there seems to be an incongruous footnote to the redemptive plan of God—worse, a defeated Christ.

Barth, I think, recognizes this unsettled state of affairs but believes it is in God's hands to resolve or not. It is speculative and unbiblical to try to solve this issue ourselves.

This demonstrates that whatever problems federal theology faces, along with the Reformed orthodoxy that undergirds it, Barth's own paradigm of grace (with God so open and disposed to save all, with Christ for all, with believers hoping for an unforeseen gracious outcome for all) is still a doctrine with its own version of hiddenness. Given that, Barth's revised paradigm of grace suffers under a certain

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<sup>70</sup> Specifically, among others, such texts as Ezekiel 18:32; John 1:29; 3:16 (cf. 3:17; 12:47); Romans 5:15, 18–21; 11:32; 1 Corinthians 15:22; 2 Corinthians 5:14, 15; Ephesians 1:10; Colossians 1:16–20, especially verse 20, 1 Timothy 2:4, 6; 4:10; Titus 2:11; Hebrews 1:2; 2:9b; 2 Peter 3:9; 1 John 2:2.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. *CD*, II/2, 418–19; IV/3.1, 477–78. Cf. Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 105–114.

ambiguity that cannot be resolved, for his theology potentially splits the work of Christ from the work of the Holy Spirit. It is possible that Christ is the elect One and the reprobated One for persons whom the Holy Spirit may never bring to faith, who never cross the frontier from unbelief to faith. “Potentially” because Barth says we must await the final verdict and hope for a new surprise of grace. That it is a surprise demonstrates that it may not be presumed upon and that by appearances it doesn’t seem to be the case. Should it turn out to be so, it certainly isn’t merited by sinners themselves. But if unbelievers do not finally come to faith, if they are not brought to conversion (in the final outcome), if universal salvation is not achieved, then Christ died for *some* sinners in vain; he was reprobated for them in vain; and this is to posit a strange will of God, darker and more hidden, than the classical view he opposes.

Perhaps Barth would have been better off affirming universalism outright as the victory of Christ, as God’s last laugh over unbelief, bringing all to believe and repent (arguing for this in the way of faith); and though appearances to the contrary God will have his banquet hall filled full. This seems a more consistent, if not a more biblical, position. Indeed, such is much too sublime an idea to be a Christian thought.

### 3. Conclusion

From our survey and analysis of Barth’s critique of federal theology and our assessment of that critique, we are in a position to offer a few summary remarks as a conclusion to this theological review.

First, Barth’s contest with federal theology can itself be contested. We have seen that the charge of historicism is grounded in Barth’s own narrow and esoteric definition of divine revelation. He will not permit the federal theologians to treat the biblical materials as able simultaneously to declare the gospel of Christ and reveal the history of God’s relationship with the covenanted, revealing what is in the human heart: faith or unbelief (the effects of the gospel). To be sure, this side of glory every paradigm of grace labors as “seeing through a glass dimly” (1 Cor. 13:12); but that does not disallow drawing conclusions, from the lived life of faith, whether one looks to Jesus Christ in hope or turns from him in unbelief. Such hardly counts as historicism inasmuch as the biblical materials do this very thing and even urge the church to exercise such discernment accordingly.

Second, Barth’s disapproval of the doctrine of a twofold covenant in federal theology—that of the covenant of works in distinction from the covenant of grace—does not necessitate the dualism Barth assigns it. While it would be too bold to say that any and every version of this doctrine is free of dualism, it is fair to say that the consensus view, as reflected in the Westminster Confession of Faith (VII.1), escapes this indictment. The covenant of works is only sensible in light of Christological themes found in the New Testament; it was a doctrine that came to expression through a holistic examination of the scriptural materials of both testaments, such that Christ was never lost from view in the articulation of this doctrine. What is more, it never imposed strict merit as grounding God’s relationship to human beings, for strict merit was impossible by definition. Divine benevolence and love, grace and goodness,

marked this covenant from the beginning; and its eschatological promise was that of freedom and blessedness—the very things Jesus Christ accomplished for those in him.

Third, Barth may likewise be seriously challenged when he declares that federal theology has fallen into mythology in its promotion of the intratrinitarian covenant, the *pactum salutis*, whereby (as Barth depicts it) God agrees within himself to be gracious to man. Instead, it may be asked whether Barth's portrait of that doctrine isn't mythology, for the federal theologians did not hold to some kind of social doctrine of the Trinity, nor did they conceive of God, among the three Persons, having three wills needing to find unity of purpose and assignment. For the federal theologians, God's will is eternal, and God is immutable. Consequently, God never negotiates with himself to be gracious and disposed to sinners. On the contrary, the pactional idea, as the divine foundation to the covenant of grace, which explains its unassailable and testamentary character, pointed to the gracious activity of God as grounded in the Godhead and therefore in God's eternal decree. This is who God eternally is. He is this gracious God in Jesus Christ.

Fourth, Barth's fundamental contest with federal theology, and with classic Reformed theology as a whole, and even with a broad Augustinianism, is its failure to reckon Christ as a Christ-for-all—that is, its failure to present the triune God as disposed to save all people, the whole human race. This is where Barth's paradigm of grace parts ways with the federal theologians, Calvin and Calvinism, and the Augustinian doctrine of predestination in back of it. Interestingly, this does not mean that Barth opts for any kind of Pelagian or Semi-Pelagian or Arminian solutions, or even with some version of hypothetical universalism as found in various strands of Reformed thinking. Barth, instead, blazes his own trail on this matter, positing a Christ-for-all *de jure*, awaiting in hope that *de jure* becomes *de facto*. Barth's paradigm of grace seeks to offer hope for the lost, especially the hopelessly lost, and for those praying for the hopelessly lost, where every avenue for deliverance seems blockaded and every path comes to a dead-end. Barth's paradigm depicts God as disposed, always favorable to all sinners. There is a constant impetus to preach Christ to them, for that Christ is ever disposed toward them.

That beautiful sentiment, however, does not seem to capture the portrait of the gospel in Scripture. Moreover, given Barth's paradigm of grace, is the Christ he disposes toward all coupled with a Holy Spirit for all? Barth's doctrine of the Holy Spirit's work does not immediately correspond in scope with that of Christ. Something of a pall hangs over his "hope."

For his part, Barth doesn't acknowledge the shroud that covers this hope. In any case, he regards his (beclouded?) hope as better than the gloom that covers federal theology's (and classic Reformed theology's) gospel of grace under a hidden decree of election and reprobation.

What is hidden in the federal view is, without question, the saving scope of Christ's work of reconciliation, known to God, to be sure, but orchestrated according to his eternal decree. Federal theology, therefore, calls believers to look to Christ for salvation; the call of the gospel is to believe in him. No persons need doubt that Christ is theirs *in the way of faith*—in believing in Christ, they can know Christ is *theirs*.

Assuredly, Christ's fully accomplished work of redemption will be fully applied by the Spirit of Christ.

What is hidden in Barth's approach is not whether Christ is for me; no, what is hidden, instead, and without question, is whether the Spirit of Christ is for me. Christ has done all—but he has not necessarily—maybe yes, maybe no—assigned the Spirit to bring me to him. He has not appointed the Spirit, assuredly, to bring to faith all for whom he died. That is a shroud of its own, hidden and unknown. It is, at best, a wait-and-see.

We observe, therefore, that all paradigms of grace face what we may call distinctive pinch-points. Indeed, both Reformed federalism and Barth's theology encounter unsolvable puzzles that call for humility, like seeing through a glass dimly.

Federal theology's pinch-point (as well as that of Reformed orthodoxy and the confessional consensus that defines it) centers on the well-meant offer of the gospel, bidding at least some sinners to believe in a Christ who (theoretically or possibly) did not die for them, bidding them to look for rescue in a Christ who, though he loves them as God's image-bearers, doesn't give himself for them redemptively. This is, perhaps, the focal point of Barth's disapproval of federal theology's paradigm of grace. God is closed off, redemptively, to a segment of fallen humanity. There is no good news for some sinners, whereas, as he sees it, his own paradigm of grace reveals God as always disposed in favor and love toward all people. God is by nature, by definition, what he is as revealed in Jesus Christ, the Word *ensarkos*—humble, patient, longsuffering, and gracious. But this is a Christ *in abstracto* from the apostles' portrait of him.

By contrast, the pinch-point in Barth's theology is that his Christ-*for-all* (such that *all* are under divine favor, *all* are elected in Christ, for Christ has been reprobated for *all*) may, in spite of all of that, prove to be a Christ-*for-some*. This is where classic Reformed theology, and the federal theology woven into it, cannot walk with Barth. Not only is his Christ-*for-all* at odds with significant themes within the biblical materials, it also introduces an uncertainty relative to the believer's assurance. Is Christ mine *de jure* but perhaps not *de facto*?

If federal theology threatens a dark corridor of a hidden decree of God wherein some are eternally rejected without Christ, Barth's theology threatens a dark corridor of an atoning work of Christ *possibly* ineffectual. Although Christ dies and reconciles all sinners to himself—some *may* sin in perpetuity against this grace for them. Human rebellion *may* outmaneuver divine mercy. Sin *may* trump the work of Christ in spite of Christ's work against sin. And the circle of church, drawn by the Holy Spirit in his efficacious work to produce frontier-crossings, bringing sinners from unbelief to faith, *may* prove not to encompass all for whom Christ died and in whom all are elect.

*May* remains the key word in Barth's paradigm of grace—a *may* which must have no hint of presumption in it but which, nonetheless, desires to play a melody of hope. But that is a melody that ends either as a universal song of glory (for all are finally saved) or as a discordant gong (for Christ died in vain; the "Yes" and "Amen" in Jesus Christ proves false). Barth cannot escape this possibility.

Barth's paradigm of grace has its own hiddenness. As such, there is still no peeking.