

fullness of what the New Testament has to say about Christian engagement with economic forces in a fallen world. If one were to follow this line, one would need to say much more about what the principalities and powers are and wherein their power consists. If mammon is just such a power, an intractable force that afflicts the socio-economic well-being of a fallen humanity, I question whether it is adequately named merely as a human capacity run amok, as Barth does in the passages I cited. Is there something about the experience of mammon and its power to wreck human life that might point to some sort of cosmic disorder that transcends mere human agency?

Following the Deacon Jesus in the Prophetic Diaconate

Toward an Apocalyptic “Third Way” Beyond
Barth and Tanner

—By David W. Congdon

SCOTT JACKSON’S LUCID ANALYSIS of Tanner’s theology in relation to Barth points out the way each theologian criticizes free market capitalism as an idolatrous worship of mammon. While both ground their criticisms in christology, Tanner goes beyond Barth in using her noncompetitive-incarnational model of divine and human agency as the basis for her economic counterproposal to the competitive economics that currently rules the day. Where Barth’s criticism of capitalism remains formal and abstract—revealed, as she points out, by the fact that his criticisms in *KD* 3.3 and *KD* 4.4 are essentially identical despite their location in different theological loci³⁹—Tanner’s is quite concrete and specific. Her christologically grounded ethics is thus a positive supplement to the christocentric dogmatic revolution that Barth began. This view is reinforced by Tanner herself in the paper she gave at the 2008 Karl Barth Conference at Princeton Theological Seminary.

39. Tanner, “Barth,” 183–85. Tanner makes the point even more strongly by including Barth’s pre-dialectical 1911 article, “Jesus Christ and the Movement for Social Justice.” She claims that “the earlier article more clearly bases its judgments directly on the gospel—ironically enough” (186).

Tanner begins her essay on Barth by referring to his famous proposal for a “third way” beyond East and West. In what follows I wish to respond to Jackson by proposing a “third way” beyond Tanner and Barth. I will do so in two parts. First, I will examine an alternative synthesis beyond Tanner’s noncompetitive soteriology of incarnation and Barth’s competitive soteriology of crucifixion. Second, I will explore what this alternative might look like by appropriating insights from Barth’s development of the prophetic office of Christ. In his conclusion Jackson says, “I wonder how such an understanding of the powers [in Barth] might be integrated with Tanner’s own incarnational framework by, let’s say, a more explicit retrieval of what a dialectical theology might say about the problem of idolatry.” This essay constitutes my brief attempt to provide an answer.

1. Via Tertia: Apocalyptic Noncompetitiveness

Jackson rightly points out that Barth views mammon as a “lordless power,” an aspect of the sinful and fallen creation that enslaves humanity in systems of oppression, and which God has decisively judged and nullified in Jesus Christ. What this means, crucially, is that Barth’s “solution” to the problem of mammon is essentially *competitive*, rather than noncompetitive. Barth locates the source of an anti-capitalistic Christian ethic in the competitive arena of Christ’s *crucifixion*, where God combats the lordless powers and emerges the victor in the light of the resurrection. By contrast, Tanner locates the source of her ethic in the noncontrastive, gift-giving union of divinity and humanity in the Son’s *incarnation*.⁴⁰ The difference this makes becomes evident in her doctrine of the atonement. Tanner thoroughly rejects the substitutionary and satisfaction models favored by the reformers and appropriated by Barth, and opts instead for the Greek patristic (especially Athanasian-Gregorian-Cyrilline) view wherein the locus of redemption is found in the deifying assumption of human flesh. Her view is thus an ontological, rather than forensic, version of the “happy exchange.”⁴¹ Tanner’s view is attractive because it frees atonement from the legal, penitential, and violent logic that severely hampers most reformational accounts of salvation.

I take it for granted that both Tanner and Barth’s emphases are worth retaining: Tanner rightly focuses on the noncompetitive relation between God and the world, while Barth rightly focuses on God’s competitive (and victorious) confrontation with both personal and systemic human sin.

40. Tanner, *Economy*, 64–5.

41. Tanner, “Incarnation,” 41.

Tanner highlights the way God's advent in Son and Spirit is a nonviolent presence in which creaturely life comes to its proper perfection; Barth highlights the fact that God's advent confronts our sinful disobedience as a radical disruption. To put it another way, in Barth we hear God's No against the power of mammon, whereas in Tanner we hear God's Yes toward a gift-giving economy of grace. If there's anything that dialectical theology has taught us, it is that we need both the No and the Yes. In this case, we need both Barth and Tanner, though that will require finding a "third way" between and beyond them.

I suggest here that this "third way" will require thinking creatively about an *apocalyptic noncompetitiveness*—that is, a noncompetitive theology of God's apocalyptic interruption in Jesus Christ. This is obviously a paradoxical manner of speaking, but only in this way can we bear faithful witness to the God who is present with us *as* the crucified one. With Tanner (*contra* Barth), we need to replace the penal conceptions of the atonement with the notion of a superabundant divine self-donation in Jesus Christ which exposes and subverts the fallen logic of debt and redemptive violence. But notions of assumption and deification—which Tanner admits trade "on a Platonic reification of universal terms such as 'humanity'"—need to be jettisoned.⁴² I agree with Barth here in seeking to overcome the abstract metaphysical language of *natura* or *physis*, though I suggest we need to go still further than Barth was able or willing to go.

In my "third way," God's self-donation is not an ontological *communicatio idiomatum*, but rather a kerygmatic event in which the "word of the cross" (1 Cor 1:18) confronts us with a judgment on our sin that simultaneously grants us unconditional forgiveness. The gift of God is the gift of an apocalyptic interruption by Christ through his Spirit that frees us for a subversive counterpolitics. It is noncompetitive in that this interruption is not a miraculous intervention but paradoxically coincides with and occurs within our social historicity. In the modality of faith, we encounter the word of Christ in the word of our neighbor. "Jesus Christ is *the* neighbor!" as Barth declared to a crowd gathered at Princeton Seminary in 1962.⁴³ Christ's gracious judgment confronts us in our contingent historical situation, disrupting our bondage to systemic patterns of idolatry and opening us up to a new future of freedom from mammon. In short, I suggest that we unite Tanner's gift-giving focus with a thoroughly nonmetaphysical, apocalyptic-kerygmatic *theologia crucis*. The gift is not an abstract ontological exchange,

42. *Ibid.*, 45.

43. Barth, *Gespräche 1959–1962*, 515.

but rather a contemporary encounter with God that funds a subversive theopolitics in every new *hic et nunc*.

2. The Deacon Jesus and the Prophetic Diaconate

As we have seen, Tanner focuses on Christ as the incarnate Son of God—with an emphasis on the ontological relation between deity and humanity—as the basis for her theopolitical insights. In his critical engagement with Tanner, Christopher Holmes focuses on Barth's image of Christ as the "royal man." Holmes rightly and helpfully points out how Barth's deployment of this notion is economically provocative (since Barth connects Christ's kingly office to his role as a revolutionary partisan of the poor), while absolutely free from all ideology and partisan politics (since Christ the king transcends all this-worldly conflicts with a royal freedom).⁴⁴ On both counts Holmes is on solid ground in Barth, but the recourse to divine freedom on its own is insufficient. If Tanner's focus on the noncompetitive presence of divinity can be correlated with *KD* 4.1, and if Holmes develops his proposal on the basis of *KD* 4.2, then I would like to offer my own "third way" on the basis of Barth's christology in *KD* 4.3.

To develop an apocalyptic account of the economy in light of Barth I suggest we take up the insights in the third part-volume of his doctrine of reconciliation, where he develops his understanding of Christ's prophetic office as the true witness. The implications of this section for a theology of the economy are more indirect than other sections—especially compared to his early socialist writings and his final *KD* 4.4 fragment on the "lordless powers" (§78.2)—but they are possibly more profound. To see why this is so, we first need to understand what Barth is doing in this part-volume. In *KD* 4.1 he develops his doctrine of Christ's divinity in relation to the priestly office; in *KD* 4.2 he develops his doctrine of Christ's humanity in relation to the kingly office; here in *KD* 4.3 he develops his doctrine of the unity of Christ's divinity and humanity in relation to the missionary vocation of Christ within the world as the prophetic bearer of the good news. To use an old metaphor, the relation is not "vertical" (as it was in *KD* 4.1–2), but rather "horizontal." The divine action is neither incarnation nor exaltation, but rather now mission. The community called into existence by this prophetic witness thus corresponds to Christ through its own life of missionary witness.⁴⁵ It is no accident that *KD* 4.3 includes Barth's potent notion of

44. Holmes, "Karl Barth," 198–215, esp. 207–12.

45. Here I wholly concur with Holmes's point that "the fight Barth encourages is of a very particular kind: it is a fight rooted in witness; indeed, the fight of the Christian

“secular parables of the kingdom” (§69.2) and his powerful exposition of the church as the “community for the world” (§72.2).

What makes this material distinctively *apocalyptic* is how Barth unfolds the worldly significance of Christ in terms of his *victory* over the powers of death and oppression (§69.3). Jesus Christ comes to the world as the disruptive event of God’s prophetic word, not as the giver of a gift of ontological participation. “The prophetic word of Jesus Christ declares positively,” Barth states, “that in the midst of the present there is the *future*—or more precisely: the arrival, advent, appearance, and incursion . . . of a new humanity.”⁴⁶ This irruptive appearance of new humanity in Christ retains the competitive dimension, insofar as Christ’s prophetic word addresses us in a way we cannot anticipate and that unsettles our existence. But it is equally noncompetitive in the sense that “all that lives and moves and stirs . . . lies in the realm of [Christ’s] power” (130/116) and for this reason “there is no secularity [*Profanität*] abandoned by [Christ] or withdrawn from his control” (133/119). Jesus is the victor, as Barth argues in §69.3, precisely in such a way that he is present to us in the neighbor. It is precisely this idea that Barth raises in his remarkable discussion of the church’s service in the form of the diaconate in §72.4.

The diaconate is the tenth of twelve forms of the community’s service—not “ministry,” as the English mistranslates the German *Dienst*. Barth begins by giving a fairly formal definition of this task, but he quickly decides to describe more concretely “the form of the action of the community in which . . . it aids and helps the physically and materially *needy* both within and outside their circle” (1021/890). After a brief paragraph describing the need for deacons who uniquely manifest the community’s calling to service, he goes on to discuss the christological basis for the diaconate. He does so through a very creative combination of the parable of the sheep and goats from Matthew 25 and the parable of the Good Samaritan from Luke 10:

Now we come to the *material point*: in the diaconate, the community solidarizes itself with the *least of these*, with the ἐλάχιστοι (Matt 25.40, 45), with those who are in obscurity and are not seen, with those who are pushed to the margin and perhaps the very outer margin of the life of human society, with fellow-creatures who temporarily at least, and perhaps permanently, are useless and insignificant and perhaps even burdensome and destructive. In the diaconate these human beings are recognized

community over and against the lordless powers takes shape as witness.” Ibid., 210.

46. *KD* 4.3:282/245–46. Future citations from vol. 4.3 will be parenthetical, with the German page first followed by the English. All translations are my own.

to be brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ according to the significant tenor of the parable of the Last Judgment (Matt 25.31f.), and therefore the community confesses Jesus Christ himself as finally the hungry, thirsty, homeless, naked, sick, imprisoned human being, and the royal human being as such. In the diaconate the community makes plain its witness to Christ, just as he commanded, by fulfilling the service of the Samaritan in fellowship with the one who has fallen into the hands of thieves—a service fulfilled with him who was the Neighbor of this lost human being. In the diaconate it goes and does likewise (Luke 10.29f.). And woe to it if it does not, if its witness is not service in this elementary sense! (1021/891)

Barth's creative interweaving of these two parables results in the remarkable conclusion that Jesus Christ is both the one who has fallen among thieves (by virtue of his self-identification with the poor, naked, and homeless) *and* the true Neighbor who cares for this person. This is not simply the "royal man" here, even though Barth makes reference to that notion in this passage. This is Jesus as the paradigmatic deacon of the world, such that the diaconate is called into existence in order to "follow the deacon Jesus," as J. C. Hoekendijk puts it.⁴⁷

Barth does not leave it there. The christological point becomes the basis for the corresponding action of the community. The "cosmic character" of Christ's reconciling work translates into the sociopolitical work of Christ's obedient witnesses (1022/891). The community attends to people "in the totality of their human existence," which means that the need of individuals is "grounded in certain disorders of the *whole* of human social life [*Zusammenleben*]" (1023/892). The diaconate is distinguished by the fact that its eyes are open to these disorders and it takes responsibility for them. The community's task is to declare its recognition of these disorders for the purpose of altering the society for the good of others: "with its proclamation of the gospel [the community] calls the world back to its senses regarding social injustice and its consequences in order to change those conditions and relations" (1023/892). He then concludes by stating, "The open *word* of Christian social criticism will need to intervene in this situation in order that Christian action can be given a new space and a new meaning" (1023/892).

In themselves, these statements are not a revolutionary theology of the economy. But when read in light of Barth's larger argument they contain the seeds of a possible way forward beyond Tanner and Barth. First, it is

47. Hoekendijk, *Church*, 143.

important to recognize that Barth's refusal to endorse any particular economic ideology is grounded in his conviction that theology is a thoroughly contextual and missionary enterprise. Theology does not trade in universal worldviews but only in contingent, contextual reflections on the gospel within a particular historical situation. For this reason, a theologian cannot declare in advance and in the abstract what a community must proclaim in its "open word of Christian social criticism," nor for that matter can she state where parables of the kingdom will appear. This is a correction to both Tanner and Holmes. Tanner is right to question why Barth's criticism of capitalism is basically identical in different doctrinal loci, but Holmes is right to point out that Barth's apparent formalism is due to a theological conviction regarding the dialectical relation between God's word and human words. That being said, we can affirm Barth's point regarding the nonideological nature of the community's prophetic witness while still affirming Tanner's point that the community can and must make concrete claims. Barth's discussion of the gospel's sociopolitical implications is in some sense formal by design, so that others (in certain cases Barth himself) can concretize the dogmatic claims in relation to specific situations. Tanner thus has every right to do precisely this within the context of the current regime of credit-capitalism in the United States. Her attempt to connect dogmatic theological claims to a specific political situation by making concrete suggestions for reforming the society is the proper extension of Barth's project, *pace* Holmes. Against Tanner, however, we ground this concretization not in the *being* of Christ as the noncompetitive unity of divinity and humanity, but rather in the prophetic *action* of Christ in his apocalyptic inbreaking into each new situation.

Moreover, if we read Barth's discussion of the diaconate in light of his broader understanding of the covenant-creation relation (*KD* 3.1) and his discussion of secular parables, we can tease out a dogmatic basis for making precisely the kind of positive economic proposals that Tanner is developing. Here we must be brief. As is well-known, Barth understands creation as the external basis of the covenant; the covenant ontologically determines the entire created order. It is this ontological grounding of the creation in the covenant of grace that makes possible the unanticipatable manifestation of secular parables of Christ's kingdom. On this basis Barth orders Christ, the community, and the state in ever-wider concentric circles. Each circle comes to correspond (i.e., actively exist in an analogous relation) to the inner circle. So the church community corresponds to Christ, while the state is called to correspond to the church community and thus to Christ.⁴⁸

48. Barth develops these ideas in his essays "Justification and Justice" ("Church and

The actualization of the latter is the grace of God made concrete through the work and witness of the community as it calls out social injustice and declares new ways in which the secular economy might bear witness to the economy of Christ's reign.

If we add to this cosmic order the discussion of the "deacon Jesus" and the prophetic diaconate, we come up with something like the following. The Christian community's primary calling is to a life of faithful and self-giving service in obedient discipleship (*Nachfolge*, literally "following-after") to the deacon Jesus. Jesus goes ahead of the community as the true prophetic witness and the agent of God's inbreaking apocalypse. His ever-new advent involves both his paradoxical identification with the materially poor and his caring for the poor through the active mobilization of others to be neighbors in correspondence to him as the true Neighbor for all. God's neighborliness attends to the totality of our existence in the world, and this entails an active revolution of the socioeconomic systems that keep people in material bondage. The church—not at all to be identified with the institutional religion of Christianity!—comes into existence when and where people's eyes are opened to this divine revolution and are empowered by the Spirit to participate in it. The community of faith is thus called to engage in a process of prayerful discernment regarding both social criticism and prophetic proclamation in relation to its concrete historical situation.

By attending to the kerygmatic word of God's economy of grace, the community freely speaks out against the systemic injustices that maintain a demonic disorder of society. But its word of negation is always included within a more expansive and embracing word of affirmation—not an affirmation of the status quo but of a new socioeconomic order. This prophetic proclamation will necessarily involve recognizing where "secular parables" of God's economy appear within the world and, if possible, participating in this parabolic moment. A current example today of such a parable is the Occupy Wall Street movement.⁴⁹ This movement is by no means a direct manifestation of the divine economy, but it can be and often is a parabolic or indirect witness to God's revolutionary order. In addition to discerning where such parables are present in the world, the community will also necessarily engage in creative efforts when the current parables are absent or insufficient. This might involve mobilizing local social and economic initiatives where none exist, petitioning state leaders with proposals for economic action (e.g., Tanner's proposal for more public spaces), and even engaging

State" in the standard English translation) and "The Christian Community and Civil Community," both collected in Barth, *Community*, 101–89.

49. Cf. McMaken, "Why I Support." This article grew out of a talk given the previous year, a month and a day after the Occupy movement began: See McMaken, "Religion."

in mass protests against injustice and on behalf of societal changes. The community of faithful witnesses to Jesus Christ must see its life of discipleship as taking place in and through these concrete and prophetic practices of sociopolitical engagement. In this way it will be an apocalyptic community corresponding to the apocalypse of God's reign in Christ. That is to say, it will be the prophetic diaconate living for the world in faithful obedience to the revolutionary mission of the deacon Jesus.