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Desperatio Fiducialis

Barth and Bultmann on the Anthropological Significance of Revelation

1 Barth, Bultmann, and the Early Luther

Scholars frequently analyze the divergence between Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann in terms of their theological traditions – Reformed and Lutheran, respectively – and for good reason, since Barth himself frames their differences in these terms. In his 1952 “attempt to understand him,” Barth considers whether Bultmann is best understood as an apologist, historian, or philosopher before finally proposing that “the nearest solution will be that Bultmann is simply a Lutheran – *sui generis*, of course!” Barth sees Bultmann’s ethics as cohering well with the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms and warns that “those who throw stones at Bultmann should be careful lest they accidentally hit Luther, who is also hovering somewhere in the background.”¹ Eberhard Jüngel furthers this line of thinking when he connects Bultmann’s concept of paradoxical identity with the Lutheran *est* and argues that “what finally separates Barth from Bultmann is the same reservation which Barth also has towards Luther’s teaching on the Lord’s Supper.”² Christophe Chalamet pushes this further still by arguing that each develops a confessionally different approach to dialectical theology: Bultmann with a Lutheran Law-Gospel dialectic and Barth with a Reformed Gospel-Law dialectic.³ The distinction between Barth and Bultmann along confessional lines has much to commend itself as an explanation of their later disagreements, but it has the disadvantage of oversimplifying Lutheran thought

1 Karl Barth, *Rudolf Bultmann: Ein Versuch, ihn zu verstehen* (Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1952), 46–48; ET: Karl Barth, “Rudolf Bultmann – An Attempt to Understand Him,” in *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, vol. 2, ed. Hans-Werner Bartsch (London: S.P.C.K., 1962), 121–23. Barth indicates that this is his guiding thesis toward the start of his essay, where he says “perhaps we should call him in all essentials a Lutheran, though, of course, a Lutheran *sui generis*, and on a higher plane!” (Barth, *Rudolf Bultmann*, 10; ET, 90).

2 Eberhard Jüngel, *God’s Being Is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth. A Paraphrase*, trans. John Webster (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), 74.

3 See Christophe Chalamet, *Dialectical Theologians: Wilhelm Herrmann, Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann* (Zürich: TVZ, 2005), 195–97.

and thereby missing the Lutheran aspects of Barth's own theology, particularly in his early dialectical years. Chalamet, for instance, suggests that "since the events of 1914, perhaps without fully realizing it, Barth had already 'become who he was', namely a Reformed theologian,"⁴ and as true as this may be in certain respects we should not overlook the fact that in 1921 Barth told Martin Rade that "I have recently been moving rapidly towards Lutheranism in more than one aspect."⁵

There is another way of understanding Barth and Bultmann, namely, as representing two different trajectories *internal* to Lutheran theology. One way to illustrate this is by looking at the way each develops a different insight from the writings of the early Luther. Bultmann rarely cited Luther directly, but one of the few passages he quoted repeatedly is a line from Luther's *scholia* in his 1515–1516 *Lectures on Romans*: "And so God, in going out of himself, brings it about that we go into ourselves, and through knowledge of him he brings us to knowledge of ourselves" (*Et ita Deus per suum exire nos facit ad nos ipsos introire et per sui cognitionem infert nobis et nostri cognitionem*).⁶ These lectures, published in 1908 and edited by Johannes Ficker, formed a key basis for the Luther Renaissance that emerged during the Weimar period in response to the quadricentennial of the Reformation. While it is hard to say when Bultmann actually read the *scholia*, he first quotes this line in his 1927 essay on "The Concept of Revelation in the New Testament," and in the citation he includes a reference to Barth's 1927 *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf* to complement Luther.⁷ In

4 Chalamet, 96.

5 Karl Barth to Martin Rade, 31 January 1921, in Karl Barth and Martin Rade, *Karl Barth – Martin Rade: Ein Briefwechsel*, ed. Christoph Schwöbel (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1981), 154.

6 *WA*, 56:229.20–22, *scholion* on Rom 3:5. Bultmann was possibly referring to the first interpretation of this text in the Luther Renaissance by Rudolf Hermann in "Das Verhältnis von Rechtfertigung und Gebet nach Luthers Auslegung von Röm. 3 in der Römerbriefvorlesung [1926]" in *Gesammelte Studien zur Theologie Luthers und der Reformation* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960), 11–43.

7 Rudolf Bultmann, *Der Begriff der Offenbarung im Neuen Testament* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1929), 38, 48n11. Reprinted in Rudolf Bultmann, "Der Begriff der Offenbarung im Neuen Testament [1929]," in *Glauben und Verstehen: Gesammelte Aufsätze*, 4 vols. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1933–1965), 3:1–34, at 29; hereafter *Glauben und Verstehen* (*GuV*). Future references to Bultmann's essay will be to the *GuV* version. See Karl Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf*, ed. Gerhard Sauter, Gesamtausgabe 2.14 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1982), 516. Bultmann originally wrote the lecture in 1927 in preparation to present at the spring holiday course held by the Marburg theological faculty each year in coordination with the Hessian pastorate, which was to occur that year on April 19–21. He apparently expected it to be a comedic event, since he told both Heidegger and Gogarten that it would likely be a "satyr play." He tells Gogarten that, because he will be presenting first, "I will throw some sticks between the legs of the following speakers." See Rudolf Bultmann

1935 he quotes the phrase “through knowledge of him he brings us to knowledge of ourselves” in a letter to Barth himself, but by this time he recognizes it no longer represents Barth’s own theology. Bultmann in fact acknowledges that Barth will likely “smell heresy” in his *Glauben und Verstehen*.⁸ He uses Luther’s statement two further times: in his 1940 essay on “The Question of Natural Revelation” (which Bultmann originally published in 1941 with the programmatic lecture on demythologizing, “New Testament and Mythology”) and in the 1952 response to his critics, “On the Problem of Demythologizing.”⁹

Barth, by contrast, latches on to a different statement from Luther. On 8 April 1516, at the same time he was giving his *Lectures on Romans*, Luther wrote a letter to Georg Spennlein, an Augustinian friar at the Memmingen monastery. While the letter is most famous for Luther’s line that “Christ dwells only in sinners,” Barth picked up on a statement a few lines later in which Luther concludes: “Therefore you will only find peace in him [i. e., Christ] through a confident despair in yourself and your works” (*Igitur non nisi in illo, per fiducialem desperationem tui et operum tuorum, pacem invenies*).¹⁰ The phrase “confident despair” (*desperatio fiducialis*) – translated into German as “getroste Verzweiflung” – appears roughly twenty times in Barth’s writings between 1920 and 1953.¹¹ Barth

to Friedrich Gogarten, 3 April 1927, in Rudolf Bultmann and Friedrich Gogarten, *Briefwechsel 1921–1967*, ed. Hermann Götz Göckeritz (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 105; Rudolf Bultmann to Martin Heidegger, 3 April 1927, in Rudolf Bultmann and Martin Heidegger, *Briefwechsel 1925–1975*, ed. Andreas Grossmann and Christof Landmesser (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 28. Unfortunately, it was cancelled at the last minute because there were only ten registrants (Bultmann to Heidegger, 18 April 1927, in *ibid.*, 31). Bultmann instead gave the lecture at the following year’s holiday course on 12 April 1928 (Bultmann to Heidegger, 11 April 1928, in *ibid.*, 60). He gave the lecture again on October 9 at the holiday course in Malente, held on 9–12 October 1928 (Bultmann to Heidegger, 29 October 1928, in *ibid.*, 73n7).

8 Rudolf Bultmann to Karl Barth, 10 December 1935, in Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann, *Briefwechsel 1911–1966*, ed. Bernd Jaspert, 2nd ed., Gesamtausgabe 5.1 (Zürich: TVZ, 1994), 161.

9 See Rudolf Bultmann, “Die Frage der natürlichen Offenbarung,” in *GuV*, 2:79–104, at 99; cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *Offenbarung und Heilsgeschehen* (Munich: A. Lempp, 1941). See Rudolf Bultmann, “Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung,” in *Kerygma und Mythos, Band II: Diskussion und Stimmen zum Problem der Entmythologisierung*, ed. Hans-Werner Bartsch (Hamburg-Volksdorf: H. Reich, 1952), 179–208, at 200.

10 Martin Luther, *Briefwechsel*, 18 vols., Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe (Weimar: H. Böhlau Nachfolger, 1930–1985), 1:36.33–34. Cf. Martin Luther, *Dr. Martin Luther’s Briefwechsel*, ed. Ernst Ludwig Enders, 18 vols., Martin Luther’s sämtliche Werke in beiden Originalsprachen (Frankfurt am Main: Schriften-Niederlage des Evangel. Vereins, 1884–1923), 1:29.46–48.

11 Barth uses the translation of Martin Rade and others in Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke für das christliche Haus*, ed. Georg Buchwald, et al., 8 vols. (Braunschweig: C. A. Schwetschke, 1889–1892), 8:313–14. Interestingly, in his 1749 edition of Luther’s letters, Johann Georg Walch (mis)translates “per fiducialem desperationem” as “durch völlige Verzweiflung,” replacing “confi-

first used the phrase as the title of a sermon on 20 June 1920, while he was in the midst of refining his new theology and about to revise his Romans commentary.¹² Barth's sermon on Reformation Sunday that year (November 7) was an extended reflection on the letter and quoted at length from it. In the sermon he says that the Reformation is an attempt to answer the question, "How does one start to become a Christian?," or more generally, "How does one become a true, living human being?"¹³ Both Paul and Luther, he says, answer this question by first acknowledging who we are, namely, "a lost and damned sinner, incapable of good, handed over to death and worthy of death."¹⁴ For this reason our only hope is "*Christ, the crucified one,*" who "*dwelled among sinners* in the deepest affliction" and thereby shows us that we are "*saved by God, held by God, belong to God.*" It is in this context that Barth refers to the "confident despair" that points us away from ourselves to Christ, in whom we hear God's yes to us.¹⁵ If there is any consistent theme throughout the entirety of Barth's dialectical theology, it is this pointing away from ourselves to God's action in Christ. Luther's "getroste Verzweiflung" appears subsequently in numerous writings: a letter to Eduard Thurneysen on 27 July 1921; the second edition of *Der Römerbrief*; his dispute with Paul Althaus in 1922 over Christian social ethics; his 1922 essay on "The Problem of Ethics in the Present Situation"; the 1927 *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf*; the Münster *Ethik* of 1928–1929; and finally *Die kirchliche Dogmatik* I/2 and IV/1.¹⁶

dent despair" with "complete despair." See Martin Luther, *Dr. Martin Luthers Sämtliche Schriften (1740–1753)*, ed. Johann Georg Walch, 23 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1880–1910), 21.1:21.

12 See Karl Barth, *Predigten 1920*, ed. Hermann Schmidt, Gesamtausgabe 1.42 (Zürich: TVZ, 2005), 224–35.

13 Barth, 369.

14 Barth, 371.

15 Barth, 373–74. Emphasis in original unless otherwise noted.

16 See Karl Barth to Eduard Thurneysen, 27 July 1921, in Karl Barth and Eduard Thurneysen, *Briefwechsel, Band I: 1913–1921*, ed. Eduard Thurneysen, Gesamtausgabe 5.3 (Zürich: TVZ, 1973), 506; Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Zweite Fassung) 1922*, ed. Cornelis van der Kooi and Katja Tolstaja, Gesamtausgabe 2.47 (Zürich: TVZ, 2010), 61; Karl Barth, "Grundfragen der christlichen Sozialethik: Auseinandersetzung mit Paul Althaus (1922)," in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1922–1925*, ed. Holger Finze (Zürich: TVZ, 1990), 39–57, at 47–48; Karl Barth, "Das Problem der Ethik in der Gegenwart (1922)," in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1922–1925*, ed. Holger Finze (Zürich: TVZ, 1990), 98–143, at 140; Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf*, 87; Karl Barth, *Ethik II: Vorlesung Münster, Wintersemester 1928/1929, wiederholt in Bonn, Wintersemester 1930/31*, ed. Dietrich Braun, Gesamtausgabe 2.10 (Zürich: TVZ, 1978), 19, 260; Karl Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*, 4 vols. (Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag A.G., 1932–1970), 1/2:409; IV/1:692–93, 700, 707, 710.

Barth and Bultmann's respective uses of the early Luther highlight, more clearly than almost anything else, that their diverging approaches to dialectical theology stem from the same root and cannot be pitted against each other as easily as many scholars would like. The divide between the "Reformed Barth" and the "Lutheran Bultmann" is attractive as a theory of everything, but it ultimately fails to illuminate the underlying logic animating their theologies, neither of which comfortably fits its given category. A more productive approach is to see Barth and Bultmann developing two aspects or possibilities internal to the same Lutheran family tree. Both theologians structure their dialectical theologies around a broadly Lutheran doctrine of justification as the event of divine grace, but Bultmann highlights the question of epistemology (how do we come to know God in this event?) while Barth highlights the question of soteriology (how are we reconciled to God in this event?). This difference in perspective leads Bultmann to identify theology paradoxically with anthropology, but it leads Barth to subordinate, or even sublate, anthropology within theology.

We will explore the difference between Barth and Bultmann by looking at their respective doctrines of revelation in the year 1927, comparing Bultmann's lecture on "The Concept of Revelation in the New Testament" with Barth's *Christliche Dogmatik* – to which Bultmann positively refers. Both works refer to the early Luther in ways that foreshadow the insurmountable differences that would become manifest in later years.

2 *Ad Nos Ipsos Introire*: Bultmann's Doctrine of Existential Revelation

Bultmann's first use of Luther's line from the *Lectures on Romans* occurs in his 1927 lecture, "The Concept of Revelation in the New Testament," the nearest thing to a systematic account of his theology that Bultmann had produced to that point. The document warrants a close reading for two reasons: (a) it clarifies the basic compatibility of Bultmann's dialectical theology with Barth's regarding the character of revelation as an *event*; and (2) it highlights the aspect of Bultmann's project that most concerned Barth, namely, the *preunderstanding* of revelation. The latter issue eventually led Barth to dissociate himself from the other dialectical theologians, even though Bultmann's position was still in flux and more nuanced than Barth recognized.

2.1 Revelation as Existential and Eschatological Event

Ernst Baasland has correctly observed that “throughout all of his work Bultmann wanted to establish the essence of religion or of faith. This issue – whether explicitly or implicitly – is the point of continuity in his development.”¹⁷ In his early years Bultmann defined this essence in terms of religious experience along the lines of his teacher, Wilhelm Herrmann. Following his turn to dialectical theology in the 1920s – catalyzed by his encounter with Friedrich Gogarten’s 1920 Eisenach lecture, “The Crisis of Culture,” and the second edition of Karl Barth’s *Römerbrief* in 1922 – Bultmann rejected the experiential, religious essence of liberal theology but did not have a clearly defined positive norm with which to replace it. The error of liberalism, as Bultmann understood it, was attempting to discover the essence of Christianity by means of the general, scientific methods of historical research, seen most notably in the nineteenth-century quests for the historical Jesus, which Bultmann refers to as “Christ according to the flesh.”¹⁸ The object of theology that results from using these methods is something given within the world and is thus incompatible with the eschatological transcendence of God, as theorized by dialectical theology.¹⁹ The focus of Bultmann’s earliest dialectical writings is therefore on opposing talk of God, or anything else, as a given object – *eine Gegebenheit*. His guiding thesis is “the constantly repeated statement of Barth and Gogarten: There is no direct knowledge of God; God is not a given object.”²⁰ This negative epistemological criterion becomes the basis for Bultmann’s early theological program.

17 Ernst Baasland, *Theologie und Methode: Eine historiographische Analyse der Frühschriften Rudolf Bultmanns* (Wuppertal: Brockhaus, 1992), 19. Original emphasis removed.

18 Rudolf Bultmann, “Zur Frage der Christologie,” in *GuV*, 1:85–113, at 101.

19 Bultmann summarized the position of early dialectical theology well in his 1926 statement: “For God is the ‘wholly other’ – not, however, in the sense of R. Otto, which is based on mysticism, but in the sense of early Christian *eschatology* (expectation of the end).” Rudolf Bultmann, “Die evangelisch-theologische Wissenschaft in der Gegenwart [1926],” in *Theologie als Kritik: Ausgewählte Rezensionen und Forschungsberichte*, ed. Matthias Dreher and Klaus W. Müller (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 156–66, at 161. Bultmann makes this statement in the context of presenting Barth and Gogarten’s dialectical theology as “a kind of revolution in theology” that speaks of “the faith of the Christian as faith in God’s revelation, and not as a phenomenon of the history of religion, a function of the human spirit, a human spiritual attitude,” and in this sense the movement of dialectical theology returns to “Luther and Calvin as the theologians who grasped the genuine theme of theology” (*ibid.*, 160–61).

20 Rudolf Bultmann, “Die liberale Theologie und die jüngste theologische Bewegung [1924],” in *GuV*, 1:1–25, at 6. He associates direct knowledge of God with liberal theology’s “pantheism of history,” which claims to access religious truth about God through the use of historical research” (*ibid.*, 5–6).

Under the guidance of Barth and Gogarten, Bultmann differentiates in 1925 between two different modes of God-talk: a speaking *about* God (*Reden über Gott*) and a speaking *of* God (*Reden von Gott*).²¹ To speak *about* God is to treat God as a *Gegebenheit*, as an object that is directly accessible to any person. Bultmann associates this with orthodox theologies that view God as something “fixed in knowledge” as well as with liberal theologies of experience that view God as directly accessible in historical research, spiritual states, creative life forces, or the irrational.²² To speak *of* God, by contrast, is to view God as wholly other and thus not as a given entity that one can supposedly demonstrate through rational proofs or historical research. For Bultmann this means that “if one wishes to speak of God, one must evidently *speak of oneself*.”²³ The opposite of a theology of divine givenness is an existential theology of God’s action upon the individual. He argues that “God is the reality that determines our existence,” by which he means God is the one who justifies the sinner, but he does not yet have the language to crystallize this into a new essence of Christianity that could serve as a norm for dialectical theology.²⁴ Bultmann thus understands *how* one must speak of God, but at this stage he does not yet have a clearly defined account of *why* one must speak of God in this way. In order to establish this he needs an account of *what* God does – and by implication, who God is – to determine what counts as responsible God-talk.

Bultmann’s 1927 essay on the concept of revelation is his first sustained effort to supply the positive norm for his new theological orientation. He begins by acknowledging that his inquiry is “guided by a certain understanding of the concept of revelation,” which he later calls a “preunderstanding of revelation.”²⁵ We presuppose a general view of revelation as the disclosure of what was hidden, but there are two kinds of disclosure. According to the first type, revelation is the communication of information “by which what was previously unfamiliar becomes familiar and thus known.” Revelation in this sense is knowledge that can be taught and passed to others; it is something mediated. According to the second type, revelation is an occurrence or event “that places me in a

21 Rudolf Bultmann, “Welchen Sinn hat es, von Gott zu reden? [1925],” in *GuV*, 1:26–37, at 26.

22 Bultmann, “Die liberale Theologie und die jüngste theologische Bewegung,” 18. Bultmann says in 1926 that the historicist theologians believed that, in their understanding of history, “the revelation of God was directly visible.” See Rudolf Bultmann, “Geschichtliche und übergeschichtliche Religion im Christentum? [1926],” in *GuV*, 1:65–84, at 67.

23 Bultmann, “Welchen Sinn hat es, von Gott zu reden?,” 28.

24 Bultmann, 29.

25 Bultmann, “Der Begriff der Offenbarung im Neuen Testament,” 1, 4. Original emphasis removed.

new situation with respect to myself.”²⁶ Revelation in this sense is an existential reality that can be a kind of knowing but may not always become explicit. Both forms of revelation address some human limitation, whether this is a lack of information requiring new knowledge or an existential limitation requiring an occurrence. Either way revelation is something highly personal in nature, like love and friendship, so that “to know about revelation is to know about our authenticity.”²⁷ It is not like “visit[ing] an exhibition of old locomotives” or asking about “the boundaries of Persia and Afghanistan.”²⁸ Bultmann has thus replaced the abstract distinction between “speaking about” and “speaking of” with the concrete distinction between two kinds of revelation: “revelation as communication” and “revelation as event.” The contrast is an either/or: “one understanding or the other must be false, must be a misunderstanding.”²⁹ It is this existential need to clarify which understanding of revelation is the correct one that motivates his study of revelation in the New Testament.

In order to answer his guiding question Bultmann investigates *what* is actually revealed according to the New Testament witness and reaches the conclusion that revelation is, first and foremost, an *existential* reality. Drawing on a vast array of texts, he argues that, negatively, the decisive human limitation is death (Rom 7:14; 1 Cor 15:26), and, positively, revelation addresses this limitation by giving life – eternal life. Revelation is a saving event that leads to new life and gives a person victory over death, not a communication of information. The problem that death poses is not merely rational in nature, as if the revelation of the “*idea* of life” could be sufficient to address our existential predicament. On the contrary, revelation can only bring about authenticity if it actually “destroys death” itself. “Revelation can only be the gift of life that overcomes death,” and therefore “revelation is an *occurrence* that abolishes death, not a doctrine that says it does not exist.”³⁰ The obvious objection to this, of course, is that death still occurs. One could argue then that revelation is at present a possibility that only becomes an actuality in the future, either at the end of one’s life or at the end of history. But this would be merely the “prolongation” of our present life, “the fulfillment of our natural longing” to hold on to our lives, and not something genuinely new.³¹ Moreover, Bultmann finds in the New Testament a clear witness to the *present* reality of revelation and new life, since ultimately

²⁶ Bultmann, 1–2.

²⁷ Bultmann, 6.

²⁸ Bultmann, 3, 6.

²⁹ Bultmann, 4.

³⁰ Bultmann, 15.

³¹ Bultmann, 16.

“revelation consists in nothing other than the fact of Jesus Christ.”³² Christ has already come and his presence is the reality of revelation itself, and yet this reality is not self-evident or generally discernible. Revelation has indeed occurred, but its occurrence “is not visible, demonstrable, or provable in the categories and with the means of perception native to ‘everyday’ existence.”³³ Or as Bultmann puts it, revelation “is perceptible neither with the eyes nor with the conscious mind or with feeling.”³⁴ The fact of Christ is not an objective reality for all but rather a “veiled revelation” that is “hidden for [the world],” since the world wants a publicly visible demonstration of revelation and so “cannot see the risen one.”³⁵ The objectivity (the what) of revelation thus demands a specific subjectivity (the how) – namely, faith.

Revelation in the New Testament is not merely a what but also a how: the revelation of life in Jesus Christ coincides simultaneously with the revelation of faith and the word of the gospel. The New Testament concept of revelation is, in a sense, a double revelation. Bultmann finds support for this especially in 2 Corinthians 2:14–6:10, where the apostle Paul can speak of the “word” or “ministry” of reconciliation having the power of salvation and life (2 Cor 5:18–19). Moreover, this revelation of life only produces life “wherever it finds *faith*,” so that one can also say “faith is revealed” (e.g., Gal 3:23, Heb 9:8, John 16:33).³⁶ The New Testament concept of revelation requires that we keep both aspects of revelation clearly in view. The dual character of revelation rules out any attempt to go behind the Christ encountered in word and faith to find the “historical Jesus” or a cosmic process that is fixed in a particular time and place.³⁷ The what of revelation – Christ and life – means that “revelation is not enlightenment or a communication of knowledge, but rather an occurrence”; the how of revelation – word and faith – means that “the occurrence of revelation is not a cosmic process that takes place outside of us,” in which case the word would be a merely informational report and thus “nothing other than a myth.”³⁸ Revelation is not hidden from us metaphysically, as in myth, but eschatologically, as in the reality of God. The

³² Bultmann, 18. Original emphasis removed.

³³ J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 104.

³⁴ Bultmann, “Der Begriff der Offenbarung im Neuen Testament,” 16.

³⁵ Bultmann, 18–19. Original emphasis removed. The fact of Christ as revelation is “not an innerworldly fact . . . but rather an ‘eschatological’ fact, i.e., one in which the world comes to an end” (*ibid.*, 22).

³⁶ Bultmann, 21.

³⁷ Bultmann, 23.

³⁸ Bultmann, 21.

event of revelation confirms its eschatological, even apocalyptic, character in the way it “*breaks in from the outside*” and is thus “not demonstrable within this life.”³⁹ The eschatological hiddenness of revelation requires and includes faith. Faith is the necessary subjective corollary of the objective event of new life. Without the objective event – the fact of Christ – revelation would be the projection of our natural longings and not something eschatologically new. Without the subjective corollary of faith, the occurrence of revelation would be a given object in the world and not something that existentially concerns the human person facing death. The two aspects of revelation occur together and require each other: “revelation is not visible outside of faith; ... therefore faith itself belongs to revelation.”⁴⁰ Or as he puts it in his theological lectures from 1933, “*Revelation and faith* are together the object of theology.”⁴¹

While Bultmann does not use these terms, we can say that Christ and the word are respectively the *empirical forms* of revelation’s what and how, while life and faith are respectively the *existential effects* of revelation’s what and how.

	The What	The How
Empirical Form	Christ	word
Existential Effect	life	faith

Schematizing Bultmann’s interpretation of revelation this way does not mean we can cleanly separate these concepts. Indeed, the point of this analysis is that each term necessarily implies all of the others. Christ is a historical fact, but this fact is only revelation insofar as it gives life; and one only receives eternal life insofar as revelation evokes faith, which takes place in response to the word of proclamation; and this word only grants faith insofar as Christ is present in it, and so on. Bultmann thus treats Christ, life, word, and faith as virtual synonyms, since each is an aspect or mode of the singular event of revelation.⁴²

³⁹ Bultmann, 15.

⁴⁰ Bultmann, 23.

⁴¹ Rudolf Bultmann, *Theologische Enzyklopädie*, ed. Eberhard Jüngel and Klaus W. Müller (Tübingen: Mohr, 1984), 159.

⁴² “Thus it becomes completely clear that *revelation, the action of God, is an occurrence*, not a supernatural communication of knowledge. Further, it is clear that revelation reveals *life*; it liberates the human person from the provisional and the past and gives them the future. Even so it is clear that *Christ* is revelation and that revelation is *the word*; for the two are one and the same. ... And once again, the word is what it is, namely revelation, not because of its timeless meaning but rather as an address that is brought to us by ordinary people. And thus, like the word, *faith*

The dual or dialectical character of revelation as simultaneously objective and subjective leads Bultmann to Luther. If both the empirical forms and existential effects are ontologically located in the singular event of revelation itself, then not only are the forms-as-revelation hidden from the eyes of the world, but the effects-as-revelation do not subsist in themselves outside of the event. Life and faith do not become properties of the person who encounters revelation. For this reason “the understanding of the Reformers is correct: righteousness is ‘imputed’ to us as *iustitia aliena*.” Bultmann clarifies that this does not mean “justified sinners are ‘seen only as if’ they were righteous. No! They *are* righteous.”⁴³ But this righteousness or life, like the revelatory significance of Christ, is actual only in the event itself, and thus only for faith. Revelation, like justification, is present and real (the what), but hidden and eschatological (the how). The hiddenness of revelation means that revelation is always existential, and the only way to speak of God’s revelation is, as Bultmann said two years earlier, by speaking of ourselves in our encounter with God. Bultmann finds support for this in Luther’s understanding of the knowledge of God as a going-into-ourselves:

What therefore is revealed? Nothing at all, insofar as the question concerning revelation asks for doctrines – doctrines that no person could have arrived at – or for mysteries that, when they are communicated, are known once and for all. But everything, insofar as *persons have their eyes opened about themselves and they can understand themselves anew*. It is as Luther says: “And so God, in going out of himself, brings it about that we go into ourselves, and through knowledge of him he brings us to knowledge of ourselves.”⁴⁴

In the footnote following the reference to Luther, Bultmann then quotes from Barth’s *Christliche Dogmatik*: “Hearing God’s word does not mean wandering in the metaphysical clouds, but rather finally – finally – coming to oneself, learning to see oneself, becoming revealed as one is.”⁴⁵ Revelation is a new reality, but its newness is only available to me as the one who hears and responds to God’s justifying word.

Bultmann’s doctrine of revelation is an ever new occurrence that, paradoxically, does not reveal anything new. It is an alien revelation in the sense that it comes from outside of us as an act of God, but its permanent alienness means that it never becomes some *thing* outside of us that we can grasp or possess.

too is revelation, because it is only faith in this occurrence and otherwise it is nothing” (Bultmann, “Der Begriff der Offenbarung im Neuen Testament,” 30–31).

⁴³ Bultmann, 31.

⁴⁴ Bultmann, 29.

⁴⁵ See Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf*, 516.

The existential event of revelation always remains event and so always draws us into ourselves, opening our eyes to the truth of our own existence. For Bultmann, this paradox points us to Christ as the eschatological fact of revelation, but without careful articulation, it can also point us away from Christ to natural revelation.

2.2 The Question of Natural Revelation

Bultmann's lecture on the concept of revelation marks a transitional moment in his theological development. Following Baasland we can identify this as the start of his existentialist phase, in which he began to construct his theology in active dialogue with existentialist philosophy.⁴⁶ We see this most clearly in the new conceptuality he employs. When originally composed this lecture was the first time Bultmann had used the concept of "preunderstanding," a term that would play a significant role in his later hermeneutics.⁴⁷ He spends the first half of the lecture developing the general meaning of revelation on the basis of both preunderstanding and church history before turning to his exegesis of the New Testament. While he gives the theological rationale for existential theology in the second half of the lecture, he begins by giving a philosophical and historical rationale. This methodological decision results in an unresolved internal tension.

Much of this is perhaps attributable to his optimism in the late 1920s about the possibilities of fruitful theological engagement with Martin Heidegger. In Tübingen on 9 March 1927, a month before Bultmann was originally scheduled to deliver his lecture, Heidegger presented his lecture on "Phenomenology and Theology," a document developed in close conversation with Bultmann on the relationship between theology and philosophy. Heidegger gave this lecture again in Marburg on 14 February 1928.⁴⁸ Two weeks later, on 25 February, and six weeks before Bultmann was finally able to deliver his lecture on the concept

⁴⁶ Baasland, *Theologie und Methode*, 76.

⁴⁷ Because the revelation lecture was delayed until April 1928, Bultmann first used the concept publicly in his lecture in Eisenach on 19 October 1927, "The Significance of 'Dialectical Theology' for New Testament for the Scientific Study of the New Testament," published in early 1928. And his very first use of the term, at least based on the available sources, is in the same letter to Gogarten on 3 April 1927, in which he mentions the upcoming lecture on the concept of revelation (indeed, only a few sentences earlier). See Bultmann and Gogarten, *Briefwechsel 1921–1967*, 105.

⁴⁸ Konrad Hammann, *Rudolf Bultmann: A Biography*, trans. Philip E. Devenish (Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 2013), 209.

of revelation at Marburg, Heidegger received a call to the University of Freiburg. This prompted Bultmann, on the eve of giving his talk at the holiday course, to consider sending “both lectures to a publisher as a unified publication. That seems to me to be a beautiful public conclusion to our shared time at Marburg.”⁴⁹

While Heidegger turned down this offer, the suggestion in itself indicates a proximity between Bultmann and Heidegger during this period, which manifests itself in Bultmann’s ambivalence regarding the newness of revelation. On the one hand, he claims that revelation is an event that “places me in a new situation,” whose content is a new creation that places a person “in this new mode of being, in this new history.”⁵⁰ On the other hand, he suggests several times that revelation does not bring about anything new at all. Revelation, he argues, is a return to the old, original revelation of creation and law. Justification reproduces the “original relation of creation” and makes “the old revelation visible again.”⁵¹ Bultmann immediately follows his reference to Luther on knowledge of God occurring as knowledge of ourselves by saying that the light that shines in Jesus is the same light that was already shining in creation. We do not understand anything in the “revelation of redemption” that we should not have already understood from the “revelation in creation and the law.”⁵² He even says that “the revelation in Christ is not the first,” that people could have known God earlier because the light of revelation was already available in the knowledge of our creatureliness. It follows that, though it has been misunderstood and lost in practice, “there is thus a ‘*natural revelation*.’”⁵³ Bultmann makes no effort to reconcile the various claims in this essay. The lecture is a rigorous inquiry in every other respect, but there is an awkward ambivalence when it comes to the question of the exclusive identification of revelation with Christ – an ambivalence that no doubt would have raised suspicions for Barth. Is revelation nothing other than the fact of Jesus Christ, or is there revelation outside of Christ in creation? Bultmann does not resolve the question in this essay, per-

49 Bultmann to Heidegger, 11 April 1928, in Bultmann and Heidegger, *Briefwechsel 1925–1975*, 60. When Heidegger declined – declining both the joint publication and Bultmann’s offer to be a coeditor of the journal *Theologische Rundschau*, on the grounds that discussing the relation between philosophy and theology was a “practical” matter that would cause him trouble within the philosophical guild – Bultmann published his essay on its own in 1929. Heidegger’s lecture remained unpublished until 1969.

50 Bultmann, “Der Begriff der Offenbarung im Neuen Testament,” 2, 27.

51 Bultmann, 26. Original emphasis removed.

52 Bultmann, 29.

53 Bultmann, 26.

haps because he was torn between his allegiance to the material norms of dialectical theology and his interest in the conceptual insights afforded by Heidegger's philosophy.

In 1929 Gerhardt Kuhlmann addressed a series of critical questions to Bultmann focusing especially on his apparent reduction of revelation to the profane self-understanding of natural existence as theorized by philosophy.⁵⁴ Bultmann attempted to clarify his position the following year by replacing the distinction between old revelation and new revelation with the Heideggerian distinction, presented most clearly in "Phenomenology and Theology," between the ontological and the ontic – that is, respectively, the general structures of existence and the particular existential reality of the individual. Revelation does not change the former (what we might call "creation"), but it does change the latter. Bultmann's point is that revelation does not make the recipient of new life a visibly different creature: "What takes place in the Christian occurrence that is realized in faith, in 'rebirth,' is not a magical transformation of the human person that removes the believer from *Dasein*. ... If prefaithful existence is existentially-ontically overcome in faith, that does not mean that the existentialist-ontological conditions of existing are destroyed."⁵⁵ Revelation, he argues, provides the "definitive clarification" of one's existence, analogous to the way falling in love definitively clarifies one's prior concept of love. But Bultmann's clarification at this stage only goes so far. On the one hand, he emphasizes that "through the *event* of revelation the *events* of one's life become new – 'new' in a sense that is valid absolutely only for those with faith and is visible only to faith, that indeed *becomes* visible only in each now and becomes visible always *anew*."⁵⁶ But no sooner does he say this than he adds that faith's self-understanding presupposes the *lumen naturale*, reveals natural existence as being "always already graced," and rediscovers "natural *Dasein* as *creation*."⁵⁷

54 Gerhardt Kuhlmann, "Zum theologischen Problem der Existenz: Fragen an Rudolf Bultmann," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* N.F. 10 (1929): 28–57, esp. 51–57.

55 Rudolf Bultmann, "Die Geschichtlichkeit des Daseins und der Glaube: Antwort an Gerhardt Kuhlmann [1930]," in *Neues Testament und christliche Existenz: Theologische Aufsätze*, ed. Andreas Lindemann (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 59–83, at 65–66. Bultmann here uses Heidegger almost verbatim. Compare "*Im Glauben ist zwar existenziell-ontisch die vorchristliche Existenz überwunden*" (Heidegger) with "*Ist im Glauben die vorgläubige Existenz existentiell-ontisch überwunden*" (Bultmann). See Martin Heidegger, "Phänomenologie und Theologie," in *Wegmarken*, 2nd ed., ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, Gesamtausgabe 1.9 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1978), 63.

56 Bultmann, "Die Geschichtlichkeit des Daseins und der Glaube," 71.

57 Bultmann, 72.

No wonder then that in January 1930, when Bultmann showed Barth this new essay, Barth immediately wrote Eduard Thurneysen to say that what he heard “before and afterwards in private conversation with Bultmann, I did not like.” He added:

My dear Eduard, a very bad business is developing along the entire line, in which I do not wish to have a part under any circumstances. Is it not the case that gradually all the people who seemed to stand alongside us want something that we ... precisely did not want and which stands in the closest connection with, if it is not identical to, what we were inherently opposed to: to put on the table a justification, not of the actuality of course, but the possibility of faith and of revelation? ... Thus: Bultmann with his theology of believing Dasein, which derives its legitimacy from a corresponding existentialist philosophy. Thus – certainly not least of all – the solemn Friedrich [Gogarten] with his framing doctrine of historicity and his already openly admitted proximity to Schleiermacher’s “anthropology.”⁵⁸

Barth recognized that the dispute came down to the anthropological significance of revelation. Given the convoluted nature of Bultmann’s argumentation, it is little wonder that Barth only heard the statements suggesting anthropology as the presupposed basis for revelation and missed the other statements indicating that revelation includes, sublates, redefines, and clarifies anthropology. During these pivotal years Bultmann was still in the process of figuring out his new theological program – and, unfortunately, at the same time Barth was in the process of rethinking his own theology. In the years immediately following, Bultmann would move away from Heidegger and write strongly against the notions of “natural revelation” and “revelation in creation” in direct opposition to the orders-of-creation theology of the German Christian Faith Movement.⁵⁹ But by that point the damage to his relationship with Barth had already been done.

⁵⁸ Karl Barth to Eduard Thurneysen, 26 January 1930, in Karl Barth and Eduard Thurneysen, *Briefwechsel, Band II: 1921–1930*, ed. Eduard Thurneysen, Gesamtausgabe 5.4 (Zürich: TVZ, 1974), 700.

⁵⁹ See Rudolf Bultmann, “Das Problem der ‘natürlichen Theologie’ [1933],” in *GuV*, 1:294–312; Rudolf Bultmann, “Die Bedeutung des Alten Testaments für den christlichen Glauben [1933],” in *GuV*, 1:313–336; Rudolf Bultmann, “Die Aufgabe der Theologie in der gegenwärtigen Situation,” *Theologische Blätter* 12, no. 6 (1933): 161–66; Rudolf Bultmann, “Der Arier-Paragraph im Raume der Kirche,” *Theologische Blätter* 12, no. 12 (1933): 359–70; Bultmann, “Die Frage der natürlichen Offenbarung,” in *GuV*, 2:79–104.

3 *Desperatio Fiducialis*: Barth's Doctrine of Historical Revelation

In the brief space remaining we turn now to Barth's doctrine of revelation from the same period, found especially in *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf* of 1927, comprising his lectures in dogmatics from the winter semester of 1926–1927. Barth had recently had a dispute with Bultmann over hermeneutics and the theological exegesis (*Sachkritik*) of the Bible,⁶⁰ but they were still by and large allies in the nascent movement of dialectical theology. For this reason – unlike the later *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, written after the dialectical honeymoon had effectively ended – the *Christliche Dogmatik* reveals the early fractures in their common theological vision over the very essence of Christian theology.⁶¹

Like Bultmann's lecture on the concept of revelation, Barth's *Christliche Dogmatik* occupies a transitional moment in his theological development, and this is nowhere more evident than in his doctrine of revelation as “primal history” (*Urgeschichte*).⁶² The concept of *Urgeschichte* first appeared in Barth's work in early 1920, following the Christmas gift in 1919 from his brother Heinrich of Franz Overbeck's *Christentum und Kultur*.⁶³ While the concept occurred a handful of times in his revision of *Der Römerbrief* – where it served as a synonym for Kierkegaard's “paradox” and Johann Christoph Blumhardt's “victor” as a way of un-

60 In 1922, after Bultmann reviewed Barth's *Römerbrief*, the two of them disputed over *Sach-exegese* and *Sachkritik*, leading ultimately to Bultmann's 1925 essay on theological exegesis. This was followed by Bultmann's review, published in early 1926, of Barth's *Die Auferstehung der Toten*. See Rudolf Bultmann, “Karl Barths ‘Römerbrief’ in zweiter Auflage [1922],” in *Anfänge der dialektischen Theologie*, 2 vols., ed. Jürgen Moltmann (Munich: C. Kaiser, 1962–1963), 1:119–42; Rudolf Bultmann, “Das Problem einer theologischen Exegese des Neuen Testaments [1925],” in *Neues Testament und christliche Existenz*, 13–38; Rudolf Bultmann, “Karl Barth, ‘Die Auferstehung der Toten’ [1926],” in *GuV*, 1:38–64.

61 In my previous work I called the period 1929–1939 the stage of “dogmatic dissonance” in Barth's theology, because of a misalignment of subject and object in his thought. I would now extend this to 1927, given the confusion manifest in the *Christliche Dogmatik*. See David W. Congdon, *The Mission of Demythologizing: Rudolf Bultmann's Dialectical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 129.

62 Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf*, 310: “Offenbarung ist Urgeschichte.”

63 Franz Overbeck, *Christentum und Kultur: Gedanken und Anmerkungen zur modernen Theologie*, ed. Carl Albrecht Bernoulli (Basel: Benno Schwabe, 1919). See Karl Barth, “Unerledigte Anfragen an die heutige Theologie [1920],” in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1914–1921*, ed. Hans-Anton Drewes (Zürich: TVZ, 2012), 622–61.

derstanding Jesus as the Christ⁶⁴ – the term played almost no role in subsequent writings, only appearing once in the entirety of the Göttingen Dogmatics.⁶⁵ That is to say, it played no role until the “false start” of the *Christliche Dogmatik*, where the idea of *Urgeschichte* appears over sixty times and serves as the dominant category by which Barth interprets the meaning of revelation. Moreover, the term takes on a new meaning: whereas in *Der Römerbrief* he uses the concept of primal history to refer to an event that is protologically and eschatologically “timeless,” in 1927 he uses the term to refer to “a historical event, an event that is itself in time” but also “not bound to the irreversible sequence of temporal history.”⁶⁶ As deployed by Barth, the master category of *Urgeschichte* functions to secure both the existential and the eschatological dimensions of revelation analyzed by Bultmann, while avoiding the potential for natural theology. On the one hand, *Urgeschichte* roots revelation in history. Barth rejects the notion that God’s “eternal history” in the trinity is revelation in itself; revelation is instead “more than eternity.” God’s history only becomes revelation when God enters time and “encounters us.”⁶⁷ On the other hand, we encounter not just anyone in revelation but rather *God*, and for this reason history in general is not revelation but only history as it is taken up by God in the event of incarnation. History is a predicate of revelation, rather than the reverse. For this reason, revelation is also “more than history.”⁶⁸ The *Ur-* thus represents this *more than* character of revelation, irreducible to either eternity or history, either the present or the past – and so “wholly undiscoverable in history” but available instead where eternity and history definitively intersect, namely in the “prophetic, adventual history” of Jesus Christ.⁶⁹ Like Bultmann, Barth posits a correlation, not between the

64 See Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Zweite Fassung)*, 50–51. For more on this, see Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909–1936* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 226–35.

65 Karl Barth, *Unterricht in der christlichen Religion, Teil 1: Prolegomena 1924*, ed. Hannelotte Reiffen, Gesamtausgabe 2.17 (Zürich: TVZ, 1985), 182. Barth here says that revelation is historical in the sense of being “prähistorisch, urgeschichtlich,” so that faith is the only means of accessing it.

66 See Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Zweite Fassung)*, 51, 344; Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf*, 310, 320. This is something of a paradox: despite working with a vertical, punctiliar concept of revelation in the *Römerbrief*, Barth’s understanding of primal history refers protologically to the origin of history and eschatologically to the end of history. By contrast, in *Christliche Dogmatik*, which has a more temporal concept of revelation, *Urgeschichte* refers to a vertical relationship between observable history below and eternal history above.

67 Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf*, 311.

68 Barth, 312.

69 Barth, 314, 320.

what and the how but between two whats: the eternal and the historical. While this does not generate an existential theology for Barth, it does lead him to the same conclusion regarding the hiddenness of revelation – on which point, again like Bultmann, Barth also quotes from the *scholia* of Luther's 1515–1516 *Lectures on Romans*, though in this case from the commentary on Romans 3:11: “The word was made flesh and wisdom incarnate *and thus it is hidden* and graspable only by the proper understanding, just as Christ is knowable only by revelation.”⁷⁰

The concept of *Urgeschichte* does heavy lifting for Barth – perhaps more than it is capable of bearing. He admits he uses the term as “a dogmatic concept” in clear distinction from the way Overbeck himself defines it.⁷¹ The word is something of a cipher that becomes the master solution to every theological problem. Barth wants to ground revelation more thoroughly in history than he did in either *Der Römerbrief* or *Unterricht in der christlichen Religion*. But Barth also wants to maintain the eschatological character of revelation as an act of God that remains nonobjectifiable. The term accomplishes both goals. *Urgeschichte* locates revelation in a divine event that encounters us existentially but takes place outside of us in history, though not a history that we can analyze and domesticate. But therein lies the problem: Barth's concept of revelation at this stage is entirely formal and has no real grounding in history at all or even any real content. Barth's exposition lacks the exegetical richness of Bultmann's lecture. If pressed to identify the what of revelation, Barth's answer in the *Christliche Dogmatik* is simply “God.” This allows him to vacillate between existential and nonexistential claims. On the one hand he can say that the human recipient of revelation is “coposited” in the event of the word of God, and thus “the word of God is a concept that is only ever accessible to an existential thinking.”⁷² Later Barth claims “the correlate of truth, of revelation, of the word of God, is the human person. ... The *individual!* That is the correlate of truth, not humanity, not even the mass of Christians, ... but rather *this* person, the I.”⁷³ This is the section in which Barth writes the line about “coming to oneself” that Bultmann quotes. He also here defines interpretation of scripture as “thinking-after, thinking-with, thinking-for-oneself” (*Nachdenken, Mitdenken, Selberdenken*), a terminological triad first mentioned in the Göttingen Dogmatics.⁷⁴ On the other hand, Barth declares – implicitly against the idea of preunderstanding – that

70 Barth, 314.

71 Barth, 313.

72 Barth, 148.

73 Barth, 517–18. Cf. *ibid.*, 310: “The reality of revelation consists in the fact that our I is addressed by God in the form of a human You.”

74 Barth, 513. See Barth, *Unterricht in der christlichen Religion, Teil 1*, 311.

“we have no access to God’s revelation on our own, no possibility of comprehending it,” and against the fatal mistake of “theological modernity,” there is “no human organ for revelation.”⁷⁵ We cannot attribute the preacher’s knowledge of God “to an original or acquired suitability of the human subject for this knowledge (neither to a religious organ or *a priori* nor to a religious experience!),” but rather this knowledge has to be understood as a modification of the preacher’s “unsuitability, as ‘docta ignorantia’ [learned ignorance], as an obedient and promising (and insofar as it grasps its object, because it is grasped by it) *not-knowing*.”⁷⁶ Whereas Bultmann speaks of a “not-knowing knowledge” (*nicht-wissende Wissen*) as our preunderstanding *before* encountering revelation,⁷⁷ Barth speaks of a kind of “not-knowing” knowledge *after* the encounter with revelation, as the existence of the human person in faith. With respect then to the preacher’s action of speaking of God, Barth says, invoking the key phrase from Luther, “we can speak of a *desperatio fiducialis*, of a ‘confident despair,’” a human despair in the self that only finds confidence in the fact that the *ius divinum* covers like a garment “an ultimately insufficient and deeply illegitimate *ius humanum*.”⁷⁸ God’s claim on the preacher is alone what makes God-talk possible, and this claim does not give security to the preacher; it is not something to which the preacher can lay claim but instead a divine act to which the preacher merely submits. For this reason “there can be no talk of anthropologizing” this divine equipping, either by trying to prove the truth of religion on human grounds or by trying to expose the error of religion along the lines of Feuerbach. God’s commission alone makes possible talk of God.⁷⁹

A year later, from November to December 1927, Barth gave a series of lectures on “God’s Revelation according to the Teaching of the Christian Church.”⁸⁰ While this material largely repeats what was said in the *Christliche Dogmatik*, there are certain notable changes. For instance, Barth here abandons the concept of *Urgeschichte* and speaks instead of *Geschichte*. The concept of “self-revelation,” used only a handful of times in both Göttingen’s *Unterricht* and the *Christliche Dogmatik*, appears over twenty times in these lectures, though in keeping with the dogmatic experimentation of this period Barth uses the concept primarily in a *pejo-*

75 Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf*, 382.

76 Barth, 86.

77 Bultmann, “Der Begriff der Offenbarung im Neuen Testament,” 4, 6.

78 Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf*, 87.

79 Barth, 87.

80 For the latter see Karl Barth, “Gottes Offenbarung nach der Lehre der christlichen Kirche [1927],” in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1925–1930*, ed. Hermann Schmidt (Zürich: TVZ, 1994), 215–95.

rative sense to refer to “the self-revelation of *human beings*.”⁸¹ Theology is only possible, he says, if revelation is neither human self-revelation nor the revelation of God to Godself, neither purely subjective nor purely objective. Bultmann makes a similar critique of both liberalism and orthodoxy in his lectures in theology from the same period,⁸² but whereas his solution is an existential theology rooted in an event that includes human faith in the divine act of revelation, Barth has yet to find a solution that satisfies him. One can almost see him trying out ideas in real time in these lectures. He speaks of revelation as “a concrete event in our life,” in which “we are placed in our own existence before God’s revelation.”⁸³ But instead of developing the material content (“the what”) of this event, he takes refuge within the formal language of an encounter (“the how”), in which God objectively confronts us as a “temporal You” and – because this revelation “occurs in the incognito” – subjectively enables us to see God through “the miracle of the Holy Spirit.”⁸⁴ In an effort to oppose all anthropologizing, he rejects the possibility of understanding the subjective side of revelation as either history or religion, as he claims is the case in both the new Protestant theology and Roman Catholic theology. He wants to secure revelation in something outside of us immune to objectification without retreating into an abstract orthodoxy. But his solution does not move beyond a formal appeal to Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit – until, that is, at the end of the fourth lecture, when Barth unknowingly anticipates the direction of his future theology by declaring without elaboration: “Divine revelation means divine *election*.”⁸⁵

4 Conclusion: Beyond the Whale and the Elephant

In the hindsight of history the year 1927 appears like a fork in the road in the relationship between Barth and Bultmann, though in the moment it was more a calm between the storms of the early 1920s and the early 1930s. And yet, intellectually speaking, the two of them were in the midst of rethinking their theological programs and deciding which values were going to dominate their future work. Both were experimenting with what it means to do dialectical theology.

⁸¹ Barth, 218.

⁸² Bultmann, *Theologische Enzyklopädie*, 28–34.

⁸³ Barth, “Gottes Offenbarung nach der Lehre der christlichen Kirche,” 254, 274.

⁸⁴ Barth, 251–52. Regarding the incognito, see *ibid.*, 277.

⁸⁵ Barth, 281.

On 19 October 1927, Bultmann gave his lecture on dialectical theology, arguing that it referred to a theology that speaks of God in relation to the historical existence of the human person, a method perfectly consistent with his new account of revelation as the essence of Christian faith.⁸⁶ Revelation is essentially dialectical for Bultmann since human faith is included in revelation. By contrast, in Barth's lectures on revelation a month later, he says that theology is only dialectical because we do not have access to God's self-knowledge and have not yet arrived at the "coming perfection" of seeing God face-to-face. Instead we are stuck doing theology in the "fragmentary nature of existence" (*Bruchstückwesen*).⁸⁷ Barth has abandoned his notion in *Römerbrief* of an "inner dialectic" in revelation, but he has neither embraced a nondialectical theology nor has he yet grasped the inner dialectic implicit in his christology, something that would not occur for over another decade.⁸⁸

When the two theologians finally realized their respective programs, they represented the two pathways to knowledge of God available within the reformational vision of Luther: the one leading to an existential self-knowledge as the location of God's event of justifying grace and the other leading away from the dead, sinful self to the confidence and security of God's electing grace in Jesus Christ. Both are legitimate approaches *internal* to the same Protestant theological tradition. Seeing dialectical theology synoptically in light of both pathways, we can conclude that dialectical theology in general is a *deseccuring*, a denial of the human attempt to secure our relation to God in ourselves. Barth deseccures by removing security from the individual self and locating security in God. We must have a "confident despair": despair in ourselves but confidence in God's election. Barth's theology thus establishes a new security outside of ourselves. Bultmann, by contrast, establishes a *permanent* deseccuring by constantly removing security and refusing to relocate security somewhere stable. Because the event of revelation includes the historical existence of the individual, security is found always only in the moment and thus has to be found ever anew. Bult-

86 Rudolf Bultmann, "Die Bedeutung der 'dialektischen Theologie' für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft [1928]," in *GuV*, 1:114–33, esp. 115–20.

87 Barth, "Gottes Offenbarung nach der Lehre der christlichen Kirche," 293–94.

88 Regarding the "inner dialectic of the *Sache*," see Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Zweite Fassung)*, 16. I agree here with Jüngel that Barth abandons the "inner dialectic" in the mid-1920s, restricting the dialectic to the human side. See Eberhard Jüngel, "Von der Dialektik zur Analogie: Die Schule Kierkegaards und der Einspruch Petersons," in *Barth-Studien* (Zürich-Köln: Benziger Verlag, 1982), 127–79, at 143–44. This is further supported by the *Christliche Dogmatik*, where Barth says that "God ... speaks an undialectical word. ... *God's* theology, God's knowing and speaking, is in itself ... undialectical theology" (Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf*, 583).

mann's path tends toward an embrace of natural revelation, while Barth's path tends toward an abstract formalism and metaphysical orthodoxy. Neither error is necessary to their respective projects. Perhaps a revitalized dialectical theology will come through renewed attention to their shared reformational origin.

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