Karl Barth and the Beauty of God
by
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Duke Divinity School
Duke University

Date: _________________

Approved:

Jeremy Begbie, Supervisor

Stanley Hauerwas

Norman Wirzba

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines the theme of beauty in the theology of Karl Barth and explores its fruitfulness for the practice of theology and two key areas of the Christian life. It offers a close, contextual reading of Barth’s seminal discussion of the theme, and pays particular attention to the historical sources and the theological rationale that inform his thinking. Most recent theological reflection on beauty has taken place under the auspices of Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, or Anglican thought. Barth’s bold theological retrieval of beauty prompts us to reconsider the possibilities and limits of approaching beauty from a Reformed Protestant vantage point.

Barth introduces beauty as a secondary but nevertheless essential concept for understanding the attribute of divine glory. Briefly, beauty names the dimension of God’s character that evokes desire, gives pleasure, and rewards with enjoyment; it is therefore especially useful for speaking of the participatory dimension of humanity’s knowledge of God. The language of beauty speaks to the winsome ways by which God, for the sake of God’s own glory, enables human beings (subjectively) to perceive and to delight in the (objectively) radiant form of God’s being and action. It follows that a failure to account for divine beauty will produce a flawed perception of God and a distorted vision of the gospel.

In the lexicon of drumming and percussion, the rudiments are a set of basic sticking patterns that serve to foster musical fluency, enabling those who master them to play with a disciplined and creative freedom. I argue that the account of divine beauty Barth puts forward in Church Dogmatics II/1 should be analogously reckoned as a “rudimentary” theology of beauty. Under the terms of this musical metaphor, the four basic nodes or patterns of Barth’s thinking—he presents beauty as revelatory, biblical, perilous, and crucial—may conceivably be applied or “played” in a wider range of
contexts, in conjunction with other doctrinal loci. Indeed, Barth himself was inclined to regard beauty as a theme deserving of further theological elaboration.

Barth’s distinctive way of conceptualizing the beauty of God was endorsed by Hans Urs von Balthasar, and thus came to play an important if indirect role in shaping the course of recent theological aesthetics. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to ask two questions: To what degree does Barth follow through on his own insights into beauty and the character of God? And to what extent are his insights fruitful in ways that Barth himself did not identify or anticipate? In response to the first question, my contention is that Barth develops his rudimentary theology most fully in relation to the human experience of joy, which I characterize as the affection that most closely corresponds to the beauty of God. I engage the second question by looking at the practice of Communion in light of Barth’s four rudiments, in order to test their constructive potential. Seen through this lens, the church’s meal appears as a vital and, in many Protestant churches, an underutilized resource for the Holy Spirit’s ongoing work of spiritual and aesthetic formation.

This study of Barth’s theology of beauty points towards several conclusions. In relation to the task of interpreting Barth, I show that the scope of Barth’s rudimentary theology of beauty is not limited to the doctrine of God; rather, it informs and enriches his broader theological project. In terms of theological praxis, Barth’s habit of reaffirming key elements of the church’s tradition while also raising critical questions, commends itself as a viable model for engaging theologically with beauty without compromising core Protestant convictions. Finally, I argue that Barth’s resolutely theo-centric way of thinking about beauty has potentially wider ramifications than he himself perceived, particularly in relation to areas of theology or Christian practice where the language of beauty is already deeply woven into the fabric of scripture and tradition.
DEDICATION

For Anne, with gratitude
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If one believes, with Barth, that theology and ethics are intertwined, then the question of who theology is for becomes vitally important. I am indebted to Terry Maner and the congregation of Grace Church of the Roaring Fork Valley for blessing my theological vocation with their steadfast prayers, and to Seth Lochmueller, Logan Patterson, and the 509 Church in Huntington for attempting with me to recover a more capacious understanding of Word and Sacrament. I also want to express my gratitude to Sam Wells and Meghan Benson, whose leadership at Duke Chapel did much to shape my understanding of the relation between worship and theology; and to Allan Poole of Blacknall Presbyterian, who shares my love of coffee and my hope of restoring a richly theological vision of beauty to the heart of the church’s common life.

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Let us continue to seek together the joy that flows from the beauty of God.
1. KARL BARTH: THEOLOGIAN OF BEAUTY?

The question of truth and beauty is after all as deep and many-sided as real life, and as complex.¹

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Within the sphere of modern theology, one of the more surprising voices in the church’s discussion and debate over beauty has been that of Karl Barth (1886-1968). At no point in his long career did Barth set out to write a full-scale theology of beauty. The Swiss theologian understood his task to be the writing of dogmatics, and thus showed no interest in putting forward a distinct theology of culture, as did Paul Tillich, much less a monumental ‘theological aesthetics,’ as with Hans Urs von Balthasar.² Yet it would be a mistake to assume from this that the varied themes and topics traditionally considered in relation to beauty—desire, pleasure, joy, etc.—are somehow foreign to Barth’s work or peripheral to his thinking. It will be evident to careful readers of the Church Dogmatics that Barth approaches the data of divine revelation with an architect’s eye for proportion: he seeks to give each theological idea its due in light of the overall scheme. Alternately, we might describe Barth as writing with a composer’s ear for consonance, in that he amplifies the inner harmony between various doctrinal loci—as, for example, in his famously Christological treatment of the doctrine of election.³ These aspects of Barth’s writing testify to his concern for the aesthetic dimensions of doctrine. For Barth, both the form and the content of theology must aim to reflect the prior and primary beauty of God.

Such a description prompts a number of fundamental questions. First, what does Barth mean by ‘beauty’ (die Schönheit)? And how does he develop this theme within his theology? This dissertation seeks to answer these questions by attending closely to specific texts where Barth speaks clearly of beauty, or where he develops the theme of beauty in new directions. More broadly, how might Barth’s understanding of beauty inform the Christian life, on both an individual and a corporate level? In the chapters to follow I consider some of the ways

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³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2, Chapter VII (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 3-506.
in which Barth’s theological account of beauty might be worked out locally and practically by believers and churches.

It must be admitted from the outset that the concept of beauty is not the ‘skeleton key’ that can solve every interpretive crux, or bring the sprawling brilliance of Barth’s *magnum opus* into a clear and orderly pattern. Even a cursory glance at the table of contents reveals that beauty is not a primary category for Barth, much less the ‘first word’ that Balthasar, by contrast, claims it ought to be. Nevertheless, Barth insists that beauty is essential for dispelling any notion that God’s glory is to be understood solely in terms of power, or as “a formless and shapeless fact.” To grasp the reasoning behind this claim is arguably to draw near to the heart of Barth’s theology. One of his chief aims throughout the *Church Dogmatics* is for the splendor of God’s being and action to illuminate the whole of Christian doctrine. So central and so vital is this aim that Barth actually speaks of rewriting his life’s work, in order to present the “content and substance” of divine self-revelation in even more clarity and detail. “This as such is beautiful,” Barth says. “We have to learn from it what beauty is.” To give even a generally adequate witness to God in his beauty, he adds,

> we should again have to work through the whole doctrine of God which we have now completed. We should have to refer back to the whole doctrine of the Word of God. We should also have to survey all the sections of dogmatics which we have yet to consider, and indeed all theology as such.

These words were written circa 1939. As it happened, Barth did not go back to re-write the opening sections of the *Church Dogmatics*, which by that point tallied approximately two thousand pages. After two previous tries (Göttingen in 1925 and then Münster in 1927), Barth had at last found a workable form, a winsome style, and a sustainable method for engaging with the content of Christian doctrine. Even so, this statement testifies to the depth and seriousness of Barth’s fascination with the revelatory beauty of God, and opens the door for us to ponder its theological and practical implications.

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5 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/1* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 653. Hereafter referred to as “*CD II/1*”.

6 *CD II/1*, 656.

7 Ibid.
The main argument of the dissertation can be summarized in three overlapping claims: first, that Barth gives us the rudiments of a theology of beauty. This theology is never fully elaborated, nor does Barth apply his insights in anything like a systematic fashion. Nevertheless, a rudimentary theology of beauty may be gleaned from a remarkable passage near the end of the first volume of the doctrine of God (CD II/1), wherein Barth grounds beauty in the being and activity of the Triune God. Who God is and what God does in the perfection of divine glory—this, according to Barth, is objectively and uniquely beautiful. Subjectively, then, to know the beauty of God is to be filled with desire for God, delighted by God’s presence, and rewarded with a share in God’s own, immanent joyfulness. Chapter two of the dissertation consists of a close reading and exposition of this seminal text. I identify and discuss four distinct rudiments—beauty as revelatory, biblical, perilous, and crucial—as a heuristic to capture the essence of Barth’s teaching.

Second, I argue that the theme of beauty is more central to Barth’s wider theology than has generally been acknowledged, and that there are substantial gains to be had from reading Barth with the rudiments of beauty in mind. Chapter three takes the form of a case study for such a reading. I propose that the Barth’s abiding fascination with joy be understood as a development of his theology of beauty. In essence, joy constitutes the affective counterpart to the beauty of God.

Third, I claim that Barth’s rudimentary theology has constructive theological potential, meaning that it offers a compelling way to apply the theme of beauty to issues of ecclesial concern. Chapter four will test this claim by bringing Barth’s nascent theology of beauty to bear upon Communion: how might the beauty of God inform the church’s theology and practice of this vital ritual? The answer is complicated by Barth’s complex and shifting views on the meaning of sacraments. What I propose is to follow the logic of Barth’s rudiments, applying them in a new way to the contemporary church (broadly speaking, I have in mind Protestant congregations in North America). Briefly, the beauty of God is that which enables the church to worship in a joyful and holistic way, acting upon the Psalmist’s invitation to “taste and see that the Lord is good” (Ps 34:8). This means retrieving a form of praxis favoring corporate celebration over private introspection; exuberant mission over insular piety; and grateful invocation over dutiful religion. It will highlight the aesthetic dimensions of the meal without presuming that the church has this food and drink as a miracle of its own making. Moreover and most importantly, such a
form will aim to facilitate and deepen the church’s trust in the present working of Jesus Christ, through the
Spirit.

Like any subject, beauty can be seen more clearly in the light of context. This first chapter endeavors, therefore,
to situate Barth’s theology of beauty historically, in a fourfold way. Barth refers to his main discussion of beauty
as an attempt to “reach back to the pre-Reformation tradition of the Church”, and so we will begin by sketching
what is generally reckoned to be the most pervasive and dominant philosophy of beauty, together with its
reception in the patristic and medieval church. What does this ‘reaching back’ entail, and why did Barth feel it
was necessary? Our focus will be on Augustine and Anselm, whose views served to inspire and to shape Barth’s
understanding of beauty.

In the second section we will examine a number of typically Protestant attitudes towards beauty, seeking to
clarify their theological rationale. While Barth claimed to have bypassed the Reformation, his treatment of beauty
arguably retains a distinctly Protestant character. We see this, I argue, not only in Barth’s characteristically
Reformed constellation of beauty with glory, but in the sense of caution that he brings to the subject. In Barth’s
account, beauty does not float free from the data of revelation, but is bounded by a biblical account of the
character of God.

In the third section, we will briefly rehearse the decline of beauty in the modern age. As Balthasar and others
have noted, only in modernity is the ancient conception of beauty finally and decisively abandoned. While
various discourses continued to speak of beauty, they did so in ways that effectively severed beauty from any
transcendent point of reference. This is the case, I suggest, with the new discipline of eighteenth-century
aesthetics and the so-called aesthetic movement of the nineteenth century. Such background is helpful by way of
contrast, for Barth’s approach to beauty tacks in the opposite direction. Far from perpetuating beauty’s ‘exile,’ he
aspires to re-present beauty by way of theology.

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8 CD II/1, 651.

J. Treier et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 184 – 208, and especially the seminal article by
The final section attempts briefly to locate Barth’s discussion of beauty in its immediate ecclesial and political setting. Barth wrote the volume of theology in question (CD II/1) from a location of relative safety (Basel, Switzerland), during in a time of intense political turmoil. Barth was actively supporting the Confessing Church movement across the border, even as Adolf Hitler moved steadily and ruthlessly to consolidate his power and bring Germany and the world to war. The pathos of this predicament invites us to abandon any notion of beauty as somehow abstract, frivolous, or detached from the issues and exigencies of daily life. Rather, it points to a different hypothesis: perhaps only by grounding our understanding of beauty, as Barth does, in the incomparable glory of God, can the church find the resources to recognize and resist the peril inherent in the forms of this-worldly beauty.

Sifting through these various layers of context will show that Barth’s nascent theology of beauty, while not radically new, is a timely, potent, and subversive retrieval of an idea with deep roots in Christian scripture and tradition.

1.2 BEAUTY AND THEOLOGY: THE CLASSICAL INHERITANCE

For many centuries beauty was regarded in the West as a universal mark of being, one of the few truly transcendental values underlying the structure of reality. In contrast to truth (which is elusive) and goodness (which is difficult to attain), beauty seems freely available, shining out clearly to the senses.\footnote{In describing the soul’s vision of the forms, Plato emphasizes the revelatory quality of beauty, which is “radiant among the other objects; and now that we have come down here… beauty alone has this privilege, to be the most clearly visible and the most loved.” Phaedrus 250d-c, translated by Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff in Plato: Complete Works, edited by John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 528.} This gives it the odd quality of being difficult to define, but easy to recognize. In the words of one contemporary critic, “I cannot define beauty or the beautiful. I can point to certain details and hope you will take my word for them as manifestations of beauty categorically undefined if not indefinable.”\footnote{Denis Donoghue, Speaking of Beauty (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 48.} The deceptively simple statement of Thomas Aquinas...
(1225 – 1274), that beauty is *id quod visum placet*, ‘that which, being seen, pleases,’ is perhaps the closest thing we have to a working definition.\(^\text{12}\)

By and large, the ancient and medieval writers alike identified beauty in terms of *proportion*, understood either numerically (as with the “golden ratio” or the intervals of a musical scale), or in terms of the suitability of a given thing for its purpose.\(^\text{13}\) In the Roman writer Vitruvius (died 15 A.D.), we can see how “the great theory of beauty” informed the practice of architecture.\(^\text{14}\) In classical and Renaissance sculpture, we see it at work in artistic representations of the body. Augustine (354 – 430) drew from this tradition when he stated that beautiful things exhibit the proper measure, shape, and order (*modus, species et ordo*). Writing one century later, Boethius likewise transmitted the classical view to the Middle Ages, declaring beauty to be *commensuratio partium*, a fitting arrangement of parts.\(^\text{15}\)

Alongside this emphasis on beauty’s objectivity, many of these writers also highlight the relational or ‘inter-subjective’ nature of beauty. Following Plato, they teach that the eternal archetype or ‘form’ of beauty appears in every pleasing appearance, and that we may participate in this form by perceiving and welcoming its presence. Aquinas, for example, says that the senses delight in things that are duly proportioned “because even sense is a sort of reason, just as is every knowing power.”\(^\text{16}\) Beauty, on this account, is not a static quality, but actively brings about the realization of a consonant relation. For this reason, Plato thinks of encounters with beauty as closely akin to falling in love. Beauty prompts the arousal of desire, yet promises something richer than carnal fulfillment. The true lover—the one who perceives beauty most truly, and is changed by the encounter—


\(^\text{13}\) For this material I am indebted to Tatarkiewicz. “The phrase *pulchritudo est apta partium coniunctio* might serve as a motto for the thinking of medievalists on aesthetics” (op. cit., 168).


\(^\text{15}\) Tatarkiewicz, 168.

effectively renounces his baser desires in hopes of achieving a higher union. Beauty thus functions as a vehicle for revelation and spiritual ascent. By inspiring us to love, it facilitates our participation in something greater and other than ourselves.

A stanza from the American poet, Richard Wilbur, helps to bring this idea into focus:

Your hands hold roses always in a way that says
They are not only yours; the beautiful changes
In such kind ways,
Wishing ever to sunder
Things and things’ selves for a second finding, to lose
For a moment all that it touches back to wonder.

What moves the poet is not the woman’s hands or the roses she holds (though presumably these are both lovely in their own right). It is, rather, a newfound recognition of personal relationship that her way of holding roses brings about. The presence of beauty in the beloved occasions wonder, pleasure, and gratitude. Paul Simon gives voice to this idea when he sings, “The light of her beauty was warm as a summer day… thank God I found you in time.” It’s a lyric that, mutatis mutandis, could have been penned centuries ago by Dante or John Donne.

It is with such notions of radiant, relational beauty that the language of classical aesthetics most naturally overlaps with the claims of Christian theology. “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork” (Ps 19). On the basis of such texts, the church fathers affirmed that the beauty found in creation reflects in a powerful way the beauty of creation’s Maker. “When you see the beauty, the breadth, the height, the position, the form, the stability,” writes Chrysostom, you are “instructed by the spectacle, [and] you adore him who created a body so fair and strange!” Glory and beauty are self-evidently and inextricably intertwined. Exactly how this relation is to be conceived remains, however, a vexing theological question. As

17 Socrates’ speeches on love (Phaedrus 244-257 and Symposium 201-212) are the relevant primary texts. For a contemporary discussion drawing on this material, see Alexander Nehamas, Only a Promise of Happiness. The Place of Beauty in a World of Art (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 53-86.


Daniel Hardy notes, there is in the Western church a long-standing tendency to view reality in an almost dualistic way: “there is such an unbridgeable gap between the spiritual and the material that the material is incapable of representing the spiritual—*finitum non capax infiniti*—except where this is made possible by God.”

Encounters with beauty would seem to break down this incipient dualism, insofar as they offer us “the invocation of a potentially whole and holy order of things….” At their best and highest, such encounters constitute an epiphany of the way things really are, and summon us to love. They appear as moments of rare delight, enabling us to behold and to be grateful for the goodness of God’s creation. They move us, even, to worship the Maker of heaven and earth. In this light, it is not surprising that theologians have sought through the centuries to account for beauty theologically. Nor is it surprising that their ways of doing so have sometimes been in conflict with each other, given the abstruse nature of the subject.

The most expansive and probably the most common way of conceiving beauty theologically in the Western church has been to supplement the classical views of beauty with insights from scripture and key tenets of neo-Platonic thought. This is the route taken by the late fifth-century writer Pseudo-Dionysius, who in the course of his meditation on the names of God develops a dualistic aesthetic theory—beauty as both “proportion and brilliance.”

A frequently cited passage from Thomas Aquinas leans in the same direction. Beauty, he writes, includes three conditions: *integrity, proportion, and brightness*, each of which bears a special likeness to the Son. Quoting John of Damascus and Augustine in turn, Aquinas argues that ‘brightness’ applies to the Son in his status as the divine Word, “which is the light and splendour of the intellect” and “the art of the omnipotent God.”

The connection between light and beauty, while not of course exclusive to Christians, gains coherence from the New Testament witness to Jesus as the “light of the world” (Jn 8:12) and the “radiance of the glory of God” (Heb 1:3). As we will see, the link between beauty and glory is central to Barth’s understanding, even if he seeks to distance himself from the neo-Platonic way in which it has often been construed.

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A narrower view would limit beauty only to the sensed appearance of things. For example, a Christological reading of the Psalms could lead readers to see the incarnate Christ as the epitome of created beauty (e.g., “You are the most handsome of the sons of men,” Ps 45:2). This is indeed what we find in some of the fathers. Not only is God “the cause of everything that is beautiful,” according to Clement of Alexandria, but the incarnation of Christ is an aesthetic revelation: “our Savior surpasses all human nature, being beautiful to the point of being the sole object of our love in our yearning for true beauty…”25 This reading, arguably, is beset by theological problems. The New Testament writers say next to nothing about Jesus’ physical appearance; moreover, it is not clear how to reconcile such extravagant claims for the physical beauty of Christ with Isaiah’s statement that the Servant “had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him” (Is 53:2b). If the category of beauty is to apply to the incarnate Son, it must account for the ugliness of the cross (perhaps this difficulty explains why the ideal of beauty in traditional Christian art is not Jesus, but the Virgin Mary).26 For his part, Barth exuberantly identifies Jesus Christ as the living embodiment of the beauty of God, but he does not conceive of this beauty in a narrowly sensory way. In fact, he deplores the long tradition of artists seeking to visually represent the face of Jesus. What Barth offers instead is an account of the beauty of Christ that accents God’s economy. Given that God’s being is revealed in and through God’s action, divine beauty may be perceived primarily by attending to what God does in and through Jesus.27

A brief look at Barth’s appreciative and yet critical reading of the church fathers can help us to see where these claims are coming from.28


26 Roger Scruton makes the intriguing suggestion that Mary’s beauty serves as “the signpost to a realm beyond desire.” He continues: “Mary has never been subdued by her body as others are, and stands as a symbol of an idealized love between embodied people, a love which is both human and divine. The Virgin’s beauty is a symbol of purity, and for this very reason is held apart from the realm of sexual appetite, in a world of its own.” Scruton, *Beauty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 54.

27 CD II/1, 661 – 664.

28 As Robert McAfee Brown says, “Barth can take tradition more seriously than any contemporary Protestant thinker has done, and yet not be constrained by it. One never finds him repeating the old orthodoxy simply because the tradition sanctions it.” “Scripture and Tradition in the Theology of Karl Barth” in *Thy Word is Truth. Barth on Scripture* edited by George Hunsinger (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 4.
1.2.1 Barth’s Reading of Augustine

Prior to his conversion, Augustine devoted an entire treatise, De Pulchro et Apto, to questions of beauty. Although this early work had already been lost by the time Augustine came to write the Confessions, he reconstructs some of the more memorable material it had included. “I used to ask my friends, ‘Do we love anything unless it is beautiful? What, then, is beauty and what does it consist? What is it that attracts us and wins us over to the things we love? Unless there were beauty and grace in them, they would be powerless to win our hearts!’”

Echoing the thought of Plato, Augustine sees beauty as a mysterious power at work in the world, as that which catches and concentrates our attention.

It is not only isolated things or encounters that are implicated. The entire creation operates on an economy of divinely-induced desire. This point is axiomatic for Augustine, and can be heard already in the words of the famous prayer with which he opens the Confessions:

> Man is one of your creatures, Lord, and his instinct is to praise you. He bears about him the mark of death, the sign of his own sin, to remind him that you thwart the proud. But still, since he is part of your creation, he wishes to praise you. The thought of you stirs him so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.

Augustine sees humanity’s natural desire for God as both occasioned and deepened by specific encounters with this-worldly beauty. Aesthetic pleasure serves as a reference point for kingdom life, in the sense that the beauty of created things points ultimately to their Maker. Augustine knew from scripture that God and creation are not to be conflated or confused; what he sought was a fuller understanding of the vital connection between the two. He reflects on beauty theologically because he believed it could help to illumine this connection. Beauty, he writes, is the answer that created things may give to the question, Who is God?

Thinking again about his lost book, Augustine recalls making a distinction between the beauty of an object considered in itself, and the beauty of the same object set in relation to other ‘parts’ of some greater whole. “This idea,” he says, “burst from my heart like water from a spring,” and he remembers his attempts to work it out with reference to various material

30 Ibid., I.1.
31 Ibid., X.6.
examples. Looking back from the vantage point of mature Christian faith, however, Augustine chides his younger self for having applied these ideas only to material forms, not spiritual realities. He laments that he had not yet learned to see God’s art, creation itself, as the hinge or turning point around which the discussion might be theologically ordered.

Read in its entirety, Augustine’s *Confessions* presents an ambivalent vision: is beauty valuable (or even essential) for spiritual growth, or is it deeply and inexorably problematic? There are, of course, numerous passages that invite the reader to see beauty and the longing it evokes as fruitful. Beauty serves to heighten Augustine’s awareness of his need for God; it prompts his practice of confession and praise; and it moves him to adopt a posture of grateful dependence. Furthermore, the intimation of divine beauty serves to relativise or downgrade the lower desires—those merely earthly loves that fail to build up faith. At other points, however, Augustine seems genuinely conflicted over the question of whether beauty ultimately serves to enable or to obstruct the soul’s ascent to God. Consider this prayer in which Augustine cries out for communion with his Lord:

> Give yourself to me, my God; restore yourself to me. I show you my love, but if it is too little, give me strength to love you more…. All that I know is this, that unless you are with me, and not only beside me, but in my very self, for me there is nothing but evil, and whatever riches I have, unless they are my God, they are only poverty.

The problem, as Augustine poignantly acknowledges, is that we seldom pray such prayers as we ought. While the beautiful things of this world have their beauty in God, they often do not lead us to God. All human lives and loves—and therefore the forms that desire takes—are marred by sin, disordered. The self is fragmented by competing desires, buffeted by the force of old habits, and beguiled by the senses and the mind’s propensity to wander in idle curiosity. Augustine repeatedly proves this point by recalling episodes from his own turbulent past. In effect, these biographical remembrances serve to temper the reader’s view of beauty’s theological usefulness. We may summarize Augustine’s position as follows: the promise of beauty is always shadowed by the distorting effects of sin—as if beauty were at once the sign of heavenly

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32 Ibid., IV.13, 15.
33 Augustine, *Confessions*, XIII.8.
splendor and worldly peril. Taken as a whole the *Confessions* offers a vision of beauty as wonderful—but-volatile, a vision thoroughly colored by Augustine’s awareness that, as fallen creatures, we find ourselves drawn to love the wrong things in the wrong ways, and so misuse the gifts of God.35

When we look at Barth’s explicit references to Augustine in *CD II/1*, we find a clear appreciation for the African bishop’s teaching, but also a willingness to question or correct him on certain points. Careful readers of Barth’s theology may recognize an echo of Augustine’s concern for the inter-relation of parts in Barth’s characteristically meticulous way of ordering the doctrine of God. Barth nests his discussion of beauty within an essay on glory, which again is part of a larger subsection bringing glory into constellation with eternity, which itself is part of a larger framework setting the attributes of God’s freedom in relation to the attributes of God’s love. By means of this elaborate pattern, Barth aims, however partially, to speak of God’s “full reciprocity… the movement of life in which God is God, corresponding exactly to His revelation of Himself as God.”36

More concretely, Barth, like Augustine, anchors his thinking about beauty in the Psalms. Specifically, he follows Augustine in interpreting the (objective) beauty of God in terms of the believer’s (subjective) experience of desire, delight, and pleasure. The beauty of God is held to be the deep sense of joy God communicates as the One who is intrinsically pleasing, desirable, and full of enjoyment. Barth credits Augustine’s well-known hymn as the specific text that inspired him to reassess the role of beauty in theology:

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35 This reading accords with Augustine’s critical distinction between *uti* and *frui* (cf. *De Doctrina Christiana*, Book I). Those who are wise and holy recognize that this life is essentially a pilgrimage; therefore, they make use of the things of this world in hopes of finding their deepest and truest happiness in God (for God alone is to be enjoyed). Those who are foolish or impious, however, attempt to *use* God in order to *enjoy* the things of this world—an impossibility and a prescription for spiritual ruin. It is love—or, more precisely, our trained habits of desire—that ultimately determine our happiness and our eternal destiny, as Augustine explains: “living a just and holy life requires one to be capable of an objective and impartial evaluation of things; to love things, that is to say, in the right order, so that you do not love what is not to be loved, or fail to love what is to be loved, or have a greater love for what should be loved less, or an equal love for things that should be loved less or more, or a lesser or greater love for things that should be loved equally” (*Teaching Christianity. De Doctrina Christiana*, translated by Edmund Hill, O.P., Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1996, I.28, 118). I have concentrated here upon the *Confessions* because it is this text that Barth repeatedly cites in *CD II/1*; the influence is direct and readily acknowledged. For a more thorough treatment of Augustine’s aesthetics, the monograph by Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) is an especially helpful guide. More recently, see Oleg V. Bychkov, *Aesthetic Revelation. Reading Ancient and Medieval Texts after Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 2010), chapter 7 (“The Augustinian Tradition”).

36 *CD II/1*, 350. The debt at this point is possibly unconscious, but it certainly appears as if Barth has applied Augustine’s notion of proportionate beauty to the doctrine of God.
I have learnt to love you late, Beauty at once so ancient and so new! [...] You were within me, and I was in the world outside myself. I searched for you outside myself and, disfigured as I was, I fell upon the lovely things of your creation. You were with me, but I was not with you. The beautiful things of this world kept me far from you and yet, if they had not been in you, they would have had no being at all. You called me; you cried aloud to me; you broke my barrier of deafness.37

The prayer suggests that holy desire is not an idle abstraction or a vague feeling; it comes, rather, as the result of a summons from the source and goal of the church’s love. Augustine’s earnest use of the second person invites the reader to think of God as beauty personified—beauty at once connected to ‘the beautiful things of this world,’ and yet immeasurably above and beyond them. This implies that the beauty of God—that “Beauty at once so ancient and so new”—is beauty-in-relation, beauty that seeks fundamentally to persuade us, to win us to its cause, summoning thereby a renewal of faith, to the end that even we disfigured and fallen creatures might come to have a share in the glory of God. As I hope to show, this idea lives also at the heart of Barth’s nascent theology of beauty, even if he presents it in less rhapsodic language.

The limit of Barth’s agreement with Augustine can be seen clearly in his commentary upon “one of the most beautiful but also most dangerous passages in the Confessions.”38 The passage in question records an unusual conversation between Augustine and his mother, Monica, shortly before her death. The two were talking about the happiness of the saints in heaven when they had what might nowadays be called an out-of-body experience.

As the flame of love burned stronger in us and raised us higher towards the eternal God, our thoughts ranged over the whole compass of material things in their various degrees, up to the heavens themselves…. And while we spoke of the eternal Wisdom, longing for it and straining for it with all the strength of our hearts, for one fleeting instant we reached out and touched it.39

What draws Barth’s attention (and criticism) is Augustine’s tacit endorsement of encounter with God that has nothing to do with ordinary, creaturely existence. Whatever may have transpired that day between mother and son, it is a mistake, Barth thinks, to privilege the idea of meeting God by way of mystical ascent. Doing so “means abandoning, or at any rate wanting to abandon, the place where God encounters man in His revelation

37 Augustine, Confessions X.27, cited in CD II/1, 651.
38 CD II/1, 10.
39 Confessions, IX.10.
and where He gives Himself to be heard and seen by man.” Were the sort of experience Augustine describes to be accepted as a normative Christian practice, it would likely foster an escapist mentality and a Pelagian spirit of self-help—as if to reach the heights of communion with God, we must learn to transcend the confines of creation, quite apart from the ordinary means of grace. As relates to a theology of beauty, the underlying issue is whether human beings may come to the highest form by leaving behind earthly particulars—this is the path laid out in Plato’s Symposium, the basic lines of which are glimpsed in Augustine’s mystical climb—or whether God’s beauty is to be discerned in the midst and sometimes in the mire of worldly particulars. Barth’s christocentric doctrine of revelation commits him to the latter option; God seeks humanity through his Word, and thus humanity is bound to seek God where God gives himself to be seen and heard. Simply put, there is no ‘unmediated’ or ‘non-objective’ perception of God.

1.2.2 Barth’s Reading of Anselm of Canterbury

Augustine is by no means the only theologian whose work on beauty anticipates or informs Barth’s own. Another vital thinker in this line is Anselm of Canterbury (1033 – 1109), who posits what might be called the analogy of delight. If particular worldly goods such as family, friendship, and food succeed in giving us pleasure, think seriously how delightful it must be to know the giver of every good and perfect gift—God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It stands to reason that God’s own self contains, as Anselm puts it,

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40 CD II/1, 11. For a clearer picture of “the place where God encounters man,” we should recall Barth’s discussion of the Word of God in its threefold form (CD I/1, 88 – 124). We meet God’s Word as it is attested in scripture and proclaimed in the community of faith, according to Barth, but this means that it must come from outside the sphere of our thought and action and human control. “We have it as it gives itself to us if we have it” (92).

41 It is also possible that Barth finds the prospect of a mystical path especially dangerous because the wider context of this passage includes a claim that he would likely endorse: “the world, for all its pleasures, seemed a paltry place compared with the life that we spoke of” (Confessions IX.10). For Augustine, as for Barth, any element of likeness between heaven and earth is outweighed by the radical unlikeness that distinguishes the one from the other.

42 CD II/1, 11. Barth notes with approval a contrary passage where Augustine suggests, speculatively, that even in heaven, our perception of God will have a sensory or mediated character to it: “by the body we shall see Him in every body which the keen vision of the eye of the spiritual body shall reach.” The City of God, translated by Marcus Dods (New York: Modern Library, 1993), book XXII.29, 864.
the pleasantness of all goods—and not the kind of pleasantness we have experienced in created things, but something as different as the Creator is from the creature. For if created life is good, how good creative life must be! If the salvation he brings about is delightful, how delightful the salvation that bestows all salvation must be! If the wisdom that consists in the knowledge of created things is lovable, how lovable is the wisdom that created all things from nothing! Finally, if there are many great delights in delightful things, what wonderful and great delight is to be found in him who made the delightful things themselves?\(^{43}\)

Anselm's conjecture on the nature of delight implies that human experiences of joy, pleasure, etc., are able in some way to illuminate the greater reward of knowing and participating in the life of God. The glorious sight of Aspen trees turned to gold in October; the haunting melody of the prelude to Bach's first cello suite; the taste, texture, and smell of a favorite meal—these are not merely temporal pleasures, but clues sown in creation, by which the Maker of heaven and earth alerts us to the prospect of a higher and more permanent beauty. This is unquestionably an endorsement of beauty as a constructive theological concept.

Elsewhere, however, Anselm gives voice to a very different concern:

> Still thou dost conceal thyself, O Lord, from my soul, in thy light and blessedness, and so it still dwells in darkness and in its own wretchedness. For it looks all around, and does not see thy beauty. It listens, and does not hear thy harmony. It smells, and does not sense thy fragrance. It tastes, and does not recognize thy sweet savor. It touches, and does not feel thy softness. For thou dost possess all these qualities, O Lord God, in thy own ineffable way, while thou hast given them to things created by thee in their own perceptible way. But the senses of my soul have been frozen and stupefied and blocked up by the ancient enfeeblement of sin.\(^{44}\)

We recall how Augustine's love for beauty was tempered by his awareness of how often and how thoroughly our loves are disordered. In a similar way, Anselm doubts whether he truly is able to perceive and enjoy God's beauty. This passage need not be read as a dismissal of the senses, or a rejection of the analogy of delight; Anselm is, after all, addressing God in prayer. Yet what he says here qualifies any claim that creatures can move directly from this-worldly forms of beauty to the knowledge of God. Beauty is not an independent vehicle of revelation. It is not an alternative to, or a substitute for, God's gracious action. For Anselm, the human ability to perceive beauty rightly remains dependent upon God's initiative.


\(^{44}\) Anselm, Proslogion, chapter XVII, 84-5. Barth quotes from this part of the Proslogion at CD II/1, 191.
This reticence to regard beauty independently, without reference to the being and action of God, is entirely characteristic of Barth. To see something of the beauty of God always implies, for Barth, that one has already been caught up in the gracious circle of glory, such that every form of human darkness is illumined and finally made impossible. “[G]od declares Himself in such a way that by His declaration He overcomes from the very outset all questions, counter-questions, hesitations, reservations and doubts concerning Him. These are only subjective and not objective. They do not have any corresponding reality.”

To perceive the beauty of God is to come into meaningful contact with the glory of God, and thus to have one’s subjectivity transformed into a genuinely “corresponding reality.”

Barth’s debt to Anselm extends in at least two other directions. The first relates to the praxis of the theologian. With Anselm, Barth views theology as “a peculiarly beautiful science… the most beautiful of all the sciences.”

A theological proof is not merely an attempt to name the truth, but a delectatio, and Barth can only admire the way in which Anselm seeks to make the joy of theology the first of his tasks; polemics and apologetics come second. Theology is not to be undertaken merely as an intellectual exercise, but as a calling, and perhaps even as a kind of spiritual quest; Anselm begins the Proslogion by recounting how long and how earnestly he searched to find a single argument that could establish the existence of God. Barth’s claim that the “theologian who has no joy in his work is not a theologian at all” reflects this same, vocational sensibility.

The second debt has to do with Anselm’s way of weighing the role of beauty within theology. Certainly, there ought to be some level of correspondence between the beauty of God and the work of theology, for theology

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45 CD II/1, 644 – 5. For this reason it is misleading to claim, as Balthasar does, that Barth can only make room for beauty by cutting back his “actualism” (Balthasar, Form, 56). I think it more accurate to say that Barth begins, in CD II/1, to develop an actualistic account of divine beauty.

46 For obvious reasons I have chosen to focus on Barth’s reading of Anselm in relation to the theme of beauty. A fuller treatment would need to reckon with Barth’s important early monograph, Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum (London: SCM Press, 1960).

47 CD II/1, 656.

48 Ibid. At an earlier point in CD II/1, Barth describes the fitting posture of the theologian as one of wondering awe, adding that “[o]ur knowledge of God is always compelled to be a prayer of thanksgiving, penitence and intercession. It is only in this way that there is knowledge of God in participation in the veracity of the revelation of God” (223).

49 Anselm, Proslogion Preface, 69.

50 CD II/1, 656 – 7.
attempts to show how fittingly “the inexpressible beauty of our redemption” was accomplished.\footnote{Anselm of Canterbury, \textit{Why God Became Man} in \textit{A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham}, edited by Eugene R. Fairweather (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956), chapter III, 105.} Anselm is sanguine, however, about the apologetic prospects of a proof that dwells only on the aesthetics of redemption. “It must be admitted that all these things are beautiful, and like so many pictures. But if they do not rest on something solid, they are not enough to convince unbelievers….”\footnote{Anselm, \textit{Why God Became Man}, chapter IV, 105.} His pastoral experience dictates that stronger proofs are needed. These will take the form of rational arguments that attempt to explain the logic of God’s economy. While Anselm never abandons a certain kind of theological aesthetics—the notion of what is “fitting” for God to have done remains a vital category throughout—he seems to work on the assumption that beauty is only one thread (even if a specially desirable one) of a much larger tapestry. Arguably, Barth inherits this very combination—an enthusiasm for beauty, matched equally (or sometimes overshadowed) by an unwillingness to make too much of it. When Barth says, for example, that “the aesthetics of theology can hardly be counted a legitimate and certainly not a necessary task of theology”, he is thinking along distinctly ‘Anselmian’ lines.\footnote{CD II/1, 657. If my reading here is correct, it may help to explain why Barth does not make much use of the Eastern fathers in developing his theology of beauty, even though their writings are in many respects a more fruitful repository of reflection on the theological character of beauty. (See especially Paul Evdokimov, \textit{The Art of the Icon: A Theology of Beauty} (Redondo Beach, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1990), or, more recently, the excellent Natalie Carnes, \textit{Beauty: A Theological Engagement with Gregory of Nyssa} (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014)). Some light may be thrown on this apparent omission by recounting a part of Barth’s argument concerning the hiddenness of God (CD II/1, 179 – 204). Barth observes that, in thinking about the basic incongruity between human understanding and divine self-knowledge, the Eastern fathers have a tendency not only to prefer abstract to concrete modes of thinking, but to proceed on the assumption that abstraction is inherently more suitable for limning the mystery of God. Speaking generally, they opt for \textit{attributes} (being, wisdom, goodness, righteousness) over the simple \textit{metaphors} and \textit{anthropomorphisms} of scripture, and regard \textit{negative concepts} (immutability, infinity, etc.) as best of all. “The further we move away from the witness of the Holy Scriptures to the sphere of general conjectures about God, so much the purer, we think, is the air of thought” (CD II/1, 222). David Bentley Hart’s \textit{The Beauty of the Infinite} (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), though uncommonly brilliant, might be cited as a contemporary confirmation of this tendency, insofar as it undertakes to speak of the beauty of God without any serious engagement with the text of scripture. Such a typically ‘Eastern’ approach is deeply problematic, in Barth’s view, because it obscures the most basic truth of revelation; namely, that \textit{God} must be the One to overcome the inherent inadequacy of all human thought. Barth is more than happy to give the Fathers credit for being aware of the problem of the inadequacy of all human speech, and for aiming to interpret this truth of revelation as attested in scripture, but he is not convinced that they succeeded: “we shall have to underline… more clearly than they did the basic character of the incongruence and the revelational character of the congruence” (CD II/1, 223). Finally, it goes without saying that this problem is not exclusive to the Eastern church; thus in this same section, Barth criticizes Augustine’s use of analogy (the text in question is \textit{Confessions} XI, 4). Barth’s concern is to safeguard, if possible, a way of speaking that does not paper over the ‘infinite qualitative distinction’ as if it were of no consequence to theology. Augustine is in this particular passage a little too vague on this point for Barth’s taste. If only we could be sure, he writes, that the distinction in question does not refer “to a superlative of unlikeness, but to a basic difference between God and the creature, and therefore between the divine being and creaturely views, concepts and words!” (CD II/1, 222).}
Beauty would never become a dominant motif in Western theology, but the core elements articulated by Augustine and Anselm—a desire to acknowledge God as the source and summit of all beauty, combined with a strong sense of ambivalence or caution—would be taken up and reworked by many later theologians. As I hope to show by looking at four distinct rudiments (beauty as revelatory, biblical, perilous and crucial), this is the template Barth will follow in the beauty passage of CD II/1. By volume III of the Church Dogmatics, however, Barth will go beyond Augustine and Anselm by reconceiving creation’s relation to God in thoroughly christocentric terms.

1.3 Barth in Relation to Traditional Protestant Attitudes towards Beauty

One popular stereotype holds that Protestants have little or nothing constructive to say about beauty. In keeping with its founding zeal to critique and correct the perceived errors and excesses of late medieval Roman Catholicism, Protestantism developed a range of disparaging attitudes towards beauty—from hostility to indifference to benign neglect. In effect, the measured appreciation for beauty that we find among the church fathers was replaced by a narrower mindset characterized by suspicion and an attitude of cultural retreat. Beauty came to be viewed as ‘worldly’ in the pejorative sense, i.e., as something ephemeral and therefore insignificant or detrimental to salvation.

There is some truth to this account. As Edward Farley has suggested, there are (historically speaking) three distinct factors that have contributed to the marginalization of beauty within theology and Christian faith: iconoclasm, otherworldliness (with its attendant moral asceticism); and apocalypticism. All three are present in Protestantism, to varying degrees. Moreover, some Protestant thinkers have cast beauty as intrinsically alien to the Christian faith. In the view of Kierkegaard, for example, “Christianity does not at all emphasize the idea of earthly beauty, which was everything to the Greeks; on the contrary… Paul speaks about the earthenware pots in which the spirit dwells.” The history of art—traditionally a locus of beauty in church and society—offers another way to gauge the impact of negative attitudes towards beauty. Hans Rookmaaker offers this blunt

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assessment: “We may acknowledge the deep influence of Calvinist Christianity on the culture and art of the seventeenth century, particularly in Holland. But otherwise we draw a virtual blank. Protestantism as such did not foster the arts.”

In relation to our present discussion, the legacy of Protestant antipathy or ambivalence towards beauty may help to explain why Barth felt compelled to draw inspiration from the patristic church. Like all stereotypes, however, it misleads through oversimplification. A more balanced appraisal of Protestant attitudes towards beauty can help us to see how Barth simultaneously works within and yet goes beyond the bounds of his tradition.

Arguably, the most important, positive contribution Protestants have made to a theological understanding of beauty is in *the constellation of created beauty with divine glory*. The pairing of these concepts is fundamental for Barth; it has deep roots in the Reformed tradition, as when John Calvin (1509 – 1564) invites his readers to view the awe-inducing beauty of nature as a mirror in which they could behold something of the majesty and power of the invisible God. Wherever you cast your eyes, he writes, “there is no spot in the universe wherein you cannot discern at least some sparks of [God’s] glory. You cannot in one glance survey this most vast and beautiful system of the universe, in its wide expanse, without being completely overwhelmed by the boundless force of its brightness.”

Elsewhere, Calvin marvels that God should provide what humanity needs to survive in a way that seems lovingly calibrated to bring about humanity’s delight and joy.

Has the Lord clothed the flowers with the great beauty that greets our eyes, the sweetness of smell that is wafted upon our nostrils, and yet will it be unlawful for our eyes to be affected by that beauty, or our sense of smell by the sweetness of that odor? What? Did he not so distinguish colors as to make some more lovely than others? What? Did he not endow gold and silver, ivory and marble, with a loveliness that renders them more precious than other metals or stones? Did he not, in short, render many things attractive to us, apart from their necessary use?

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56 Rookmaaker, op. cit., 17.


58 Calvin, *Institutes* III.10.2.
One inference to be drawn from Calvin’s comments is that human beings are free to enjoy and celebrate the beauty they find in creation, for this beauty reflects the goodness of God. There is nothing inherently wrong with sensory pleasures. God has placed humanity in a world that is tailor-made to give delight.

Later Reformed theologians followed Calvin by learning to see the intricate order and harmony of creation as one of the clearest and most compelling pieces of evidence for God’s majesty and benevolence. Jonathan Edwards (1703 – 1758) speaks of a resemblance or “great suitableness” obtaining between objects perceived by our senses and the character of the unseen God. Nature’s greatest beauties are often hidden in ways that are beyond human understanding; they yield pleasure without our necessarily knowing why. Most characteristically, Edwards traces the beauty of creation back to the beauty of God. “There is an infinite fullness of all possible good in God,” he writes, “a fullness of every perfection, of all excellency and beauty, and of infinite happiness.” Buoyed by an expansive and hopeful eschatology, Edwards revels in the idea that “[t]he conscious celebration of God’s beauty is the end toward which the whole of creation is drawn.” Belden Lane has helpfully summarized this distinctly Reformed pattern of thought, noting how “…the natural world is a communication of God’s Trinitarian glory that prompts the human heart to a deeper longing.”

Viewed from this vantage point, the glory of God can be linked to creaturely “glorification,” understood not merely as a copy of divinity (as in the imitatio Christi tradition), but as an actual (though vicarious) participation in Jesus’ resurrection life.

Christ, whose glory fills the skies…
Visit then this soul of mine; pierce the gloom of sin and grief;
Fill me, Radiancy divine, scatter all my unbelief;
More and more thyself display, shining to the perfect day.

62 Ibid.
Similar notes ring out clearly from a plethora of Protestant voices: theologians, preachers, poets. What they have in common is a passion for the beauty of holiness; i.e., a life of godly obedience, understood as a process of being conformed to the pattern and person of Jesus Christ.

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit (2 Cor 4:17-18).

Because this change is and can only be wrought by God, its eschatological end—“glory” as perfected life in the kingdom of God—is already in view, despite appearances to the contrary. The promise of future glory alerts believers to a non-material form of beauty that is no less real for being difficult to perceive. Considered as a theological category, “glory” is arguably the richest and most authentically biblical way to map the relations between God’s character, creation’s splendor, and the radiance of human life animated by the Spirit of God (“the glory of God is man fully alive,” claims Irenaeus).64 It should not then surprise us that Barth chooses ‘glory’ as the point of departure for his discussion of beauty.

Of course it is also true, as we have mentioned, that alongside and often overshadowing the positive relation of glory with beauty offered by Edwards and others, Protestantism has a history of disparaging beauty in various ways. For this reason, we must distinguish between attitudes which are, so to speak, needlessly negative, and those which reflect a wise and biblically-formed understanding of human nature and human affairs. At least some of the ambivalence Protestants have historically felt towards beauty has been motivated by the recognition that beauty may be distracting or even deadly to the life of faith.

How so? For the Reformers it was axiomatic that sin pervades every part of creaturely existence, including our faculties of perception. “Although the works of man always seem attractive and good, they are nevertheless likely to be mortal sins,” argues Luther.65 This teaching does not, of course, deny either the objective reality of beauty or its power to move us subjectively. It does imply that our aesthetic judgments, like our moral judgments, are

64 Irenaeus, of Lyons Against Heresies, book IV, chapter XX.7. It is clear from the context that Irenaeus is not making a general, anthropological statement, but a specific Christological claim: the “man fully alive” to whom he refers is none other than Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word. It is the revelation of the Father that comes through this unique Word that gives life to those who see God.

not immune to the effects of sin. The beautiful queen in a fairy tale may be the embodiment of grace—or a witch in disguise. Her beauty may inspire or deceive; it may ennoble the hero to perform great deeds (as in Morris’s *The Well at the World’s End*), or enslave him in a self-destructive ignorance, such that he cannot recognize his own peril (e.g., Lewis’s *The Silver Chair*). The cliché, “beauty is only skin deep,” while banal, reflects a deeply Protestant conviction; namely, that the surface appearance of things often masks or misrepresents the underlying reality. In a fallen world, therefore, beauty cannot always be trusted. Rather, it is likely to be used artfully and cynically to disguise evil and render it desirable—a process we will refer to as *aestheticization*.

Protestants have often displayed a keen understanding of this dynamic and been alert to its potential peril. In Edmund Spenser’s Arthurian epic, *The Faerie Queen*, much of the drama revolves around a series of unfortunate misprisions. In scene after scene, a false image of beauty suffices to fool unwary or unwise characters into believing a lie and acting in less-than-virtuous ways.66 To be sure, Spenser’s poem also offers an occasional image of lasting beauty (e.g., Redcrosse’s pilgrim-assisted vision of the heavenly City), but the characters achieve such moments of true clarity only at rare intervals. Most of the time, they mistake this-worldly beauty for its heavenly analogue and suffer the consequences. “They cannot find that path which first was shewne, / But wander too and fro in waies unknowne.”67 Spenser’s masterful exploration of this trope encapsulates a quintessentially Protestant attitude: being sinful, human beings are prone to make faulty judgments; as a consequence, they may be deceived and misled by false forms of beauty.

A robust doctrine of the fall also implies that the various forms of beauty to be found in creation cannot, on their own, lead people to God. A surer, more definitive witness is required. Calvin frames the matter as a rhetorical question:

66 Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queen, Book One*, edited by Carol V. Kaske (Indianapolis, IN: Hacket Publishing, 2006). Specifically, I have in mind the scenes where, 1) the evil enchanter Archimago forms a Sprite into a likeness of Una, the beautiful daughter of Adam and Eve, in an attempt to seduce Redcrosse (I.1.45f.); 2) Una herself is fooled into thinking that Archimago is Redcrosse (I.2.10); 3) Fraudubio is fooled by the “forged beauty” of the witch, Duessa, and so changed into a tree (I.2.34f. – a Christian variation on the myth of Apollo and Daphne); 4) Redcrosse visits the attractive but deadly house of Pride “much beautified” (I.4.7); and 5) the satyrs behold Una’s beauty and thereupon worship her as a goddess (“All stand astonied at her beautie bright”, I.6.10 and I.6.18).

67 Ibid., I.1.10.
[W]ith regard to the most beautiful structure and order of the universe, how many of us are there who when we lift up our eyes to heaven or cast them about through the various regions of earth, recall our minds to a remembrance of the Creator, and do not rather, disregarding their Author, sit idly in contemplation of his works?\(^68\)

We may reframe Calvin’s concern by suggesting that the relationship between beauty and goodness is ambiguous. Beauty is revelatory, but human beings are unable to receive or respond rightly to its testimony. As Calvin says, the evidence of God in creation does not profit us apart from “another and better help.”\(^69\) Any form of aesthetic revelation must therefore be measured and complemented by the clear teaching of scripture and supported by a life of faithful obedience to God’s commands.

More broadly, this line of thinking assumes that the subjective realization of beauty always and already implies an account of revelation, i.e., a set of claims about how God reveals himself to humanity and how humanity is thereby enabled to recognize and respond in faith, to the end of glorifying and enjoying God forever. The relevant point is that one cannot talk about beauty—its qualities, its possibilities, its meaning for human life and culture—in the abstract, as if our perception and appreciation of beauty were somehow unaffected by the particular circumstances of our creaturely existence, or by the particular way in which God has chosen to enter into that existence as Immanuel, God with us. While the entire *Church Dogmatics* might profitably be read as one long attempt to provide just this sort of doctrinal ‘backstory’ to the life of faith, Barth in *CD II/1* identifies the humanity of Jesus as “the first sacrament, the foundation of everything that God instituted and used in His revelation….\(^70\) And since this is the case, the beauty of who God is and what God does in and through Christ cannot, finally, be separated from the seemingly more accessible and enjoyable beauty of creation. As we will see in the next chapter, Barth’s enthusiasm for beauty is always bounded by his Christology, and not vice versa.

Barth’s reliance on Christology as the definitive measure of the relationship between God and creation puts him at odds with the otherworldliness of much Protestant theology. Far from treating sin as the “impossible possibility,” as Barth does, many Protestants view sin as humanity’s normative condition. This makes it difficult if not impossible to reconcile the beauty of God with the beauty of creation. One finds instead a sharp, almost

\(^68\) Calvin, *Institutes*, I.V.11, 63.
\(^69\) Ibid., 69.
\(^70\) *CD II/1*, 54.
dualistic divide between these two kinds of beauty, and hence a hesitation to trust or invest in the lower, created forms. The great Puritan divine, John Owen (1616 – 1683), offers a useful case study here, for his exposition of the glory of Christ lays a heavy stress upon the radical difference between mortal and eternal life. Owen presumes that the image of God in human nature, though originally “the seat of excellency, of beauty, and of glory,” is now lost and not merely obscured, as the church fathers had generally taught. Certainly it is true that Christ takes on human flesh and makes human nature his own, but the benefits of his incarnation and redemptive work are, for Owen, to be found primarily in the future, not in this present life. Thus Owen juxtaposes the longing for the glory of Christ with the lure of lesser desires, those “sensual lusts and pleasures” that threaten to divert us from everlasting happiness. Aesthetic encounters play no productive role in faith, for the evidence of the senses is a snare to heavenly ambitions. In Owen’s words, “[t]he soul is now parting with all things here below, and that forever. None of all the things which it has seen, heard, or enjoyed, by its outward senses, can be prevailed with to stay with it one hour, or to take one step with it in the voyage wherein it is engaged.” The forms of created beauty—even, in Owen’s case, the manifold splendors of the University of Oxford—are unhelpful in readying the Christian for heavenly glory.

This is not a uniquely Puritan sentiment; no doubt, similar advice could be gleaned from Thomas à Kempis or the desert fathers. But for some early Protestants, regarding the things of this world as an obstacle and not as an aid to faith gained a new appeal and urgency in light of their polemical struggle to excise every vestige of Roman influence. “Simply by virtue of the Reformers’ concentration on God and the activity of God in Christ, on things invisible and unlocatable except in the transformed self, [Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli] are naturally suspicious of what is visible and externally locatable.” What such moral asceticism implies for created forms of beauty may be gauged by Owen’s insistence that the church’s worship naturally

72 Owen, *Glory*, 27. He adds that, “[n]othing was now more vile and base; its glory was utterly departed.”
73 Ibid., 27.
74 Ibid., 34.
devolves into idolatry. Well-intentioned (but nonetheless deluded) Christians “have filled their divine worship with images, pictures, and music to represent to themselves somewhat of that glory which they fancy to be above. For unto the true glory, they have no prospect, or can have….”\textsuperscript{76} On this account, the vision of faith is fundamentally in tension with sensory existence, and therefore with the forms of beauty that are most readily available to us. It follows that the calling of those who desire to behold the glory of Christ is to separate themselves from the taint of the world, so far as this is practicable.

We have seen in this section that Protestant thinking about beauty is more nuanced and positive than is often recognized. While Barth could be interpreted as making a ‘Catholic’ turn by his enthusiastic embrace of beauty and his appreciative use of Augustine and Anselm, the case can also be made that Barth’s treatment of beauty preserves characteristic elements of his Protestant heritage. We will see this above all in Barth’s typically Reformed constellation of beauty with glory, but also in his decision to make beauty a secondary and not a primary category for theology.\textsuperscript{77} Arguably, this decision reflects the same spirit of caution and the same prioritizing of divine glory that one finds in older Protestant sources. Yet if in some ways Barth stays within the pale of Protestant thinking about beauty, in other ways he pushes against some elements of that tradition. Barth rejects any otherworldliness that would bifurcate God from creation, and refuses to let a ‘Puritan’ concern over sin rule out a joyous and free theological investigation of beauty.\textsuperscript{78}

As Barth’s letters and the reminiscences of his friends readily attest, this passion for discovering and defending the many and particular gifts of creation was not only theological and theoretical, but deeply personal and practical, a truth to be found in the course of long walks through the countryside, rousing conversations over good food and wine, and a daily immersion in the music of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Too much of what it means to be human is at stake for Barth to allow negative attitudes towards beauty to prevail.

\textsuperscript{76} Owen, \textit{Glory}, 50. The beauty of Christ is utterly unique and beyond compare. “Only by a view of the glory of Christ by faith here may we attain such blessed conceptions of our beholding His glory above by immediate vision that our hearts shall be drawn to admire it and desire its full enjoyment.”

\textsuperscript{77} \textit{CD} II/1, 652.

\textsuperscript{78} \textit{CD} II/1, 654.
1.4 THE FATE OF BEAUTY IN THE MODERN AGE

One benefit of considering patristic and medieval understandings of beauty alongside Protestant attitudes is that certain basic similarities come into view. The tension or ambivalence we find in Augustine and Anselm reappears in Calvin and Owen, even if the motivations that inform this view of beauty vary from one thinker to another. Barth’s understanding of beauty stands in continuity with these earlier theologians, even if he disagrees with them at some critical points. Where does Barth stand in relation to beauty, as it has been understood in the modern period?

1.4.1 A Loss of Participation

The status of beauty in modernity might be compared to a queen living in exile. In areas of life and culture where beauty has traditionally been perceived and celebrated—in the arts, the natural world, in marriage and friendship, and in the church—beauty’s influence has receded and its once-clear witness has been obscured. Likewise in modern theology, beauty has not disappeared completely, but lingers on as, at best, a marginal theme. Edward Farley probably speaks for many modern theologians when he confesses that his theological project has neglected beauty by ignoring the aesthetic dimensions of daily life. “It was as if the most concrete way in which human beings experience their world… had no place in the world of faith.”79 Farley’s admission echoes a claim made by Balthasar, that beauty has become “a word which both imperceptibly and yet unmistakably has bid farewell to our new world, a world of interests, leaving it to its own avarice and sadness.”80 Yet why this should be the case? What has happened in recent centuries, that beauty should be cast aside from the exalted place it once occupied?

79 Farley, op. cit., vii.
80 Balthasar, Form, 18.
A long list of contributing factors might be offered in explanation. Broadly speaking, the passage from the medieval to the modern world entails a fundamental shift (or series of shifts) in thought and perception, perhaps most dramatically the erosion of what Owen Barfield calls “original participation.” Barfield uses this term to describe a tacit awareness of one’s deep connection to creation. Within this mindset, as we have seen, beauty is that which evokes desire, bestows delight, and summons persons to love. While beauty may be described in formal terms—proportion, harmony, and so forth—these aspects are not conceived as mathematical abstractions, but as instances where the mind had essentially grasped something of the underlying truth and mystery of the world. “The mind rejoices in the beautiful because in the beautiful it finds itself again: recognizes itself, and comes into contact with its very own light.” John Milbank ventures to summarize this way of perceiving the world: “the possibility and experience of seeing the invisible in the visible, or of seeing the invisible as invisible… was [in the Middle Ages] generally assumed and pervaded life, art and understanding.” In modernity, by contrast, “there is no mediation of the invisible in the visible, and no aura of invisibility hovering around the visible. In consequence there is no beauty.” Only when influential writers and thinkers began to insist upon measuring reality by the limits of their own subjectivity, did a significant break occur.

At what point did this occur? Louis Dupré suggests that the early humanists and Renaissance artists were still able to maintain a constructive, dialectical tension. “The artist complemented and corrected nature, yet he never

81 The causes of beauty’s exile are complex, as attested by the various accounts of the birth of modernity. The most comprehensive is that of Charles Taylor, A Secular Age (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).


84 John Milbank, “Beauty and the Soul” in Theological Perspectives on God and Beauty (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 2. Such an abstract claim could presumably be demonstrated in any number of ways. We are reminded of the peculiar way in which women and men of the medieval period assumed the hourly influence of heavenly bodies (see John Livingston Lowes, “Time in the Middle Ages” in The Norton Reader, sixth edition (New York: Norton, 1984), 722 – 727). Alternately, we might construe the medieval preoccupation with angels and their places in the celestial hierarchy as evidence that the shared conception of what exists had not yet been pared down to what can be unambiguously proven along scientific or ‘positivist’ lines.

85 John Milbank, op. cit., 3.
ceased to consider himself an integral part of it.”

Leonardo da Vinci, whom Dupré regards as a transitional figure, retains the belief that “artistic form must be discovered in and extracted from nature.” This conviction implies a deep consonance between subject and object, between the mind and the natural world. Beauty will be found at their intersection, not only by artists, but by anyone attuned to the evident splendor of God’s creation. By the seventeenth century, however, this mode of ‘participation’ came under serious threat in the West.

Following the lead of Descartes, among others, people in the West began to measure reality by the limits of their subjective thoughts and experiences. As a result, they gradually came to feel as if they were on the outside looking in at reality, rather than being immersed and involved in it. The typical modern person is, as the novelist Walker Percy puts it, “lost in the cosmos.”

Both the causes and the effects of this shift were well documented by the Romantic poets. It is, for instance, the doubting and dislocated state of the modern mind that animates Wordsworth’s well-known lament:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;  
Little we see in Nature that is ours;  
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

To Wordsworth it is clear that advances in Western civilization have not been achieved without a corresponding loss of holistic feeling and imagination. To be “too much” with the world is to lose touch with the things of the spirit. For Samuel Taylor Coleridge, likewise, modernity has led to the eclipse of “meditative joy” and the weakening of humanity’s humble capacity to perceive “Religious meanings in the forms of Nature”.

In place of the older, simpler, more holistic way of being in the world, Coleridge diagnoses a prideful way of life. England’s dominant position in the world has been built, he fears, on a foundation of political oppression abroad and hollow sanctimony at home.

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87 Ibid., 51.
All individual dignity and power
Engulfed in Courts, Committees, Institutions,
Associations and Societies,
A vain, speech-mouthing, speech-reporting Guild,
One Benefit-Club for mutual flattery,
We have drunk up, demure as at a grace,
Pollutions from the brimming cup of wealth;
… the Book of Life is made
a superstitious instrument, on which
We gabble o’er the oaths we mean to break91

If truth and beauty are intertwined (or identical, as Keats claimed), then a breakdown in truthful speech cannot help but damage humanity’s perception and appreciation of beauty. This in turn has consequences for humanity’s relation to the natural world. Writing in the mid-nineteenth century, Gerard Manley Hopkins registers his sorrow and indignation at the ongoing and unthinking destruction of England’s pastoral landscape.

O if we but knew what we do
    When we delve or hew—
Hack and rack the growing green!
    Since country is so tender
To touch, her being so slender,
That, like this sleek and seeing ball
    But a prick will make no eye at all…
After-comers cannot guess the beauty been.92

The poem suggests that, by learning to treat the world instrumentally, modern persons (“After-comers”) have actually lost the ability to recognize and revere the hidden but real relations between things. The relations in question are between the individual (acting, in Hopkins’s case, as a devout observer of the “sweet especial rural scene”), a row of venerable trees, and the Isis river which forms the city of Oxford’s western boundary. The poem implies that a loss of perception translates to a loss of participation; only those who no longer feel a part of the landscape could countenance the wanton cutting of the Binsey poplars. By this very act, they confirm their blindness to a local and irreparable beauty.93

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91 Ibid., lines 54 – 60; 70 – 73.
93 Contemporary analogues are not difficult to find. The founding assumption of global capitalism seems to be that the flourishing of some people and some places requires other people in other places to be exploited, degraded, or ruined (here I have in mind Wendell Berry’s argument in “Out of Your Car, Off Your Horse” from Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community (New York: Pantheon, 1992), 19 – 26). Indeed, the recent push towards “sustainability” in many industries can be read as a belated acknowledgement that the aim of achieving unlimited material progress with
1.4.2 Beauty and Sublimity

The argument of this section so far has been that beauty’s exile in modernity is largely due to the loss of a participatory worldview. Not only are modern persons alienated from themselves, but from nature (indeed, the habit of thinking of creation as ‘nature’ already presupposes a loss of participation). To the extent that beauty involves a subjective response to an objective quality, this loss of participation would seem to weaken the possibility of perceiving beauty. Arguably, a second contributing factor is the emergence in modernity of a sharp distinction between the beautiful and the sublime.

The classical ideal of beauty included, or could conceivably include, a sense of rapture, i.e., a feeling of being inspired, transported, or overcome by wonder. Earlier we referred to Plato’s ‘ladder of love’ and Augustine’s confessional prayers to “Beauty ever ancient and ever new” as examples of this trope. To this way of thinking, the archetypal metaphor for the human response to beauty is that of ascent. Motivated by a taste or a glimpse of what we desire, we press onward and upward, hoping for a deeper experience of delight. Dante’s journey up the seven-storey mountain might be adduced here as perhaps the perfect symbol of this aspiration, for it answers the question of how human beings may achieve the beatific vision. It is significant that Dante is always accompanied on his quest, first by Virgil and later by Beatrice; this detail invites us to see beauty as an intrinsically dynamic and relational phenomenon, as something that accompanies, enables, and embodies the human longing for God.

While the specific details of this ascent will of course vary from person to person, beauty’s role as a catalyst for desire remains relatively constant.

The modern sublime points in a very different direction. In his classic treatise on the subject, Longinus treats sublimity as a rhetorical effect, whereby a poet or speaker elicits not merely agreement, but ecstasy in the
hearer. Following Boileau’s translation in 1674, however, various writers began to speak of the sublime in 
relation to art, nature, and religion. To experience the sublime was to be overwhelmed, awestruck by something 
that exceeds our perceptual and cognitive grasp. In contrast to beauty, which had always tended to incorporate 
notions of order and integrity, the sublime was conceived as a disorienting force. The guiding metaphor ceases to 
be the ascent, and becomes instead the abyss, for in the sublime we are confronted by “the absolutely unknowable 
void, upon whose brink we finite beings must dizzily hover.” In this experience of shock and rupture there can 
be no guide, nor indeed any companions. The journey through life becomes a solitary endeavor, as is evident in 
Caspar David Friedrich’s famous painting of the wanderer staring out over a sea of fog.

This shift in imagery from the ascent to the abyss alerts us to the theological trouble inherent in the dichotomy 
between the beautiful and the sublime. As David Bentley Hart explains, the new prominence of the sublime 
masks an “irreducible metaphysical assumption”; namely, that “the unrepresentable (call it difference, chaos, being, 
altery, the infinite…) is somehow truer than the representable (which necessarily dissembles it), more original, 
and qualitatively other…” If the sublime alone is thought to offer an experience of the depths, then the 
beautiful must necessarily be limited to the surface of things. Hence it is that, in modernity, beauty comes to be 
identified with mere prettiness, or with trivial matters of décor. In arguably its most potent form—that of 
Immanuel Kant—the sublime lends itself to a distorted account of God’s relation to the world. Hart, again, 
highlights this defect of Kant’s critical project:

[B]eauty does not speak of the good, nor the good of being. Questions of the good, of being, of value, of 
the possibility of appearance itself do not so much exceed the world as stand over against it; truth is not, 
finally, the seen, but the unseen that permits one to see. With the dissolution of an ontology of the 
transcendent, of that infinite eminence in which what appears participates, every discourse that would 
attempt to speak not only of the things of the world but also of the event of the world must inevitably 
resort to the mysticism of the sublime and its dogmatisms...

Approach the Beyond, edited by Regina M. Schwartz (New York: Routledge, 2004), 211.
97 Hart, ibid., 51-2.
The problem, briefly, is that an inflexible dichotomy between beauty and sublimity yields a domesticated transcendence and a flawed doctrine of creation. Transcendence is domesticated insofar as the mind always retains a degree of mastery, even when faced with an experience of the sublime. Oddly, this is so for Kant because human beings continue to think rationally about the fact that they feel overwhelmed. Ben Quash captures this quirk of Kant’s thought, noting how “[e]ven the most violent, majestic, crushing magnitude of nature is finally contained by reason’s contemplation.” The view of creation is flawed insofar as nature is not valued in its own right, but only as the occasion for sublime feelings. Within a Kantian framework, as Nicholas Adams points out, “particulars are, at the deepest level, of no consequence.”

What implications might this material have, with respect to our attempt to understand the context for Barth’s retrieval of beauty? A theological response to the critical problems raised by the sublime would seem to require at least three distinct lines of argument. First, it would seem necessary to offer a non-competitive account of the relation between God and the world. Given the incarnation, transcendence need not be opposed absolutely to immanence, for such an opposition would imply that revelation is inherently unreliable or incomplete. Second, there is a clear need to safeguard the integrity of creation. By this I mean that creation, having been judged by God to be good, has beauty as a given quality of its existence. Its value, therefore, does not depend upon human response, judgment, or approval. Of course humans may be—and in truth often are—insensible of creation’s beauty. This leads us, third, to the issue of responding fittingly to the beauty that surrounds us. A theological response would do well to reintegrate the sublime, perhaps by showing how the sense of awe and wonder that human beings often feel in the presence of overwhelming grandeur, is a distinctive and vital aspect of beauty, not an entirely unrelated phenomenon. If this assessment is correct, we will need at some stage to consider the extent to which Barth’s rudimentary theology of beauty satisfies these considerations, and promotes a suitably participatory understanding of reality.

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1.4.3 The Rise of Modern Aesthetics and Aestheticism

It might seem strange to describe beauty as being ‘in exile’ during an age when prominent cultural movements arose with the express aim of exalting beauty to a place of honor. We are thinking here especially of the emergence of ‘aesthetics’ as a distinct academic discipline in the eighteenth century, and of the ‘aestheticism’ movement in the nineteenth century. Some explanation is in order.

Modern aesthetics arose partly from a conceptual conundrum that had never been definitively settled, either in antiquity or in the medieval period. If beauty may be either ideal or sensual, spiritual or corporeal, objectively grounded or subjectively interpreted, then is not the range it has been tasked to cover simply too broad to be useful? This doubt—call it the tension between metaphysical and numerical theories of beauty—motivated Hutcheson, Burke, and the other eighteenth century British thinkers to conceive of aesthetics as a new discipline, not a sub-field of philosophy, theology, or even of art. For example, they could not reconcile Plato’s claim that beauty be immediately perceptible with the equally venerable notion of beauty as proportionate. Evaluating proportion requires reason, which in turn requires time to think, to measure, to test. Rather than continue the search for a resolution to such problems, the early aestheticians eventually gave up on the project of finding a common property, standard, or formula that could be said to apply to beauty in all cases. With respect to art, “what made paintings ‘work’ seemed poorly captured by the way beauty had been classically formulated.” Yet the eighteenth century alternative—to recast beauty as a matter of subjective judgment—made it increasingly difficult to take beauty seriously as a viable means of encountering and describing a reality outside of the mind. The outcome of these changes was that beauty was reduced to one out of many concepts in the crowded new field of aesthetics.

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Ancient conceptions of beauty, both classical and Christian, were frequently linked with love. By contrast, modern aesthetics made it possible for a typical person of the times—the man of privilege and power, whom Barth calls the “absolute man”—to view “the supreme spiritual gift” not as the practice of love, but as the possession of taste. Taste needs, of course, to be cultivated, and so the idea of “aesthetic education” took root. One might think that an appreciation for beauty in its various forms would go hand in hand with an appreciation for truth in the form of Christian doctrine. Yet this did not prove to be the case for many of Europe’s most influential thinkers. For Friedrich Schiller (1759 – 1805), devotion to truth and beauty is essentially unrelated to religious devotion, since neither value is limited to the tenets of orthodox Christianity. Indeed, some of the most barbed criticism in Schiller’s influential treatise, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, is reserved for the Christian faithful who (as he saw it) cling stubbornly to old dogmas in the face of the modern spirit. In his view, “we should be rightly contemptuous of those… [who] prefer the twilight of obscure conceptions… to the beams of truth which dispel the fond delusion of their dreams.”

Schiller is by no means an isolated case. The new discipline of aesthetics takes flight at the same time that Enlightenment challenges to Christian faith begin to seem insuperable. As Roger Lundin acutely observes, this is not a coincidence. “The harder it became to trust in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—and Jesus Christ—the more beguiling it became to believe in beauty, entire and alone.” Increasingly, it was felt that an aesthetic education required one to look elsewhere than to the trappings and teachings of the historic church. As a result, beauty comes more and more to be understood without reference to God, the church, or the Christian life.

A variation on this theme would play out decades later in the celebrated ‘cult of beauty’ and the movement known as ‘aestheticism,’ for “[i]t was in the nineteenth century that men and women began to realize that the world outside themselves had nothing to say to them.” In an increasingly secular culture uprooted from the biblical witness and in flight from church authority and tradition, beauty became for many people

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103 Karl Barth, Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 19.
105 Lundin, op. cit., 191.
106 Ibid., 199.
the best available candidate to take God’s place—a kind of substitute religion. Like traditional faith, beauty offered rapture, required worship, and promised to inscribe purpose and meaning on quotidian life.

Perhaps no European writer illustrates this ideological drift better than Charles Baudelaire (1821 – 1867), whose hymn to beauty finely articulates both a sincere desire for transcendence and a deep pessimism about the prospect of linking beauty to either goodness or truth.

Viens-tu du ciel profond our sors-tu de l’abîme,  
O Beauté, ton regard, infernal et divin,  
Verse confusément le bienfait et le crime,  
Et l’on peut pour cela to comparer au vin.  
…  
Que tu viennes du ciel ou de l’enfer, qu’importe,  
O Beauté! Monstre énorme, effrayant, ingénû!  
Si ton œil, ton souris, ton pied, m’ouvrent la porte  
D’un Infini que j’aime et n’ai jamais connu?107

For Baudelaire it seems not to matter where beauty comes from, whether heaven or hell, so long as it opens him to experiences of the greatest depth and mystery. As in the dictum, “art for art’s sake,” the aesthete’s love for beauty is essentially mystical: he wants to be lifted above the fray of political, social, and religious considerations that can threaten to undermine the integrity of art. Less laudably, however, this apathy towards the metaphysical origin of beauty finalizes a divorce from the older notion that artists were morally and spiritually accountable for the content of their art, and not solely for its making. It is clear that by the late nineteenth century, beauty had

107 Charles Baudelaire, “Hymne à la Beauté” in Flowers of Evil, edited by Marthiel and Jackson Mathews (New York: New Directions, 1955), 28. As with Edgar Allan Poe (whom Baudelaire greatly admired), and as with the symbolist poets to follow, a great part of shock of his writing derives from the disjunction between, on the one hand, Baudelaire’s radically amoral vision, and on the other, his astonishing poetic talent. Could it be that beauty is to be approached only through the portal of art, and has nothing to do with either goodness or truth? Yet aestheticism was not necessarily a morally frivolous enterprise. It could take the form of a serious quest to cope with the problem of human finitude. For the Oxford don Walter Pater, for example, aestheticism names a way of living fully and attentively in the moment, conscious of life’s extreme brevity. Pater found himself fascinated with the mysterious way in which all of life, both external doings and mental processes, exists in a state of flux—flaring into momentary fullness, then passing away. And since this is the case, Pater asks, how then shall we live? “The service of philosophy, of speculative culture, towards the human spirit is,” he answers, “to rouse, to startle it into sharp and eager observation. […] Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end.” From this Heraclitean vantage point, success in life is “to burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy…. Aestheticism in Pater’s sense thus requires one to pay studious attention to the living of life—not merely theorizing or accustoming oneself to the expected routines of work, church, school, or family. In its purest form, aestheticism offered a bold critique and repudiation of bourgeois mentality, from which the liberal Protestant theologians of the nineteenth century could have learned a great deal. Walter Pater, “Conclusion,” in Selections from Walter Pater (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1901), 21-22.
become a highly effete and secularized ideal, a rival to historic Christian faith rather than an integral aspect of it.\textsuperscript{108}

For Karl Barth, by way of sharpest contrast, it matters enormously where beauty ‘comes from.’ If beauty is to be included in theology, its presence is justified not because it is inherently fascinating (though it is), or potentially useful (beauty is rarely useful), but because God “is beautiful, divinely beautiful, beautiful in His own way, in a way that is His alone, beautiful as the unattainable primal beauty, yet really beautiful.”\textsuperscript{109} If, as Barth argues, theology is bound to its unique object—God—then beauty’s omission from theology can only mean that the theologian has failed to catch sight of something essential.

1.4.4 Beauty Lost and Found

To put matters simply, the loss of beauty has come at a cost. Some have cast this in terms of a grand narrative of cultural dissolution, where the unraveling of Western culture is related in complex ways to beauty’s exile. Balthasar perceives a connection between the loss of beauty and the general sense of dislocation that haunts the West: “in a world which is perhaps not wholly without beauty, but which can no longer see it or reckon with it… the good also loses its attractiveness, the self-evidence of why it must be carried out.” Moreover, he says, “the proofs of the truth have lost their cogency. […] The very conclusions are no longer conclusive.”\textsuperscript{110} Others see the loss of beauty as an indictment of the church, a sad result of its longstanding failure to be salt and light in the world. Thus Makoto Fujimura laments the church’s unwillingness to become stewards of the wider culture in

\textsuperscript{108} Evidence for this hypothesis might readily be gathered from the ostensibly Christian art of the late Romantic period. A surfeit of examples from painting, hymnody, and architecture would show just how debasedly sentimental the church’s aesthetic had become, and therefore how necessary it had become to look elsewhere for beauty. Thus Hans Rookmaker describes a set of wall paintings by the in the town hall of Antwerp: “what do we see? People from a past period, full of faith, reverent, praying – but we do not see the object of faith, the crucified Christ. This is typical [of nineteenth century painting]. The whole scene is designed to create an atmosphere of the golden times of the past, when people were still full of faith—it is all very beautiful and fine. But the focus is on the faithful men and women, not on the content of their faith. The crucifix, Christ himself, has been left outside the picture-frame” (Modern Art, 43). Theologically, the problem is that beauty in the mode of sentimentality amounts to a denial of truth. On this theme, see J.S. Begbie, “Beauty, Sentimentality and the Arts” in The Beauty of God (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 45 – 69.

\textsuperscript{109} CD II/1, 650.

\textsuperscript{110} Balthasar, Form, 19.
ways that would allow the beauty of the gospel to shine forth for centuries to come. Fra Angelico, he suggests, is one who succeeded in answering “the five-hundred-year question”; namely, how believing artists may create lasting beauty in the midst of a fallen world through obedience to their vocation. Art, to be sure, is not theology, and beauty on its own does not replace truth and goodness, but forms of created beauty (including the arts) would seem to be vital if believers are to live in the light of God’s revelation, and not merely think or speak. Perhaps aestheticism’s impulse to seek beauty in all its purity is the right one, only wrongly deflected (as Augustine feared) from its rightful object. And for this, the church is at least partially to blame.

The gradual disappearance of beauty from theology has been notable in both Protestant and Catholic spheres, though in different ways and for different reasons. In the case of Protestantism, Balthasar names the root problem as the polemical desire to rid the church of everything that does not fit with one’s own reading of the gospel. Among the early reformers, Martin Luther comes in for heavy criticism on this score:

> Every form which man tries to impose on revelation in order to achieve an overview that makes comprehension possible—for this is presupposed in beauty—every such form must disintegrate in the face of the ‘contradiction’, the concealment of everything divine under its opposite, the concealment, that is, of all proportions and analogies between God and man in dialectic.

Once protesting became a normative principle, it becomes impossible to stop. And once the church has been pulled to pieces, it becomes exceedingly difficult to see the beauty of its God-given unity. Balthasar finds it ironic and yet fitting that Protestants are divided among themselves—some groups emphasizing an highly external form of religion (legalism), others dwelling on the importance of “inwardness” and the individual’s relationship to God (pietism). He thinks the recovery of beauty would be served by learning to appreciate the church’s contemplative tradition; both the outward and the inward dimensions are necessary, and no beauty—and certainly, no beautiful theology—is possible without a holistic understanding of faith.

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112 Not surprisingly, Balthasar is far more comfortable than Barth in praising the value of such forms. Where for Balthasar things like marriage or the Christian life possess a kind of Platonic timelessness (“to be a Christian is precisely a form,” *Form*, 27 – 8), Barth tends to accent God’s initiative and what might be called the ‘event quality’ of God’s revelation. As we will see in chapter four, this difference becomes problematic in relation to the Eucharist.

In the case of Roman Catholicism, Balthasar singles out the severance of philosophy from theology that took place in early modernity. The long-term consequence of this breakup, he suggests, was a loss of a sense that theological work could be shaped dynamically through the practitioner's participation in the Holy Spirit.

The work of Aquinas, and also that of Anselm, Bonaventure, and Albert the Great, radiates the beauty of a human power of shaping and structuring which has been supernaturally in-formed…. It makes no difference whether or not they are expressly speaking of the beautiful, or even whether or not they are conscious of the aesthetic moment as they methodologically order and elucidate their material…. They would not enjoy such a shaping power… if their talents had not themselves been transformed through and through by the Spirit’s shaping power: if, that is to say, these theologians were not in a Christian sense ecstatics, had not been caught up and drawn into the unity of enthusiasm and holiness.114

What is noteworthy about this description is the degree to which it might reasonably be applied to Barth and his *Church Dogmatics*. Considered quantitatively, the beauty passage in *CD* II/1 is negligible, a proverbial drop in the bucket. Considered as a small yet essential part of a much larger (and indeed unending) whole, however, the beauty passage embodies some of the virtues of Barth’s best work—not least the sense, as Balthasar says, of being “caught up and drawn into” the wonder of God’s self-revelation. We can put the point more strongly by noting that what Barth has to say about beauty is not offered in the mode of explanation (i.e., “This is what Christians believe about beauty…”), but in the mode of witness (“This is who God reveals himself to be…”).115 Barth confessed to feeling a new freedom at the outset of this undertaking: “with polemic behind me, I could simply go over to the doctrine of God and describe in positive terms what and who God is.”116 Hence his treatment of beauty will not be abstract, but highly particular—indeed, so particular that one of the reader’s challenges is to determine how widely Barth’s account of beauty may be applied. Rudimentary, fragmentary, and

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114 Balthasar, *Form*, 78.

115 For this distinction between explanation and witness I am indebted to Stanley Hauerwas’s discussion of Barth’s peculiarly unapologetic theology. See chapter 6 (“The Witness that was Karl Barth”) in *With the Grain of the Universe* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001), 141 – 171.

116 Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 284. Part of this freedom, evidently, was a new seriousness of purpose. Upon turning fifty the previous year, Barth had come to a new realization of his need to focus: “[f]or anyone who still has time and a goal to reach, this can only mean that everything and everyone become more sharply etched…. Now is the time when everything seems to be extremely serious, as indeed it is. One has to decide whether the gift of this short life also involves a responsibility and whether one has properly understood this responsibility, for all one’s stupidity and perverseness. There is also the question whether despite one’s own unfaithfulness, one has accepted this responsibility gratefully as a sign of the free grace of God” (277).
suggestive rather than prescriptive, Barth’s treatment of beauty is certainly not a treatise (as one critic calls it), so much as a brilliantly realized cadenza. That Barth attempted such a retrieval of beauty in such a joyful and confident way, is all the more remarkable given the context in which he found himself called to write and teach.

1.5 BARTH’S IMMEDIATE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

After beginning his academic career in Germany, Barth returned to his native Switzerland in the fall of 1935, taking up a teaching post at Basel “as though nothing had happened.” But of course much had already happened in Germany—Barth was relieved from his faculty position in Bonn for speaking out against the Nazis and refusing to take the required oath of allegiance to Adolf Hitler—and much more was about to happen, both in Germany and throughout Europe. As part of our attempt to read Barth’s theology of beauty in context, a final layer to consider is the immediate political and ecclesial situation in Germany in the years leading up to World War II.

The situation, very briefly, was as follows. Desperate for economic stability, national unity, and cultural restoration following their defeat in the first World War, the German people turned to the Nazi party (NSDAP) in 1933, electing Hitler to the office of Reich Chancellor. Throughout the mid-thirties Hitler then worked to consolidate his power through a series of calculated steps (e.g. the Enabling Act of 1933, which allowed him to pass legislation at will, without the input of the German parliament). In effect, democratic rule was replaced by a totalitarian state. Every mediating institution was gradually either co-opted or suppressed; personal freedoms were curtailed and dissent effectively stifled.

This new state of affairs placed the churches in a terrible crucible, pitting patriotism against faithful Christian witness. Most Christians were proud of being German, and wanted to support the state. Moreover, the rise of a strong leader after the humiliations of Versailles and the economic and cultural chaos of the Weimar Republic was widely perceived as a providential gift to the nation. In the eyes of millions of Germans, Hitler was clearly

117 Ibid., 266.
Germany’s Savior. On the other hand, a disturbing body of evidence pointed exactly in the opposite direction—to Nazism as a mortal threat to Christian faith. This was the subtext of the Barmen Declaration, a “theological lifeline” Barth helped to write in May of 1934: “We reject the false doctrine, as though the church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God’s revelation.”

Barmen, however, was intended as a statement of theological principle, not as a guide to action. Current events would soon expose the regime’s latent hostility as well as the churches’ impotence in responding to an existential threat. Remarkably, the state-sponsored murder of several prominent clergy in June of 1934 prompted no great outcry or protest. Some decisive steps towards self-governance were taken at the Dahlem Synod in October, only to be renounced a month later by a block of ministers seeking to make the church more acceptable to the Nazi government.

In his dealings with the churches, Hitler proved a master strategist. Broadly speaking, his regime followed a threefold strategy. The first goal was to take administrative control, subsuming the church to the state. This was attempted primarily through the ‘German Christian’ movement and the creation of a single Reich Church under the state-appointed Bishop Muller. The concordat agreed with the Vatican served a similar purpose, as did the later creation of the ‘Church Ministry’ in July of 1935. A second line of attack was ideological: to develop a new notion of German identity. The efforts of Joseph Goebbels and the propaganda ministry were instrumental here in fashioning a revisionist narrative of German greatness. Other officials, such as Hanns Kerrl, head of the Church Ministry, deliberately sought to blur any distinction between a Christian and a National Socialist

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119 Karl Barth, *The German Church Conflict* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1965), 41-6. Busch adds that, “while [the Confessing Church] had stumbled on the right insights (Barmen) and resolutions (Dahlem), increasingly and in the end irrevocably it allowed itself to be prevented form taking the relevant action” (op. cit., 254).

120 As Richard Evans notes, the new ministry was given wide-ranging powers. “Pastors were banned from preaching, or had their pay stopped. They were forbidden to teach in schools. All theological students were ordered to join Nazi organizations. An important Protestant publishing house was confiscated and a Protestant church in Munich demolished…[and] by the end of 1937, over 700 Protestant pastors in the country had been imprisoned.” Evans, *The Third Reich in Power* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 230.

121 The work of Alfred Rosenberg (author of *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*) and the more fanatical wing of the Nazi party can also be seen in this light. See Evans ad loc.
outlook. The Nazis’ third approach was more direct. The Gestapo pursued a policy of violent intimidation characterized by arbitrary arrests, imprisonments, beatings, and the forcible removal of offending persons to concentration camps.\textsuperscript{122} As Conway explains, these three lines of attack were often pursued simultaneously, and in an unpredictable fashion.

\[\text{It was part of Hitler’s tortuous planning that he encouraged the protagonists of his three-pronged attack to rival and even to compete against one another, thus enabling him to maintain his own paramount position and to conduct his campaign according to whichever strategy seemed at the time to be the most advantageous.}\textsuperscript{123}

Hitler’s essentially pragmatic policy towards the churches was driven by his overarching aim of increasing and maintaining power. Thus, while he intended eventually to do away with the churches, Hitler astutely recognized the immediate need for empty promises leavened by tactical concessions.\textsuperscript{124}

The years 1936—1937 marked the zenith of the Nazis’ ideological campaign against the churches.\textsuperscript{125} From 1937 onwards, open persecution became the new norm. Hitler’s willingness to allow the Gestapo a freer rein coincided with a series of foreign policy triumphs: the annexation of Austria (March 1938), the Munich agreement (September 1938), and subsequent takeover of Czechoslovakia. By the middle of 1938, Heinrich Himmler could write with satisfaction that, “the situation in the churches was characterized by weariness with the struggle, by uncertainty of purpose and by lack of courage.”\textsuperscript{126} Distracted by the seeming success of the nation and deprived of leaders—Barth across the border in Basel, a strident but isolated voice; Niemöller in prison from 1937 onwards—the Confessing Church withered to insignificance.\textsuperscript{127}

Looking back at the plight of the Christian churches under National Socialism, one can point to occasional moments of clarity and resistance—to Barmen’s forthright rejection of any other standard apart from the Word

\textsuperscript{122} Conway, Nazi Persecution, 168 f.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 96.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 40.
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 141.
\textsuperscript{126} This statement is attributed to an annual report by Heinrich Himmler cited by Conway, 220 (cf. F. Zipfel, Kirchenkampf in Deutschland, Berlin 1965, Note I/61, p. 378).
\textsuperscript{127} This story is told in illuminating detail by Victoria Barnett, For the Soul of the People: Protestant Protest Against Hitler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).
of God, or to Niemöller’s leadership in forming the “Pastors Emergency League”—but the larger story of the Confessing Church was, in Barth’s words, “no glorious chronicle for its participants, no heroic or saintly story.”128 Rather, it was a tragic story of gradual accommodation leading to near-total capitulation. In spite of incontrovertible evidence of persecution, in spite of explicit warnings from church leaders both home and abroad, in spite of the ongoing mistreatment and incipient holocaust of the Jews, the majority of Christians in Germany could not fathom the idea that the Führer could be working to deceive them, or that he would cynically use every available means to effect their ruin.129 Precisely how and why the churches failed is a question that has haunted survivors and puzzled scholars ever since.

Barth’s own answer is that the German Christians’ attempted fusion of traditional Christianity with a race-based nationalism should not be seen as a new development, but as the latest in a long series of well-intentioned, but catastrophic accommodations made by the church, stemming from its desire to keep in line with the spirit of the age.130 The name Barth gives to these collective phenomena is “the condominion of natural theology in the Church.”131 They share a willingness to acknowledge other sources of authority besides the Bible; revelation can be accessed “in reason, in conscience, in the emotions, in history, in nature, and in culture and its achievements and developments.”132

From the vantage point of our study, an awareness of the political and ecclesial background to Barth’s theology of beauty is worthwhile for two reasons. The first is simply a matter of timing. Barth wrote Church Dogmatics II/1 over a two-year period, beginning in the summer of 1937. This means that his theology of beauty was not

128 Barth, Church Conflict, 45.
130 “Exactly the same thing had happened a the beginning of the 18th century with the reviving of humanism of the Stoa; or a century later with Idealism; or, in its train, with Romanticism; and then with the positivism of the bourgeois society and scholarship of the 19th century; and the nationalism of the same period; and a little later socialism: they had all wanted to have their say in the Church” (CD II/1, 174).
131 CD II/1, 175.
132 CD II/1, 173. One thinks here of Goethe, Beethoven, et al. Barth ruefully observes that, by the time the Nazi threat was upon the church, “it was about two hundred years too late to make any well-founded objection” (174).
developed in seclusion or tranquility, but in a time of intense trial for the churches in Germany. Unless Barth
was hopelessly out of touch with the times, pursuing his theological agenda with no thought for its
contemporary relevance, his theological retrieval of beauty—anchored as it is in revelation and scripture, mindful
as it is of both the peril and the necessity of beauty—cannot be read as an exercise in aestheticism (i.e., an
emphasis on beauty divorced from all ethical considerations). On the contrary, he might have dared to hope that
a theologically grounded understanding of beauty would inoculate his fellow Christians against the Fascist
aesthetic of the Nazi state.

The second reason involves terminology. One can speak of Nazi ideology as heresy, or of the churches’ embrace
of Nazism as a case study in idolatry, or of the churches’ failure to act on their confessions as apostasy. These
traditional terms are accurate, but they do not fully capture a key feature of the German church struggle; namely,
the “Hitler myth”—the widely-held, heroic image of the Führer, imputing to him characteristics and motives that
were at crass variance with reality. As Ian Kershaw explains, “Hitler’s involvement in the attack on the
Churches and his ultimate responsibility for it could… only partially and dimly be glimpsed through the miasma
of Führer adulation emanating from the Nazi propaganda machine.” The popular press, visual art, film,
music—all manner of media were targeted for appropriation by Nazi propagandists and by the Ministry of
Culture. The annual Nuremberg rallies, meanwhile, showed how traditional elements of Christian liturgy could
be transformed into an intoxicating, idolatrous spectacle. Arguably, the term that best describes the lure of the

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133 While some might object that Barth was by this time safely ensconced in Switzerland and therefore no
longer in danger, this misses the degree to which Barth remained committed to the cause of his fellow
Christians in Germany. If anything, he became even more active on their behalf, even more convinced of the
mortal and spiritual peril posed by Nazism. As Busch helpfully details, Barth’s activism took many forms:
giving aid to exiled scholars; arranging grants and jobs for émigrés; opening his home to non-Aryans; carrying
on a brisk correspondence with leaders of foreign churches (the bishop of Chichester, George Bell, for
example); interceding for political prisoners; warning the Swiss churches of the implications of events just
across the border; and receiving a steady stream of visitors, all while teaching and writing at full speed. Barth
believed he could see “much better from a distance” just “how dangerously the Confessing Church is swaying
to and fro in the storm” (Busch, 272).

134 For a concise description of what such an ‘aesthetic’ entailed—its sources, features, and the ends to which the
Nazis sought to direct it—see “The Ideal of an Eternally German Culture” and “Approaches to Practical
Implementation” in Jost Hermand, Culture in Dark Times: Nazi Fascism, Inner Emigration, and Exile (New York:

135 Kershaw, Hitler Myth, 2.

136 Ibid., 120.
Hitler myth and its power over Germans’ hearts and minds is *aestheticization*; i.e., the use of beauty to manufacture and manipulate desire, to mask the evil of one’s actions. Earlier I suggested that Protestants historically have been alert to this danger. Obviously, this was no longer the case in Germany under Nazi rule. Can a theology of beauty be articulated in such a perilous context? Can it avoid aestheticization? A close reading of Barth’s beauty passage will help to answer these questions.

### 1.6 Conclusion

We began this introduction by noting how beauty was a subject of abiding fascination to ancient thinkers. For some, the quest to understand beauty was essentially practical; their need was to solve concrete problems in the arts or architecture. Others, such as Plato, were more interested in probing beauty’s metaphysical or ethical status. While the ancients were not all in agreement regarding the nature of beauty, even a cursory survey of their views shows that beauty involves objective qualities as well as subjective effects. The central thread of the great theory of beauty was proportion, but woven together with it are notions of fittingness, consonance, radiance, and perfection, as well as desire, love, joy, and delight. Was this multi-faceted interest in beauty one of the “brackish lakes” that, according to C.S. Lewis, was left behind by pagan thought and never properly drained by Christendom? Or could beauty be reconciled with the truth of scripture and the living out of the gospel? This has been an open question for much of church history.

As we have seen, Augustine, Anselm, Edwards, and others in the church’s tradition, Protestants as well as Roman Catholics, deemed it worthwhile to welcome beauty. They sought energetically to explore and to explain the relation between the various forms of created beauty and the transcendent beauty of God. They looked for beauty in scripture and allowed their understanding of the Christian life to be shaped, in part, by the aesthetic

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137 The fuller quote reads as follows: “The last, and neo-Platonic, wave of Paganism which had gathered up into itself much from the preceding waves, Aristotelian, Platonic, Stoic, and what not, came far inland and made brackish lakes which have, perhaps, never been drained” (*The Discarded Image*, 48). Lewis goes on to say that there are two basic responses to this problem. One is obviously to try to eliminate every remnant of alien thinking (Tertullian’s “What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?”); the other is more willing to take in outside material if it is compatible with the gospel. Justin Martyr fits this description (“Whatever things have been well said by all men belong to us Christians,” *Apology* II, xiii), as does Augustine. Barth seems to fall somewhere in-between (cf. *CD* II/1, 664 – 65).
qualities of God’s self-revelation. The thinkers I have profiled were cognizant, however, of beauty’s peril—its limitations as a theological concept, as well as the spiritual dangers associated with worldliness and inordinate desire.

Meanwhile, the fate of beauty in the modern era has been one of ‘exile’—a fact that has implications for the church as well as the broader culture. Even movements that purported to praise and exalt beauty, such as “aesthetics” and “aestheticism,” had the paradoxical effect of severing beauty from theology. Moreover, few theologians in the generations preceding Barth had shown any serious interest in the subject.

Beauty would seem to be an odd choice of theme for a theologian writing, as Barth was, in the shadow of National Socialism, in the face of church persecution and genocide and the advent of a world again at war. Given all of these pieces of the puzzle, it still is not easy to form a neat or predictable picture of his theological engagement with beauty. Unlike Maritain and Milbank, Barth does not view the subject nostalgically, as if there were once a time when beauty ruled supreme over church and culture. Unlike Balthasar, he does not position himself as a critic of modernity. Nor does Barth seem to fit with the stereotype that beauty is somehow native to Catholicism, but alien to Protestantism. He rather suspects that serious theological work on beauty from any source, Catholic or Protestant, has been the exception, not the rule. Against this backdrop Barth’s decision to reintroduce the theme of beauty into theology must be seen as unusual, unexpected, and instructive. It is unusual in the sense that beauty had for centuries been a neglected topic within theology, fitting only awkwardly into the usual ways of ordering doctrinal material. It is unexpected given the historical astringency of the Reformed tradition on aesthetic matters, as well as the turbulent ecclesial and political context in which he was working. And it is instructive by virtue of the winsome clarity with which Barth will invite his readers to see beauty as revelatory, biblical, perilous, and crucial for a right understanding of God and of the Christian life. This invitation—the rudiments of Barth’s theology of beauty—will be the focus of the next chapter.

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138 Augustine, Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, J.M. Scheeben, and the great German hymnwriter Paul Gerhardt are the outstanding names Barth mentions (CD II/1, 651 – 656).
2. Karl Barth’s Rudimentary Theology of Beauty

2.1 Introduction

Throughout the long history of Western culture—in philosophy and theology, art and aesthetics—the concept of beauty has very often been closely aligned with ideas of revelation.¹ For Karl Barth, likewise, revelation serves as the ground for understanding not only truth and goodness, but also beauty. Where Barth distinguishes and perhaps stands apart from the broader tradition is in his determination to allow the being and activity of God to determine the meaning of these concepts. God’s self-revelation is primary; beauty is secondary (but still essential to consider).

Expanding and borrowing from the form of Luther’s *Heidelberg Disputation* of 1518—an important background text for Barth—this chapter seeks to present the central features of what may be termed a nascent theology of beauty in Barth. For heuristic purposes, we may think of this theology as characterized by four essential ‘rudiments’:

(1) Beauty as revelatory. As Barth describes it, divine beauty is not an impersonal or abstract power, but the winsome and persuasive aspect of the perfection of God’s glory. Beauty names that in God which evokes desire, gives pleasure, and satisfies with delight. To describe beauty as ‘revelatory’ is to emphasize how the objectively beautiful form of God’s own being creates and even compels a subjective, participatory response.

(2) Beauty as biblical. While Barth is conversant with the church’s long tradition of reflecting theologically on beauty, he is concerned to allow the scriptural witness to determine what he has to say on the subject. This rudiment reflects Barth’s unremitting opposition to any *a priori* definition of theological concepts. We cannot know the meaning of beauty apart from, or in advance of, God’s self-revelation.

(3) Beauty as perilous. Echoing his Reformed background and convictions, Barth’s commendation of beauty is balanced by a strong sense of caution. He takes care to elucidate some of the most significant theological and historical reasons why beauty has been, and still remains, a potentially dangerous theme within theology.

Beauty as crucial, in several overlapping senses. For Barth, the cross both invites and requires a re-ordering of every creaturely conception of beauty. “If the beauty of Christ is sought in a glorious Christ who is not the crucified, the search will always be in vain.”

Beauty is also necessary for theology. In terms of content, Barth claims that a theology lacking in beauty will tend to overlook or obscure the exuberant gladness that belongs intrinsically to the gospel message; in terms of praxis, theologians who lack joy in their work cannot hope to convey the winsomeness of God’s character or the obedient freedom that characterizes the children of God.

Taken together, the rudiments offer a rich and potentially fruitful resource for thinking anew about the role and significance of beauty in relation to the practice of theology, the worship of the church, and the normal Christian life. Subsequent chapters (centered on the virtue of joy and the practice of Communion) will seek to flesh out this claim. For the present, we will begin by considering the doctrine of God as, in Barth’s view, the most fitting dogmatic context for a discussion of beauty. The chapter then moves to a close reading Barth’s classic passage on beauty and a detailed explication of the four rudiments named above.

To be clear, my argument is not that Barth’s theology of beauty is without flaw or defect; Barth sometimes delivers less than he promises, and some of the claims he does make deserve to be questioned, supplemented, annotated, or amended. What Barth has done, however—and with a force and clarity unrivalled by any other modern theologian—is to bring beauty in from the cold of speculation, suspicion, and subjective opinion. He does this by witnessing to the self-evident beauty of God’s glorious being in action.

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2 CD II/1, 665.

3 In the lexicon of drums and percussion, the term ‘rudiments’ refers to a set of elementary sticking patterns, a kind of rhythmical alphabet. Fundamental and yet flexible, these patterns lend themselves to new uses, previously unheard combinations, and to improvisation in the service of a musical idea. Drummers who master the rudiments play with a freedom and confidence that would otherwise remain inaccessible. My contention is that something like this is true of Barth’s theology of beauty. If the metaphor succeeds, these rudiments will prove to be constructive as well as descriptive.

4 CD II/1, 650-666. This volume of the Dogmatics contains two chapters, V and VI, but seven different paragraphs (§25-31). These are not all equally relevant for our study, but we will draw upon some of the more relevant and compelling ideas before looking more closely at what Barth has to say about beauty in §31. For commentary and a detailed evaluation of CD II/1 as a whole, see Robert B. Price, Letters of the Divine Word: The Perfections of God in Karl Barth’s Church Dogmatics (London: T&T Clark, 2011).

5 The language of ‘being in action’ is a way of getting at one of Barth’s most distinctive claims, namely, that God’s eternal being cannot be considered in abstraction from God’s action in time, since that action truly
2.2 The Doctrine of God as the Context for Thinking about Beauty

Karl Barth thinks and writes about beauty as one who views God’s redemptive action in Jesus Christ as the center and key to understanding every aspect of created reality, including the meaning of human existence. Both critics and admirers have noted how Barth’s entire work bears a strongly Christocentric and Trinitarian character. He seems determined to reproduce in his own writings that strain of New Testament thinking that led Paul to see Christ as the one in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col 2:3). Partly this may be attributable to the distinctively dogmatic style of theology Barth practices, but at the most basic level it derives from a deep conviction that, in God, we are met at last by One who is truly incomparable, transcendent, and worthy of ‘all glory, laud, and honor.’ I propose that this determined focus on God—not as a hypothetical divinity, but as the perfect triune communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—yields the necessary vantage point for grasping why Barth introduces the theme of beauty not, as one might expect, in connection with art or nature or culture, but in the context of the doctrine of God, and specifically in an extended treatment of God’s attributes.

2.2.1 The Wider Dogmatic Context of CD II/1

In the first half of CD II/1 (Chapter V), Barth’s overarching argument is that human knowledge of God is grounded in God’s action. In Christ, God effectively meets us where we are, making himself objectively available to human perception and understanding. Such a claim naturally begs for explanation, and so Barth introduces a distinction between God’s “primary” and “secondary objectivity” in order to explain how finite creatures may come to know the eternal and infinite God.6 “Primary” in this context refers to the way in which God is objectively present to God’s self; i.e., to the relations that characterize the inner life of the Trinity. “Secondary”

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6 CD II/1, 16.
refers to the way in which God is “mediately objective” to us in revelation—really present, Barth says, though “under the sign and veil of other objects.” These two kinds of objectivity are to be distinguished but never divided from one another. The Creator/creature distinction requires that divine revelation be indirect—no one can see God and live—and yet revelation has an indelibly personal aspect; Barth insists that we really do come to know God.

On Barth’s account, to speak of God is not to speak merely of an appearance, of something that might or might not be the case, much less of a construct of the human imagination. God reveals himself to human understanding “in the objectivity of His works and signs in our creaturely sphere, before the eyes and ears and in the hearts which as such and of themselves alone are quite incapable of knowing Him.”9 Whilst our knowledge of God will necessarily be limited by our creaturely capacities, this knowledge is nevertheless true and complete, not misleading or fragmentary. Barth makes this point in a typically provocative way: “We either know God Himself and therefore entirely, or we do not know Him at all.”10 Adapting the Lutheran formula for Christ’s presence in the Eucharistic elements, Barth can thus describe the incarnation in explicitly sacramental terms:

[Christ] unveils Himself as the One He is by veiling Himself in a form which He Himself is not. He uses this form distinct from Himself, He uses its work and sign, in order to be objective in, with and under this form, and therefore to give Himself to us to be known. Revelation means the giving of signs. We can say quite simply that revelation means sacrament, i.e., the self-witness of God… in a form which is adapted to our creaturely knowledge.11

Barth structures this argument dialectically. Having emphasized the clarity and certainty of our knowledge of God—since God takes the initiative to make himself known—Barth proceeds to engage with the converse theme of God’s hiddenness. “How far is God known? and how far is God knowable?”12 In what sense is God

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7 Ibid.
9 CD II/1, 51.
10 CD II/1, 52.
11 CD II/1, 52.
12 CD II/1, 179.
hidden, yet present in and to the world? Barth considers such questions in the light of the traditional maxim, “God is only known by God.”13 His concern is to encourage a due reverence for God’s ineffability without losing sight of the central gospel truth that God is for us.

Three points from Barth’s discussion call for special notice. First, Barth strongly opposes any notion that human beings have an innate capacity for rightly perceiving (via the senses) or conceiving of (via the mind) God. 14 What is more, he adds, “we ourselves have no capacity for fellowship with God.”15 The appeal of this Reformation teaching, in Barth’s eyes, is that it leaves room for human action, but not for human merit: “although the knowledge of God certainly does not come about without our work, it also does not come about through our work, or as the fruit of our work.”16 God is not only invisible to the physical eye of man, but to the so-called spiritual eye as well.17 Thus Job’s statement, “Behold, God is great, and we know him not,” serves as a model confession and a useful example of the humility human beings should have in the face of the divine hiddenness.18 It is easy to see how this line of argument, if pushed to extremes, could lead to the common caricature of Reformed theology: God so dominates the picture that no ‘room’ is left for humanity.19 A more charitable reading of Barth would recognize that an affirmation of humanity’s basic incapacity means that revelation is always and already grace, “a bestowal which utterly transcends all our capacity, being and existence as such, but does not destroy us, does not consume and break our being and our existence.”20 This is a case where Barth accents the discontinuity between God and creation in order to secure the essentially gratuitous character of God’s self-revelation.

13 CD II/1, 179. Barth will cite this axiom again at II/1, 665, in support of his argument that the beauty of Jesus Christ is to be received as the beauty of God.

14 CD II/1, 184.

15 CD II/1, 182.

16 CD II/1, 183.

17 CD II/1, 190.

18 Job 36:26, cited on II/1, 184.


20 CD II/1, 197.
Second, the creature’s lack of innate capacity should not be interpreted to mean that God is disengaged from the world. If it is not possible for human beings to view God or conceive of God rightly, unaided, yet it remains true that God can and does manifest himself to creation—above all in the person and work of Jesus Christ. As Barth explains, the incarnation constitutes “the first, original and controlling sign of all signs,” to which correspond a number of divinely chosen witnesses. Barth has a number of related phenomena in mind: the prophets and apostles; the visible church (perhaps the institution, but certainly the perduring existence of people who believe the witnesses’ testimony); the power of the gospel within the church; and the sacraments, “in which this gospel has also a physically visible and apprehensible form.” This does not mean, of course, that God has entered into “the sphere of our own survey and control.” God remains God even in the divine condescension by which God becomes known to us through his Word and by means of his Spirit. What the notion of “signs” and “witnesses” does, then, is to underscore the relation between objective revelation and subjective response. As we will see in more detail in Barth’s account of divine glory, God’s self-revelation means among other things that the church is called to demonstrate its obedience to Jesus Christ in concrete ways.

It follows, third, that the fitting subjective response to God’s hiddenness cannot be an attitude of despairing resignation. Rather, the ideal response is characterized by heartfelt gratitude. Turning aside from confidence in our own ability to apprehend God, we discover that, in Jesus Christ, the hidden God has made himself apprehensible, albeit indirectly—not by sight, but by faith. Faith becomes the indispensable means by which we can understand that “we know, view and conceive God, not as a work of our nature, not as a performance on the basis of our own capacity, but only as a miraculous work of the divine good-pleasure….” The paradox Barth highlights here is that, “[i]f we apprehend, view and conceive of God in His hiddenness, we stand already

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21 CD II/1, 199. Among the “objects” or “works and signs” through which God reveals himself, the humanity of Jesus is uniquely revelatory and constitutes “the first sacrament, the foundation of everything that God instituted and used in His revelation as a secondary objectivity….”

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 CD II/1, 192.

25 CD II/1, 189, 199.

26 CD II/1, 184.
in the real knowledge of God.”27 Faced with the potentially unsettling phenomenon of the hiddenness of God, the church’s task is to allow itself to be guided by such “creaturely witnesses” as God has provided.28 A life of grateful discipleship is the appointed way to “participate in the knowledge of God”—which Barth insists is a form of God’s own self-knowledge.29

How does this material relate to the theme of beauty? Two points may briefly be noted at this stage. First, Barth’s account of God’s self-revelation begs the question of whether faith is analogous to the perception of beauty, i.e., to an aesthetic sensibility. For even if we grant that the decisive element in a person’s knowledge of God is God’s own initiative, the question may still be asked: how does one become the sort of person who perceives what God reveals? This in turn invites us to consider carefully the role of the Holy Spirit, and the value of specific acts of obedience in developing ‘ears to hear’ and ‘eyes to see.’ These are matters to be taken up in subsequent chapters, focusing on the virtue of joy and the practice of celebrating the Eucharist.

The second point is that Barth’s account of revelation places great stress upon the irreducible and scandalous particularity of the gospel. Thus, while experiences of this-worldly beauty may point towards God in sundry and various ways—this was Augustine’s insight—they ultimately cannot serve as an alternative or shortcut to the relation between God and humanity established in Jesus Christ. Some forms of beauty threaten to “cut short our spiritual journey by persuading us that we have already arrived.”30 Barth heads off this possibility in advance by insisting upon faith as the unique form of human response that God requires and, in Christ, graciously makes possible. In his words,

We shall have to destroy the very roots of the Church of Jesus Christ and annihilate faith itself if we want to deny and put and end to the area of secondary objectivity; if, to reach a supposedly better knowledge of

27 CD II/1, 192; cf. 194.
28 CD II/1, 200.
29 CD II/1, 201.
God, we want to disregard and pass over the veil, the sign, the work in which He gives Himself to be known by man without diminution but rather in manifestation of His glory as the One He is.\textsuperscript{31}

We may summarize this material as follows: with regard to any activity claiming to be theological, Barth insists upon the priority and clarity of God’s revelation, and does so in a way that acknowledges and even welcomes the limitations inherent in the creature’s knowledge of God. This doctrine seems geared to produce Christians who are simultaneously confident and grateful in humility; conversely, it seems designed to foreclose every form of spiritual elitism, spiritual self-help, and (perhaps especially) the characteristically modern attitude—a kind of Christian agnosticism?—that wavers in the face of everything we don’t know, as if God’s revelation were cloudy instead of clear, God’s gifts inadequate instead of abundant. Moreover, it invites us look on revelation as not only a source of our understanding of truth and goodness, but of beauty as well.

\textit{2.2.2 Knowing God in Love and Freedom}

In the second half of \textit{CD II/1} (Chapter VI), Barth presents God as One who is, in a real and profound sense, already known to us. Barth’s approach stresses the importance of attending to the unique particularity of God’s revelation. This entails a kind of conceptual remodeling, as if he were rebuilding an enormous house from the inside out. Many of the terms and categories Barth uses in speaking of God are familiar within Christian theology; what is unfamiliar is the way in which these terms and categories are subtly turned in a different direction, or given an unexpected emphasis. So for instance, in §28 (‘The Being of God as the One Who Loves in Freedom’), Barth argues for the necessity of holding together the being and the activity of God, which in the past have often tended to be divorced from one another (Barth has in mind cases where “essence” is used as the most basic determination of God’s identity).\textsuperscript{32} When Barth makes use of the language of “being,” he does so in the belief that the being of God cannot be understood by subsuming it to a general doctrine or theory.\textsuperscript{33} Instead, the theologian’s task is to attend to God’s revelation: “we cannot discern the being of God in any other way than

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{31} \textit{CD II/1}, 20-21.
\item \textsuperscript{32} \textit{CD II/1}, 262.
\item \textsuperscript{33} \textit{CD II/1}, 260.
\end{itemize}
by looking where God Himself gives us Himself to see, and therefore by looking at His works….”34 What works, exactly, does Barth have in mind? And what is the character of the being and act of God we see there? Broadly speaking, Barth is concerned with the reconciliation and redemption of creation accomplished by God in and through the person and work of Jesus Christ. This theme belongs to the heart of the Church Dogmatics as a whole. But in CD II/1, Barth focuses especially on the character of God, and how the great works of salvation God accomplishes are but an outpouring or outward reflection of the divine love and freedom. It is these two qualities that anchor Barth’s treatment of God’s being and action, and which in the upcoming sections (§30-31) will guide Barth’s detailed presentation of God’s attributes.

As the source of love, God gives himself to us.35 Thus, to speak of God’s love for humanity is to speak of the way in which God seeks and creates fellowship with all that is not God. Apart from God, humanity is lost and in darkness. But God’s love is like a bridge that reaches us across a chasm, like a light shining in our darkness.36 Significantly, the affirmation that ‘God is love’ entails the claim that God loves us because it is in God’s nature to do so, not because we possess some inherent loveliness. Rather, says Barth, we become lovely as God loves us.37 By a similar turn of logic, Barth suggests that we discover what it means to be persons only as we are loved by God, and learn to love God in return. Such inversions offer illustrations of Barth’s working assumption, that common concepts must be interpreted in line with the particularity of revelation.38 Here, as throughout his writing, Barth seeks to disavow us of any notion that the meaning of a given concept can be determined in advance of God’s self-revelation. He remains an unremitting opponent of any a priori definition of theological terms (including beauty).

34 CD II/1, 261.
35 CD II/1, 276.
36 CD II/1, 278.
37 CD II/1, 278-9.
38 CD II/1, 281.
It follows that Barth’s exposition of God’s freedom does not deal with abstract or hypothetical speculation regarding what God might or might not be able do; instead it opts to explore the ways and means by which God reveals himself within creation, creating and finding faith in the process.

God’s freedom is the freedom proper to and characteristic of Him. It is His freedom not merely to be like the reality different from Himself, but to be as the Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer acting towards it and in it, and therefore as its sovereign Lord. Again, it is His freedom not merely to be in the differentiation of His being from its being, but to be in Himself the One who can have and hold communion with this reality (as in fact He does) in spite of His utter distinction from it.  

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It is striking here that divine transcendence does not stand in opposition to immanence, but encompasses it. God exercises his freedom, according to Barth, by maintaining difference from creation whilst yet entering into communion with it.

What is the relevance of this dogmatic material for our enquiry? If we again listen between the lines for notes that harmonize with the theme of beauty, several can be heard. First, if Barth is correct to insist upon the ultimate conjunction of God’s being with God’s activity, and if revelation invites us to identify ‘love’ and ‘freedom’ as the baseline concepts for our knowledge of who God is, then we may expect our understanding of beauty to be re-tuned along these same lines. For example, the proposition, ‘God is beautiful,’ would need to be qualified by the knowledge of how God has actually chosen to love us. For God to engage with human history in such irreducibly particular ways (e.g., Israel, Jesus, church), thereby bringing humanity into a covenant relationship, freely choosing to be God with and not without us—this, we must come to see, is beautiful.

A second point is that Barth’s actualistic presentation of the Trinity—opposed as it is to both speculation and systematization, but committed from the outset to a concept of relation that takes seriously God’s economic involvement with the world—can be read as a challenge to both the latent neo-Platonism of the Augustinian tradition (where material beauty has value only as a route to a higher, immaterial beauty), and to the “Parmenidean” tendency of the Thomist tradition, (where beauty is granted status as a transcendental quality of

39 CD II/1, 304.
being, though at the expense of particularity). This begs the important question of how Barth’s emphasis upon triune particularity might inform a theological account of beauty—a question, I suggest, that Barth will begin to answer in his account of the perfection of glory.

Third, because the term “aesthetics” is often used in a way that pertains to the human sensorium, it is worth noting one place where Barth appears to disparage the role of the senses in theology. In the event or ‘happening’ of the Word becoming flesh, he says, “the world of nature and sense is undoubtedly subordinate. It is the servant. It is the component which is not important and necessary for its own sake, but only in its relationship and function.” Such a claim would seem to clash with theologies that view the natural world as having a kind of independent or autonomous witness to God (e.g., “all nature sings and round me rings the music of the spheres”). In my view, Barth’s apparent dismissal of the senses in passages like these is best read in light of his earlier arguments for the mediated character of all human knowledge of God. It may well be the case that all of creation has been hallowed by Christ’s coming to earth, but Barth is highly resistant to speaking of terms such as ‘nature’ or ‘sense’ or ‘being’ in a static or general way, without reference to God’s ongoing action. In his words, “we cannot discern the being of God in any other way than by looking where God Himself gives us Himself to

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40 Throughout his discussion of §28 (“The Being of God as the One who Loves in Freedom”) Barth repeatedly stresses that revelation does not fit into any of our preconceived categories (e.g. CD II/1, 260-1; 264; 272; 276; 300). For a more wide-ranging account of the point I am making here, see Colin E. Gunton, The One, the Three, and the Many. God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 129-154. A similar view is propounded by Norman Kreutzmann: “the medieval theory of [transcendental terms] appears to have developed independently of considerations of the Trinity” (“Trinity and Transcendentals” in Trinity, Incarnation and Atonement. Philosophical and Theological Essays, edited by R. J. Feenstra and C. Plantinga (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 87, cited by Gunton, 139.

41 CD II/1, 267.

42 “The revelation of God, in which man’s fulfillment of the true knowledge of God takes place, is the disposition of God in which He acts towards us as the same triune God that He is in Himself, and in such a way that, although we are men and not God, we receive a share in the truth of His knowledge of Himself. […] This share is given as God unveils himself to us… in the objectivity of His works and signs in our creaturely sphere, before the eyes and ears and in the hearts which as such and of themselves alone are quite incapable of knowing him” (CD II/1, 51). These are not metaphorical eyes and ears. Barth insists that the senses are necessary for knowing God, and in fact makes a special point of explaining why the notion of knowing God apart from the senses, i.e., in a mystical or non-objective way, is both misguided and dangerous. God’s “very revelation consists in His making Himself object to us, and so in His making a flight into non-objectivity not only superfluous but impossible” (CD II/1, 11-12).
see, and therefore by looking at His works….43 Later, under the heading of the first rudiment (beauty as revelatory), we will look more closely at the logic behind this claim.

As for the remainder of chapter VI, Barth devotes three sections (and over 350 pages) to a sustained exposition of the attributes of God. Barth favours the term “perfections” (Die Vollkommenheiten) because it clearly communicates the idea that the qualities under consideration (whatever we call them) are not simply predicates of God, but true markers of the being of God as disclosed to us by revelation. Barth is also concerned to speak in a way that does not harden the distinction between the economic and the immanent Trinity. If mercy, righteousness, wisdom, and so forth are merely economic, Barth believes, they will ultimately be unreliable descriptions of who God is, and theology will fall victim to a “subtle nominalism.”44 But on the other hand, there is a danger of treating God’s character qualities as de-personalized “divine potencies”—spiritual forces that may be real, but are strangely detached from the God we have come to know in Jesus Christ.45

In reflecting dogmatically on God’s perfections, then, Barth’s goal is to identify and to distinguish between the myriad aspects of God’s singular greatness. Essentially, Barth seeks to do justice to the differentiation within God’s being without compromising the ancient Jewish and Christian conviction that God is One. By following the path of the perfections, we come to know the true character of God and not merely its formal aspect.46 Later, Barth will point back to this wondrous pattern of unity and differentiation in God’s being as one of the clearest expressions of God’s beauty.47

Under the general heading of the Divine Loving, Barth groups the pairings of Grace and Holiness, Mercy and Righteousness, and Patience and Wisdom; under the Divine Freedom he combines Unity and Omnipresence,  

43 CD II/1, 261.
44 This phrasing is from G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, Preface to CD II/1, viii. “In this case,” Barth writes, “faith in [God] can never completely free itself from ultimate suspicion in face of a Lord whom it pleases to yield Himself to us in this or that form in a kind of sport, without disclosing Himself in reality…” (CD II/1, 324).
45 CD II/1, 325. Barth is more than willing to engage with the long tradition of reflecting on God’s “attributes,” but he is clearly concerned with the risk of an excessive subjectivity. “Perfections” are most emphatically not the character qualities that human beings project onto God.
46 CD II/1, 322.
47 CD II/1, 657-661.
Constancy and Omnipotence, Eternity and Glory. At one level, any such list must have an element of arbitrariness, and Barth admits as much. Yet the elaborate patterning of Barth’s presentation aims to help the reader glimpse something of the splendor of the “revealed variations” of God’s character.\textsuperscript{48} It is clear that in the structuring and performance of his account of God’s perfections, Barth is now constructively deploying the dialectic between veiling and unveiling, concealment and revelation, that he had articulated earlier in CD II/1:

although … [God] is concealed from us in so far as these words are our words and not His own Word about Himself, yet it remains true that we are invited and authorized by His revelation to name Him with these words of ours in the confidence that in this way we are moving in the sphere of truth and not of falsehood so long as we are always willing to allow Him to be Himself the interpreter of these human words which He has placed upon our lips. […] The knowledge of God is true knowledge and not vague surmise and sentiment.\textsuperscript{49}

From the viewpoint of this study, Barth’s most significant formal decision is that of situating his discussion of beauty within a wider account of the perfection of divine glory (\textit{die Herrlichkeit}), an attribute that (according to Barth’s schema) evinces God’s freedom, but also calls to mind God’s love.\textsuperscript{50} For Barth, ‘glory’ is a more fundamental category than ‘beauty’ for thinking rightly about God, and this fact suggests that there is something fundamentally misguided about the desire to build a theology around the concept of beauty (as opposed to revelation). The particular relation Barth sees between glory and beauty can only come through a close reading of Barth’s text.

\textbf{2.2.3 \textit{The Perfection of Glory}}

Glory refers to God’s unique ability “to be in control and act as God.”\textsuperscript{51} It is, Barth suggests, “the self-revealing sum of all divine perfections”—in sum, that one quality of God’s being and activity that draws together and unifies the themes of love and freedom that do so much to govern Barth’s entire description of the character of

\textsuperscript{48} CD II/1, 316.
\textsuperscript{49} CD II/1, 336.
\textsuperscript{50} On the pairing of perfections and the possible significance of Barth’s pattern, see Price, op. cit., 49-54.
\textsuperscript{51} CD II/1, 641.
God. By placing glory both at the beginning and at the end of his capacious treatment of God’s perfections, Barth invites his readers to view glory as their culmination and crown. The perfection of glory clearly holds a special place in this theological exercise.

In the course of his discussion, Barth elaborates three inter-related senses of glory. The first has to do with what might be called God’s right of self-evidence: “not only to maintain, but to prove and declare, to denote and almost as it were to make Himself conspicuous and everywhere apparent as the One He is.” Second, the perfection of glory connotes God’s way of enabling recognition and remembrance. It is, as Barth puts it, God’s right and ability “in some sense to impose or intrude… in such a way that not only is He not overlooked, but He is not mistaken for another or again forgotten.” And third, glory incorporates the notion of success, or efficacy. Not only does God have the dignity and right, but the power to do all this. God’s glory thus points to “the truth and capacity and act in which He makes Himself known as God.”

A rich deposit of scriptural testimony underlies these claims, and Barth is not slow to elaborate the theme of glory with reference to particular elements of the biblical teaching. For instance, Barth notes how, in the Old Testament, God’s glory (Heb. kabod) is figured as the substance of God’s presence in Israel. In the New Testament this presence then takes human form in the person of Jesus Christ, who glorifies the Father and is in turn glorified by him (Jn 13:31). As John writes in his prologue, “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14). Glossing this passage in constellation with Psalm 139, Barth adds an imaginative, stellar analogy:

In the universe… there may be immense sources of light which have never been seen by any human eye and never will be so seen. Now this might well be the case between God and His creatures. But a God of whom this was true would not be the God who is the kingdom, the power and the glory. As the living God is the source of light, and light in himself, He also has and is the radiance of light…that reaches all other beings and permeates them. […] As light He penetrates the darkness, even the farthest darkness. He

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52 CD II/1, 643.
53 See CD II/1, 324; 640f.
54 CD II/1, 641.
55 See especially CD II/1, 642-3; 647-9.
shines round about it and through it. He illumines it in some way, so that nothing is hidden from Him, but everything is revealed and open.\textsuperscript{56}

In texts such as this we can see how Barth views Jesus Christ as the focal point of both divine and creaturely glory. Jesus’ full humanity implies that the glory he receives from the Father and returns to him through his obedient life and ministry is \textit{inclusive} rather than \textit{exclusive}; those who respond in faith to Jesus are in some sense caught up in the circle of glorification. Jesus Christ thus becomes “the prototype of all participation by creation in the glory of God.”\textsuperscript{57} And as is so often the case throughout the \textit{Dogmatics}, Barth uses this thread of Christology to tie together the disparate pieces of the biblical witness. It is Jesus who recapitulates Israel’s life and ministry, inaugurates the life and ministry of the church, and lifts the eyes of his followers to the full realization of God’s kingdom.\textsuperscript{58} In so doing he encompasses in his own person the entire economy of salvation. Ultimately, then, an encounter with the glory of God is an encounter with the glory of Jesus Christ: “The \textit{kabod} has this middle point, this concrete form and name.” This, Barth suggests, is “the new element in the New Testament.”\textsuperscript{59}

Just as light leads to illumination and radiance to reflection, divine glory and the creaturely response are intimately connected, with ‘glory’ designating God’s dynamic and effective presence. Barth draws upon imagery from Jesus’ earthly ministry in order to highlight this relation:

This is not an idle or unfruitful presence. It is not the presence of a cold confrontation. It is not a presence which leaves blind eyes blind or deaf ears deaf. It is a presence which opens them. It is a presence which also loosens at once tongues that were bound. God’s glory is the indwelling joy of His divine being which as such shines out from Him, which overflows in its richness, which in its super-abundance is not satisfied with itself but communicates itself.\textsuperscript{60}

By focusing on Christ, Barth aims to remind the reader that the perfection of glory is not an abstract concept, so much as a vital aspect of encountering the living God. Subjectively speaking, ‘glory’ describes the felt immediacy

\textsuperscript{56} \textit{CD II/1}, 646.
\textsuperscript{57} \textit{CD II/1}, 643.
\textsuperscript{58} \textit{CD II/1}, 642-3.
\textsuperscript{59} \textit{CD II/1}, 643.
\textsuperscript{60} \textit{CD II/1}, 647.
and awesome power of God’s presence. Nothing else can take the place of this encounter, as Barth makes vividly clear:

What reaches us from [God] and permeates us is not merely an effect to be distinguished from Him, a creaturely or a half-divine, half-creaturely force. Certainly to reach us God does also make use of creaturely powers both of a higher and a lower rank. But what reaches us through them is His own power and kingdom and glory, and therefore Himself. No angel of God is this, no divine sign or sacrament, no divinely instituted service of creatures, unless it includes God’s own presence, unless God Himself reaches us and is present with us in it, unless by it we are in some way placed before the face of God. God's face is more than the radiance of light. And God’s glory is the glory of His face, indeed His face itself, God in person, God who bears a name and calls us by name. God is glorious in the fact that He does this, that He reaches us in this way, that He Himself comes to us to be known by us.  

Surveying Barth’s treatment of the perfection of glory, what stands out most is what might be called its ‘dual’ quality. For Barth, ‘glory’ names both the (transcendent) fullness of God’s being and the (immanent) abundant fruitfulness of God’s gracious action towards creation. There is a dual quality also with respect to the personal character of revelation. Objectively, this fullness of God’s being and act bears a human face and a name—that of Jesus Christ, who stands at the center of what scripture teaches about glory. Subjectively, “God’s glory is revealed when God is not present in vain, when the distinction and worth of His person are not merely immanent but are recognized and acknowledged as such…” Thus ‘glory’ entails not only God’s revelation, but its corresponding recognition and reception.

What, then, is beauty, and how does Barth view beauty in relation to glory? In the next section we will use the four rudiments we delineated earlier—beauty as revelatory, biblical, perilous, and crucial—to show how Barth answers these questions.

### 2.3 THE RUDIMENTS OF BARTH’S THEOLOGY OF BEAUTY

#### 2.3.1 Beauty as Revelatory: Barth’s Theological Reading of Beauty

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61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.
Barth introduces the concept of beauty near the end of CD II/1, after some six hundred and fifty pages of exposition. Musing on the doxological closing section of the Lord’s Prayer (“Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever…”), he asks, “Is [glory] a knowledge or revelation which in the last resort is a mere object—without shape or form?” Obviously it cannot be, if we are to talk meaningfully about God’s relation to the world. Then Barth notices how the three-fold form of the doxology suggests that more is involved than mere power. Of course glory includes power, but the language of ‘kingdom’ and ‘glory’ beckons towards a more expansive understanding. How, Barth wants to know, do we speak of that added dimension? Can we speak about the glory of God not only in terms of the fear and trembling it elicits, but in more positive terms of love and adoration, joy and delight? It is here, prompted by the Lord’s Prayer, that Barth feels obliged to speak of beauty. “The concept which lies ready to our hand here, and which may serve legitimately to describe the element in the idea of glory that we still lack, is that of beauty.” Specifically, Barth suggests that beauty answers the question of how the glory of God enlightens, attracts, and persuades.

The statement “God is beautiful” aims to communicate “not merely the naked fact of [God’s] revelation or its power, but the shape and form in which it is a fact and is power.” Barth frames this glory-beauty link in a remarkable formulation:

[God] has [glory] as a fact and a power in such a way that He acts as the One who gives pleasure, creates desire and rewards with enjoyment. And He does it because… He is the One who is pleasant, desirable, full of enjoyment, because first and last He alone is that which is pleasant, desirable and full of enjoyment. God loves us as the One who is worthy of love as God. This is what we mean when we say that God is beautiful.

It is evident that the question of who takes precedence over the question of how. The language of beauty describes the winsome and attractive character of God’s glory. Only as God is the God of glory, is God beautiful.

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63 CD II/1, 650.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
66 CD II/1, 651.
67 I owe this way of juxtaposing the questions to Alan Torrance, Persons in Communion: Trinitarian Description and
One may find the seeds of this insight deep in the Reformed tradition. “What is the chief end of man?” asks the famous first question of the Westminster Shorter catechism. Answer: “to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”68 In the generations preceding Barth, however, it would have been unusual for a Protestant theologian to engage constructively and enthusiastically with the theme of beauty.69 To clarify and place his inspiration in context, Barth asks his readers to think back to the centuries prior to the Reformation, pointing them to the well-known passage from the Confessions where Augustine laments the lateness of his conversion and addresses God as beauty (“Beauty at once so ancient and so new!”).70 Based on this reference, it is tempting to align Barth with the long tradition of those who think of beauty as a transcendental quality of being itself. In highlighting the rudiment of beauty as revelatory, however, I am proposing that Barth’s linking of beauty with glory is better understood as a development and intensification of his doctrine of revelation.

This can be seen most clearly in Barth’s emphasis on the utter uniqueness of God’s beauty. God, he says, “is beautiful, divinely beautiful, beautiful in His own way, in a way that is His alone, beautiful as the unattainable primal beauty, yet really beautiful.”71 The effect of this statement is to make the element of discontinuity greater


69 Hans Urs von Balthasar, The Glory of the Lord I: Seeing the Form (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 45-57, hereafter referred to as “Form.” Balthasar traces the elimination of beauty from Protestant theology all the way back to Luther and his heirs (Melanchthon, Kierkegaard, et al.), but he does not seem to be as conversant with the Reformed tradition, particularly with branches that re-engage with beauty by investigating the world precisely as creation (see, e.g., Belden Lane, “Nature and Desire in Seventeenth-Century Puritanism” in Ravished by Beauty, 97-123). Would Balthasar’s assessment and approach to beauty have been any different if he had read Jonathan Edwards? For that matter, would Barth’s? Whatever the case, a measure of the novelty of Barth’s linking of glory and beauty can be gleaned from comparing his approach to that of Herman Bavinck, whose treatment of the attribute of glory admits a threefold distinction in terms of humanity’s subjective response. God’s greatness produces admiration and adoration, glory proper elicits gratitude and praise, while God’s majesty evokes reverence. God’s absolute dignity is such that subjection is demanded of every creature. Absent from Bavinck’s analysis of glory, however, is any accounting for that in God’s character which bestows delight, pleasure, or joy—everything, in a word, that Barth assigns to God’s beauty. Bavinck does allow for an analogy between the divine glory and its reflection in creation, but insists that there is no identity, and just for this reason, “[the expression ‘beauty of the Lord,’ used by the church-fathers, scholastics, and the R.C. theologians, is not deserving of commendation.” Augustine in particular is singled out for criticism. The Doctrine of God, 3rd edition of 1918 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 250-1.

70 CD II/1, 651, cf. Augustine, Confessions, X.27.

71 CD II/1, 650.
than the element of continuity implied by an analogy of beauty.\textsuperscript{72} Both Barth and Augustine maintain that beauty is by nature objective, not arbitrarily ‘in the eye of the beholder.’ As Augustine puts it, beautiful things are not beautiful because they elicit pleasure, but give pleasure because they are beautiful.\textsuperscript{73} Barth, however, amends Augustine’s statement in a subtle but significant way, in order to draw out the inexorably personal quality of the revelation beauty brings about: “\textit{God is not beautiful in the sense that He shares in an idea of beauty superior to Him…}” Rather, we should say that God is “the basis and standard of everything that is beautiful and of all ideas of the beautiful.”\textsuperscript{74} There is clearly \textit{some} kind of analogy of beauty at work here—otherwise, what would be the point of introducing words borrowed from the domain of creaturely aesthetics?—but the analogy is disciplined by Barth’s emphasis on divine particularity. The meaning of “beautiful” cannot help but be redefined by the reality of God.

Arguably, Barth’s use of the language of beauty is best regarded as an instance of the theologian’s liberty to use whatever terms come to hand, not allowing the discussion to be bound strictly by the meaning that these terms may have acquired from other contexts. This liberty, which Barth says is “so very necessary and is always enjoyed in dogmatics,” implies that “[n]o term has as such an absolutely universal and therefore binding sense.”\textsuperscript{75}

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{72} To speak of analogy at all issue raises the technical question of what sort of analogy is in play. Some theologians prefer to restrict ‘analogy’ to the domain of language; i.e., to see it as an answer to the question, “how may discourse about what transcends our customary categories proceed by way of arguments, and so lead to a form of knowledge?” (David Burrell, “Analogy” in \textit{The Westminster Dictionary of Theology}, 16). By this narrow measure it would seem that Barth definitely makes use of Augustine’s analogy of beauty. Other theologians, of course, use ‘analogy’ in a far more comprehensive way to describe an ultimate metaphysical kinship between God and the world (the \textit{analogia entis}). Barth was famously and vociferously opposed to analogy in this broader sense, although debates continue over whether his opposition reflects an accurate reading of traditional Roman Catholic teaching. On this uncommonly contentious question, see especially Keith Johnson, \textit{Karl Barth and the Analogia Entis} (T&T Clark, 2010) and Bruce L. McCormack, “Karl Barth’s Version of an “Analogy of Being”: A Dialectical No and Yes to Roman Catholicism” in \textit{The Analogy of Being}, edited by Thomas Joseph White, O.P. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 88-144.
\item \textsuperscript{73} \textit{Non ideo pulchra sunt, quia delectant, sed ideo delectant, quia pulchra sunt.} Augustine, \textit{De vera rel.} 32.59, cited by Barth at \textit{CD II/1}, 656. At various points Barth adopts this principle (\textit{mutatis mutandis}) as a kind of theological axiom. To paraphrase one example: Barth argues that the gospel message of God’s saving action is not believed because of the Church’s proclamation; rather, proclamation and belief alike follow from the fact that God has acted to save (\textit{CD II/1}, 258-59).
\item \textsuperscript{74} \textit{CD II/1}, 656, italics added.
\item \textsuperscript{75} \textit{CD II/2}, 513. In context, Barth is speaking about “ethics”, but his point seems equally applicable to the present case. It might be objected that if the meaning of words is not stable, theology becomes an imprecise and equivocal project involving a private and incomprehensible language. To this objection two answers come to mind. The first is that, since meaning is determined by usage in a given context and not by etymology or
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Instead, the meaning of theological language must derive from the object under consideration—in this case, the glory of God. As Barth says in one place, “the revelation attested in [scripture] refuses to be understood as any sort of revelation alongside which there are or may be others.”

Were we to apply some general concept or theory of beauty to God, we would miss the ways in which God’s revelation centrally determines the meaning of that very concept. To see beauty as revelatory, on the other hand, acknowledges that our perception is in already in a sense encompassed within the act of God’s revelation.

There is a second way in which Barth’s doctrine of revelation impacts and informs his theology of beauty. In *CD* I/1, Barth had spoken of how the Word of God is not “a wish or command which remains outside the hearer without impinging on his existence.” Rather, the Word calls forth a fitting human response; humanity’s true hearing is claimed, even commandeered, by God. In a similar way, Barth now (in II/1) uses the language of beauty to emphasize the evocative quality of glory. God is glorious *in se*, but this glory overflows, so to speak, making God’s own inner delight evident within and to God’s creation. We might call this the ‘inter-subjective’ or participatory dimension of divine beauty (although it encompasses more than the human sphere). Barth himself coins a new word—the “joy-streaming out element” (*jenes Freudesstrahlende*)—to describe this irresistibly desirable and delightful quality of glory, and he urges that it not

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some sense of what words ought to mean, communication is always a matter of trying to bring clarity out of obscurity at the risk of misunderstanding. Because Barth’s use of beauty-related language is informed by his doctrine of revelation, the meaning of “beauty” in his theology is bound at least to resemble “beauty” as we find it in Plato, Augustine, and others who similarly see revelation as in some way an essential component or dynamic inhering in the concept (on this, see Bychkov, op. cit., 129-175; 212-267). Conversely, Barth’s concept of “beauty” will have much less in common with accounts that exclude the notion of *desire* (such as Kant’s), or that reduce beauty to mere *prettiness* or *décor*. What Alan Torrance adds to this picture—our second point—is a reminder that even if language is in some sense commandeered in Barth’s account of revelation, the Spirit’s work of in-formation is never a private event, but something that happens “within the context of the shared life of the Body of Christ, the community of the Church” (*Persons in Communion*, 97). Something of this community extends to the structure of Barth’s work, conceived not as a solo exercise, but precisely as Church dogmatics. While Barth may not always agree with Augustine on beauty, he listens to him and learns from him. In the bigger picture, then, “Barth’s lasting contribution to contemporary theology is not that theologians are free to ignore the concerns and criticisms of other discourses, but that these cares can be taken up and engaged within the process of discussing Christian doctrine and practice in a way free of anxiety and pretensions to self-justification” (Kenneth Oakes, *Karl Barth on Theology and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 253.

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76 *CD* I/1, 295.
77 *CD* I/1, 152.
be overlooked, lest we miss the glory of God and lose touch with the deep, underlying goodness of the gospel.\textsuperscript{78}

As Barth sees it, this “joy-streaming out” aspect of God’s glory is not to be explained or proved, so much as encountered. In fact, an encounter with the beauty of God actually constitutes the proof. “It belongs to the nature of the subject,” Barth notes, “that the real proof of our statement that God is beautiful can be provided neither by few nor by many words about this beauty, but only by this beauty itself. God’s being itself speaks for His beauty in His revelation.”\textsuperscript{79} This claim, also, should be heard as an echo of Barth’s earlier teaching that “only the Logos of God Himself can provide the proof that we are really talking about Him when we are allegedly doing so.”\textsuperscript{80} There exists a self-authenticating quality to God’s revelation; this is the key point Barth is trying to bring out in his doctrine of the Word of God, and then again in a more focused way with reference to the beauty of God.

As if anticipating that this material will still be scandalous or baffling to some readers, Barth continues over the course of several pages to elaborate the persuasive, delightful, and ultimately satisfying nature of the glorious God in his self-revelation. He does this by considering three congruent ways of conceiving the divine beauty: the being of God; God’s Triune nature; and the Incarnation. Of these three examples, the first is meant as a capstone to the discussion of the perfections of God that Barth has carried on so ably and extensively in \textit{CD II/1}. Although it is especially fitting to speak of the beauty of God in connection with divine glory, beauty may be said to describe all of God’s perfections in the richness of their simplicity and multiplicity, their ‘inward’ and ‘outward’ dimensions.\textsuperscript{81} Barth feels confident that the ‘content’ of God’s life will shine through the ‘form’ of revelation, and be recognized as beautiful.\textsuperscript{82}

\textsuperscript{78} \textit{CD} II/1, 655. Along these lines, Barth will go on to speak of the Holy Spirit as “the only conclusive argument” (\textit{CD IV}/3, 109, cited in Hunsinger, \textit{How to Read}, 52).

\textsuperscript{79} \textit{CD} II/1, 657.

\textsuperscript{80} \textit{CD} I/1, 163.

\textsuperscript{81} \textit{CD} II/1, 657.

\textsuperscript{82} \textit{CD} II/1, 659.
Barth’s second example points the reader back again to *CD* I/1, this time to the doctrine of the Trinity. What Barth emphasizes is not the persons, *per se*, but the form of relationship—the Father and the Son in the unity of the Holy Spirit—that is radiant with joy, attractive in a way that wins and persuades, and thus is uniquely beautiful.\(^{83}\) Barth describes this triune form as “the secret of [God’s] beauty.”\(^{84}\)

The third example of beauty is the most concrete and accessible: the Incarnation constitutes “the centre and goal of all God’s works,” the event that reveals the beauty of God “in a special way and in some sense to a supreme degree.”\(^{85}\) Granting the New Testament claim that we see the glory—and therefore the beauty—of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 4:6, cf. Heb 1:3), how does Barth think this happens? Or, to put the question in a slightly different way: where does Barth locate the beauty of Jesus? In contrast to much of Protestant tradition, Barth looks neither to the wisdom of Jesus’ teaching, nor to the moral purity of his earthly life, nor to the compassion demonstrated through his ministry of healing. Nor does Barth believe that Christ’s beauty is to be found in Jesus’ physical appearance. Rather, Jesus is beautiful precisely as the self-revelation of God.

In making this claim, Barth is referring specifically to the ways in which the event of the Incarnation exhibits incredible differentiation in unity. In Jesus Christ, humanity’s burden of sin and death is met by God with a judgment that brings life; its base humiliation with an inconceivable exaltation; its hopeless lostness with guidance, instruction, promises, commands, and fellowship.\(^{86}\) Much in the way that the “persons” of the Trinity are differentiated in their unity, God’s becoming human in the person of Jesus Christ testifies to God’s unique and wondrous ability to be one and yet another. God does so, moreover, “without confusion or alteration, yet also without separation or division.”\(^{87}\) And because God in Jesus Christ “is this in this way, He is not only the source of all truth and all goodness, but also the source of all beauty.”\(^{88}\) Here we see Barth making use of the

\(^{83}\) *CD* II/1, 660-1.  
^{84} *CD* II/1, 661.  
^{85} Ibid.  
^{86} *CD* II/1, 663.  
^{87} *CD* II/1, 664.  
^{88} Ibid.
aesthetics of Chalcedonian Christology in order to anchor the language of the transcendentals in the divine economy.

For some readers it may seem puzzling that Barth should emphasize so strongly the beauty of God’s character and economy without also considering examples from other doctrinal loci, or from nature and culture. This seems to me a purposeful omission. When Barth insists that “[w]e are dealing here solely with the question of the form of revelation,” he is effectively saying that we are not dealing with a general theory of beauty drawn from metaphysics or aesthetics, anthropology or artistic practice. Barth may welcome the views of other theologians, such as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, but he uses their insights to embroider his own account, rather than establish its main lines.

Those lines, I have suggested, are already present within Barth’s doctrine of revelation, e.g., in the self-authenticating quality of God’s engagement with humanity. What the discussion of the perfection of glory offers, then, is a new dogmatic context in which Barth can extend and apply his ideas. Such development is perhaps most evident in Barth’s renewed emphasis on the dynamic interplay between form and revelation. In terms of our larger study, this rudiment implies that the content of the concept, ‘beauty’, must come from the side of the One who becomes human for us and for our salvation. To affirm the beauty of God as revelatory is to recognize its ultimately gratuitous character. In desiring and delighting in this beauty, as in every other area of faith, “[w]e cannot know this of ourselves. It can only be given us, since “God cannot be known except by God.”

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89 CD II/1, 655. Barth’s German is actually more insistent on this point than the English translation suggests: “Es geht um die Formfrage – nur um die Formfrage! – der Offenbarung” (KD II/1, 739).

90 In CD I/1, Barth had affirmed that form is necessary—God’s Word always comes to us “veiled in secularity”—and yet his actualism combined with his concern to preserve God’s freedom could sometimes make it seem that form is unimportant, or even dispensable: “even in the form [God] assumes when He reveals Himself God is free to reveal Himself or not to reveal Himself…. The form as such, the means, does not take God’s place. It is not the form, but God in the form, that reveals, speaks, comforts, works and aids” (CD I/1, 321). By contrast, the language of beauty seems conducive to a closer engagement with form, and this is what we find with Barth’s three dogmatic examples, drawn from different domains of the doctrine of God.

91 CD II/1, 665.
2.3.2 Beauty as Biblical: the Language of Beauty in Scripture

“Scripture has a fairly limited sensibility. It is much concerned with law and morality, little with romance and affection, not at all with visual beauty.”92 While doubtless overstating the case, Luke Timothy Johnson raises the issue of the relationship between beauty and the Bible in a provocative way. If the biblical witness cannot be fully understood without the concept of beauty, as Barth believes, what are the grounds for this belief? How does Barth understand the role beauty plays within scripture?

Given the principles that underpin Barth’s doctrine of scripture, one cannot build a biblical view of beauty simply by collating a list of Bible passages where the right words or themes show up—though as we will see, Barth does pay close attention to specific texts. Beauty cannot be abstracted from the sundry and various scriptural contexts in which it appears, or its significance measured by purely quantitative means. The question instead is how to discern the native ‘thought form’ of beauty in the Bible, paying attention to the highly particular ways in which the biblical writers speak of beauty.

Barth does not minimize the role of beauty in scripture, but he also does not want to over-exaggerate its importance. He finds that the biblical writers do not, as a rule, devote sustained attention to beauty in the way they do to many other topics (such as mercy or salvation). Nor do they treat beauty in isolation from a wider set of theological themes and concerns. If the concept of beauty is essential for understanding the biblical witness, its role is nevertheless quite modest: “the idea of the beautiful as such and in abstracto does not play any outstanding or at least autonomous part in the Bible.”93 What we find in Barth is hence both an affirmation of beauty as a vital part of the biblical witness, and a tempering of any temptation to make beauty into a central or defining theme. For this rudiment we will look briefly at some of the key hermeneutical assumptions undergirding Barth’s use of scripture, and survey the types of biblical texts that he adduces on the subject of beauty.

93 CD II/1, 653.
2.3.2.1 Beauty and the Strange New World within the Bible

We begin with two aspects of Barth’s doctrine of scripture. First, Barth believes that the Bible serves as a chief means by which God challenges and corrects the church. Reading faithfully often implies a great reversal, an overturning of the natural attitudes and expectations we bring to the biblical text. As Barth puts it in a memorable early essay,

It is not the right human thoughts about God which form the content of the Bible, but the right divine thoughts about men. The Bible tells us not how we should talk with God but what he says to us; not how we find the way to him, but how he has sought and found the way to us; not the right relation in which we must place ourselves to him, but the covenant which he has made with all who are Abraham’s spiritual children and which he has sealed once and for all in Jesus Christ.\(^{94}\)

This idea of scripture as a word of correction helps to explain two otherwise curious features of Barth’s approach to beauty. On the one hand, the metaphor of the Bible as a “strange new world” implies that the beauty of God cannot be straightforwardly equated with whatever passes for beauty out in the world. Some kind of tension or disjunction between the two must be anticipated. Discerning readers need to ask, what vision of beauty does scripture offer, and how does it either complement or challenge other forms of beauty we know and recognize? On the other hand, Barth is certainly not blind and deaf to the beauty of the biblical text itself. His mode of commentary has been compared to that of a literary critic, in the sense that he often “gleans his insights by paying close attention to the direct wording and literary structure of the texts.”\(^{95}\) Yet in spite of having great admiration for the aesthetic value of scripture, Barth makes no attempt to link divine beauty to the Bible’s literary qualities. Rather than looking for God’s beauty in the Bible’s immanent characteristics, he concentrates on the event of revelation itself—the unique and peculiar way in which God addresses God’s Word to the church through the words of scripture.\(^{96}\)

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\(^{96}\) *CD* 1/2, 457f.
This notion of scripture as a witness (das Zeugnis) to divine revelation is a second key feature of Barth’s hermeneutics. “Underlying all the daunting complexity and prolixity of the Church Dogmatics is a simple, cheerful confidence that God speaks with us in and through the Bible in its testimony to Jesus.”97 From Barth’s vantage point, the ‘Word of God’ in its most basic sense is not to be identified strictly with the text of scripture, but with the dynamic and life-giving speech of God, personified in Jesus Christ. Sacred and decisive though it may be, the Bible ultimately points away from itself to a deeper reality.98

The expectation of encountering God in and through and in a certain sense beyond the biblical text compels the reader (or hearer) to adopt an obedient attitude towards the teaching of scripture. This means accepting and applying the native thought forms of the Bible, where they can be discerned.99 Barth speaks of a kind of faithfulness that extends not only to the letter, but to the spirit of the text as well. He writes, “The idea with which scriptural exegesis must begin is that of fidelity in all circumstances to the object reflected in the words of the prophets and apostles.”100 Where such exegesis ends, ideally, is a place of profound understanding. Barth says it this way:

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98 Cf. Barth, Church Dogmatics I/2, 464. This is what Watson calls the “indispensable role assigned to [scripture] in the outward movement of the divine communicative action in the world” (The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth, 61). It remains true, of course, that faithful reading requires the work of considering carefully the actual words of scripture. One must study the nuances of language, search for contextual clues, compare possible interpretations, and make use of the tools of exegesis. Ultimately, though, Barth sees the faithful reader as moving with the help of the biblical words (and certainly not without them) to an encounter with the One to whom these words bear witness. In practice this led Barth to oppose a reductively critical way of reading—the sort of reading that never moves beyond the academic or purely “historical-critical” questions. Barth regarded this widespread academic habit as “a hearing in which attention is paid to the biblical expressions but not to what the words signify, in which what is said is not heard or overheard…” (CD I/2, 466).

99 Barth, Church Dogmatics CD I/2, 816-22; cf. CD IV/3, 92-3, and Hunsinger, “Postcritical Scriptural Interpretation,” 30. Barth’s hermeneutical method has been helpfully described by Francis Watson as an ‘eccentric’ reading of scripture; that is, a way of reading that works ‘out from the center’ of the irreducibly particular revelation of God in Jesus Christ. By extension, the ec-centricity of Barth’s theology is “its orientation beyond itself towards scriptural texts that themselves point beyond, to the prior reality of the divine-human-being-in-action” (Watson, “Bible,” 57).

100 CD I/2, 725, cited by Hunsinger, “Postcritical Scriptural Interpretation,” 34. Summarizing Smend’s reading of Barth, Hunsinger notes how, “in both Israel and earliest Christianity, the biblical texts were always shaped by interests of worship, preaching, and mission. The biblical texts were kerygmatic in character all the way down” (36-7). Since theology (as dogmatics) is bound in this practical way to scripture and to the church, it is not in a position to treat other disciplines or modes of thought as having equal authority. In Barth’s words, “dogmatics has no freedom to decline to allow its thought to be formed by the prototype of the biblical witnesses. It has no freedom to
I must press on as interpreter to the point where I almost stand only before the enigma of the subject-matter, where I almost do not stand any longer before the enigma of the document; where I, therefore, have almost forgotten that I am not the author, where I have understood him so well that I can allow him to speak in my name and can myself speak in his.\textsuperscript{101}

Perhaps we may summarize by defining the faithful reader of scripture as one who hears Jesus’ words and shapes her theology accordingly, neither neglecting the word that was heard nor forgetting the vision seen in scripture’s mirror.

\textbf{2.3.2.2 The Biblical Evidence}

How does Barth arrive at, and how does he justify, his conviction that beauty is biblical, \textit{i.e.}, that the biblical witness cannot be fully understood without the concept of beauty? Barth sets out the scriptural grounding for beauty using three different types of texts.

A first set of passages contrasts the glory of God with creaturely frailty.\textsuperscript{102} Thus Isaiah: \textit{All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field… The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever} (Is 40:6,8). Similarly, Barth notes how the glory that appears to the shepherds initially produces fear, but yields an announcement of the gospel. \textit{Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people} (Lk 2:9-10). And he cites Paul’s claim that \textit{all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God} (Rom 3:23). The images obviously differ, but in each case—grass withering, shepherds falling down in fear, humanity sinning and falling short—human limitation can be no more than a prelude to God’s eventual victory. Though it may not always be apparent in the midst of trying circumstances, God’s glory provides the key to human joy, contentment, and meaning in life. As Barth puts it, “the other side is even truer, and the first truth can be rightly understood only as we look back at this other side. And the other side is that in Jesus Christ sinful, blind and disobedient man has become a historical or psychological, political or philosophical dogmatics” (\textit{CD} I/2, 822). Or, may we add, an “aesthetic” dogmatics\textsuperscript{2}.

\textsuperscript{101} Barth, \textit{The Epistle to the Romans}, 8, cited in Bruce L. McCormack, “The Significance of Karl Barth’s Theological Exegesis of Philippians,” xvi.

\textsuperscript{102} \textit{CD} II/1, 645.
as such been so encircled by the light of God’s glory that he can and must see it and he will lack nothing in Jesus Christ.”

The beauty of the world is ephemeral, but the beauty of who God is and what God does is eternal.

A second set of texts picks up on the relation between glory, beauty, and light. So in Ps 104 the poet speaks of light as God’s garment, while the messianic Ps 45:2 praises the physical beauty of the king. Presumably there are other texts that could be included in this category—Ezekiel’s vision, the story of the transfiguration, and John’s image of the new Jerusalem all come to mind—but Barth does not bring them up in this context. Barth finds it curious that, although the metaphor of light occurs frequently in the scriptures, the biblical writers for the most part shy away from describing God in highly visual terms (Pss 104 and 45 are exceptional in this respect).

Their reticence is arguably part of the reversal of expectation that scripture brings about. God’s beauty may on occasion be engaged via the senses, or it may not; what seems to matter more is the peculiar quality of the encounter between God and humanity.

Third, Barth shows a keen interest in those biblical texts that speak about the joy of the believer, or the desire for God, or the discovery of delight in God’s presence. Such passages provide the thread he is most willing to follow, and constitute a third category of beauty-related passages. The beauty of God is that which leads believers to rejoice in the Lord (Lk 1:46 and Phil. 4:4); to delight in God’s law (Ps 1, 112, Rom 7:22, elaborated in Ps 119 as desire, gladness, pleasure), or simply to delight in God himself (Ps 37:4, cf. Prov. 23:26). Believers thus learn to recognize God as the One who satisfies the desire of every living thing (Ps 5:11; 145:16; Ps 16:11; Is 9:3); they are commanded to “taste and see that the Lord is good” (Ps 34:8). As Barth sees it, “All this has nothing whatever to do with an optimistic glossing over of the need and the condition of mankind.”

Human need and our fallen condition “is confuted and overcome by the fact that God must be the object of joy.”

103 CD II/1, 645. A fuller development of this category would perhaps also include texts that illustrate the way in which the glory of God “works by contraries” (CD II/1, 653), which is surely one of the deepest paradoxes of the Bible. God’s glory induces fear and trembling, even death—but also celebration, victory, rejoicing.

104 CD II/1, 653.

105 A helpful passage in this regard is Barth’s reading of Moses’ encounter with God from Ex 33, CD II/1, 18-19.

106 CD II/1, 654.

107 CD II/1, 654.
God is the One who turns mourning into dancing (Ps 30) and satisfies the soul’s longing (Is 26:8-9). The fear of the LORD yields gladness, joy, a festive crown (Sir 1:11). According to Isaiah the meek “shall increase their joy in the Lord” (Is 29:19). Scripture thus exhorts God’s people to draw near to God (Ps 73:28), and to serve the Lord with gladness (Ps 100:2).

For all these reasons (and the point, Barth says “could be illustrated directly or indirectly from hundreds of other passages”), we should not reject the medieval concept of taking delight in God (fruitio Dei). Scripture affirms in manifold ways what Barth describes in conceptual terms as the participatory quality of beauty, i.e., that our subjective experience of desire, joy, and pleasure in God corresponds to the objective beauty of God. Besides, he adds, “too much of what cannot be overlooked in the Bible would have to be struck out if the legitimacy of this concept of beauty were denied out of an excessively Puritan concern about sin.”

While the foregoing list represents a fairly broad range of biblical passages, it should be noted that Barth is not attempting to provide an exhaustive guide to the theme of beauty in the Bible. He proffers only a sketch of some of the more prominent possibilities.

2.3.2.3 Beyond Barth: the Broader Biblical Witness to Beauty

Barth’s hermeneutical assumptions point to the need to take seriously the evidence of those many biblical texts that in one way or another speak of beauty. Scripture cannot properly challenge or correct the church if its witness is flattened, as when readers assume that every part of scripture expresses an identical theme, or that the meaning of beauty in the Bible is more-or-less the same as that which could be gleaned from other, non-biblical sources. We have also noted how Barth marshals at least three different types of texts in support of his rudimentary claim that beauty is grounded in the biblical witness. All of this notwithstanding, Barth’s theology of beauty would be deepened, arguably, by going beyond what Barth himself attempted in CD II/1.

\[^{108} CD II/1, 653-4.\]
Closer attention to the ‘form’ of scripture would lead us to take special note of the quantity, diversity, and particularity of biblical texts related to beauty—including several kinds of texts that Barth does not cover with any kind of adequacy in his brief overview. Four may briefly be mentioned. Most obviously, we might ask how the beauty of God relates to the beauty of creation. Psalm 19 has long been interpreted along these lines (“The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork”). Then there are numerous passages that explore the interplay of sensory and spiritual perception, from which one might develop an account of how believers may come to see, hear, and even in some sense taste the beauty of God. “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God” might be cited as an example (Ps 46:4). Because there is no river anywhere close to Jerusalem—the city has always relied on the Gihon spring and an elaborate system of aqueducts—the reader is prompted to wonder just what sort of water brings gladness to God’s people. Still other scriptures speak of particular spiritual practices—worship being perhaps the best example—that serve to train God’s people in the way of joy. Finally, the biblical writers employ a broad constellation of figures, tropes, and symbols to illuminate the intimate relation between Christ and the Church, and hence the beauty that characterizes humanity’s present and future relationship to God. Here, a more adequate survey might well include texts that speak of the temple together with its furnishings; the priestly garments woven “for glory and for beauty” (Ex 28:2); the communion of saints as an occasion for delight (e.g., Ps 16:3); the prophetic promise of a great eschatological banquet (Is 25:6); and the complex figure of Mt. Zion:

Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised
in the city of our God!
His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation,
is the joy of all the earth,
Mount Zion, in the far north,
the city of the great King. (Ps 48:1-2)

Finally, we would want to reckon with marriage as a window into the mystery of Christ’s love for the Church (Eph 5:21-33), allowing our understanding of its beauty to be guided by the correlative images of the bride and the city of God (Rev 21:2). At one point—but this is probably the closest he comes (in CD II/1) to acknowledging these disparate but evocative materials—Barth wonders aloud “whether an important contribution could not and would not be made by a new and more penetrating exposition of the Song of Songs.” Modern
commentators had, in his view, no real understanding of the book. Presumably, such an exposition would need to explore, explain, and ultimately reconcile two apparently irreconcilable elements; namely, the ‘surface’ meaning of the text (the Song as an elaborate poem in praise of erotic love), and the ‘spiritual’ meaning (the Song as an allegory). How might the beauty we find in the Song—the beauty (at least) of human bodies, drawn together in an intoxicating and intimate embrace, but also and necessarily the beauty of Christ and the church—serve to critique the church’s tendency to polarize these readings? Or again, how might the Song speak into areas (like sexuality and ecclesiology) where the church’s understanding has often been clearly flawed, where its practice has frequently and tragically failed, and where the healing word of the gospel is so desperately needed? A richer commentary on this difficult, wondrous book might help us better to hear the single deep theme of the gospel that unites all of scripture.

\[109\] CD II/1, 653.

\[110\] Paul J. Griffiths’s *Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011), may be commended as a candidate for the sort of work Barth imagined. Consider his illuminating gloss on the question asked by the daughters in 6:10: “Who is she who comes out / like the dawn rising / beautiful like the moon / set apart like the sun / terrible like an ordered rank from the camps?” Griffiths’s answer, though jarring to a Protestant sensibility, is worth quoting at length. “What the daughters do not know is her name: we, those who benefit from a long tradition of hearing and interpreting the Song, do know that name: it is Mary, and by extension the Lord’s Israel-church. In likening the unnamed woman who approaches to ‘the dawn rising,’ the daughter uses words that occur only here in the Song. ‘Sun’ and ‘moon’ occur often in scripture, most often as instances of the radiantly impressive beauty of the ordered cosmos that are, in spite of their magnificence, creatures of the Lord and subject to his providence…. She, the beloved, in being likened to them is being likened to the most beautiful and awe-inspiring among creatures, but shown also to be a creature, subject to the Lord. That the beloved exceeds even the splendor of the heavenly bodies is suggested by the resonances with Rev. 12:1: ‘A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman crowned with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and with a crown of stars above her head.’” One senses, perhaps, a danger here of drifting off and losing touch with the bare, irreducible, earthly sensuality of the poem. Still, Griffiths’s reading is much more than a modern recycling of patristic or medieval ecclesiological doctrine, especially Marian and (therefore) ecclesiological doctrine, is rich and complex: I have learned how to read the Song more fully by learning something of what the church teaches and performs by means of it. It is not merely that the Song reprises and foreshadows what the church teaches (though this is true); neither is it that the church teaches more fully what the Song figures (though this also is true). It is, rather, that what the Song has to teach the church was not fully known to those who composed, edited, redacted, and canonized it; and that what the Song has to teach the church is not yet fully known to the church. That is why the Song must continue to be read by the church, and not only as an illustration of what it already teaches” (lv-lvi, italics added). Griffiths and Barth are at least agreed in the expectation that God still speaks, and speaks uniquely, through the words of scripture. The reader (and more broadly, the church) addressed by these words must thereby come to grips with the gracious demands of God’s Word in ever-new circumstances. The result amounts to a personal and corporate reformation of desire. “The text confronts us, you and me, demands something from us, and will reconfigure our thought and speech and appetite to the extent that our own particular sins and their concomitant damage do not prevent it from doing so. The beloved’s passion in the Song, her desire and her anguish at separation from her lover, will, if you let it, become yours, and in becoming yours reform your loves—not by replicating hers, but by conforming yours to
I have argued for the necessity of attending to additional threads of the biblical witness (beauty in creation, perception, spiritual practices, and the Church). This is less a critique of Barth than an attempt to say briefly what sort of generative possibilities are opened up by his ‘rudimentary’ theology. For although they do so in different ways, each of the texts mentioned depicts or elicits the joy, delight, and holy desire that mark humanity’s encounter with the beauty of God. It is not difficult to imagine the benefits that would come from exploring their exegetical and ecclesial implications.

2.3.3 Beauty as Perilous: Underlying Reasons for Barth’s Sense of Caution

It was the view of Hans Urs von Balthasar that Barth deserves great credit for helping to restore beauty to its rightful place in theology.111 At the same time, it must also be acknowledged that Barth’s use of the concept of beauty remains highly cautious and circumspect. In his words, “…the concept of the beautiful seems to be a particularly secular one, not at all adapted for introduction into the language of theology, and indeed extremely dangerous.”112 And while Barth might well agree with the reservations and criticisms of beauty made by earlier Protestants, his own acute sense of beauty’s peril is motivated by a narrowly theological set of concerns. Chief among these are the overlapping dangers of theological abstraction and natural theology. Let us briefly examine them in turn.

2.3.3.1 Beauty Abstracted from Revelation

For some readers of CD II/1, it is likely a jarring experience to hear Barth assigning beauty to a secondary, and not a leading, role in his theology so soon after introducing it:

In view of what the biblical testimony says about God it would be an unjustified risk to try to bring the knowledge of God under the denominator of the idea of the beautiful even in the same way as we have done in our consideration of [the divine perfections]. It is not a leading concept. Not even in passing can...
we make it a primary motif in our understanding of the whole being of God as we necessarily did in the case of these other concepts.\textsuperscript{113}

At face value, this statement appears pedantic. Are not theologians—much like preachers planning a sermon—required to make decisions all the time regarding which themes to emphasize, which to avoid, and how best to structure the presentation of a given doctrine? What, exactly, is the risk of using the concept of beauty to think about God?

Barth’s caution appears to be prompted by a recognition that the attributes of God seen most clearly in scripture (majesty, holiness, and righteousness) all imply God’s transcendent otherness and reinforce the boundary between God as Creator and the world as creation, whereas beauty and its attendant discourse (“aesthetics”) risk bringing God “into the sphere of man’s oversight and control, into proximity to the ideal of all human striving.”\textsuperscript{114} “Aestheticism” is the term Barth uses to refer to a misplaced emphasis on beauty; this is abstract in the sense of ignoring the inner logic of scripture.\textsuperscript{115} Some degree of abstraction in theology is, of course, necessary, else it would be impossible to speak coherently about matters of doctrine and faith (e.g., of ‘New Testament theology,’ or ‘a Reformed perspective’). Deviate too far from the particularity of the biblical witness, however, and one’s way of speaking, thinking, and acting become unrecognizable as Christian. Barth is concerned with beauty’s potential to obscure the center of God’s redemptive activity in Jesus Christ, and so distort the church’s obedient and joyful response. To speak of a predicate such as “divine beauty” is already to

\textsuperscript{113} CD II/1, 652. The “other concepts” to which he refers are the perfections of God’s love (grace and holiness, mercy and righteousness, patience and wisdom) and freedom (unity and omnipresence, constancy and omnipotence, eternity and glory).

\textsuperscript{114} CD II/1, 651.

\textsuperscript{115} CD II/1, 652. It is tempting to extend Barth’s admonition and to characterize the aestheticism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—the European “cult of beauty” in visual art, literature, and culture—as, in effect, a form of the abstract thinking that so concerns him. Its unofficial motto, “art for art’s sake,” may express a legitimate desire for beauty to be free from every political, social, or religious consideration that might possibly compromise the integrity of art, but it also finalizes a divorce from the older idea (e.g., Sidney’s \textit{Apology}) that artists are somehow accountable, ethically and spiritually, for the form as well as the content of their work. Ironically, the severance of the beautiful from the true and the good—as one finds in the poems of Baudelaire, for example, or the films of Leni Riefenstahl—leads not to freedom, but to the paradox of evil presented in attractive forms, i.e., to “aestheticization” and the manipulation of beauty for purposes of corrupt power and propaganda. On this theme, see Mary Devereaux, “Beauty and Evil: the Case of Leni Riefenstahl’s \textit{Triumph of the Will}” in \textit{Aesthetics and Ethics}, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 227-256.
court abstraction from the revealed being of God, already to move away from the world of scripture and towards the false idea that such language can apply meaningfully to God outside of, and decoupled from, the biblical narrative of who God is and what God has done on humanity’s behalf.\textsuperscript{116}

The figure who best illustrates this tendency in the Christian tradition is the influential fifth century theologian Pseudo-Dionysius, whom Barth reads as following in Augustine’s footsteps by developing a systematic notion of the beautiful in constellation with the good. Beauty is “the ultimate cause that produces and moves all things.” As that which is “in and for itself, identical in form with itself”, divine beauty “possesses all beauty already in a more eminent degree, by which all the harmony of the universe, all friendships and all fellowships have their existence, and by which everything is ultimately and finally united.”\textsuperscript{117} Barth sharply criticizes this conception of beauty as “a hardly veiled Platonism.”\textsuperscript{118}

\textsuperscript{116} Barth’s comments regarding the uniqueness of God’s being as the One who loves in freedom—and his warning about the risk of anthropomorphism—may be taken as \textit{à propos} to the peril of using beauty to speak of God: “Even when we enquire about the special and distinctive element in the life and love of God, we are not enquiring about the content of a universal idea of the divine, as though we could glean from this instruction concerning the special and distinguishing essence of God. We make our enquiry on the assumption that the object of this universal idea of God, i.e., of any idea of God formed otherwise than in view of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, is necessarily other than He who is Lord and salvation, and therefore the object of the faith of the Church and the only true God. We are not trying to discover a characteristic mark of divinity which this God will have in common with other gods. We are not concerned with any idea of the divine under which we will subsume the only true God with other gods. We are well aware that, if we do this, we shall be enquiring in fact not about the idea of God, but, in common with the worshippers of those other gods, about the idea of man, about the sum of his wishes and longings, about the highest embodiment, in absolute form, of our own being. Therefore now as before we do not enquire in disregard of God’s revelation, but with our attention concentrated upon it and only upon it” (\textit{CD II/1}, 298-99).


\textsuperscript{118} As Barth does not engage with Pseudo-Dionysius in any great depth or detail, it is left up to the reader to determine what, exactly, Barth finds troubling about this particular brand of Platonism (as a point of contrast, most of what Barth has to say about Augustine is highly complimentary). It would seem that the problem in Pseudo-Dionysius is not the ontology of participation that undergirds his account—as when, for example, he writes that, “We call ‘beautiful’ that which has a share in beauty, and we give the name of ‘beauty’ to the ingredient which is the cause of beauty in everything” (\textit{Names}, 701C). Nor is it his claim that divine beauty is the source of such diverse values as harmony, sympathy, community, measure, and proportion (\textit{Names}, 704A, 705C-D). These features may be read charitably in a Christian sense. One suspects, rather, that Barth saw Pseudo-Dionysius as a case study in conceptual overreach. Throughout \textit{The Divine Names}, theological reflection upon God’s being and activity in the world is eclipsed by a speculative theological scheme, such that the language of the transcendentals—“the One, the Good, the Beautiful”—effectively supercedes the language of scripture. Beauty functions as the grammar by which the Areopagite can speak about God and the world without reference to the concrete particulars (whether historical, moral, or ethical) that must indelibly mark faithful Christian thinking (e.g., \textit{Names}, 704B). What is more, Pseudo-Dionysius’s conception of divine beauty cannot encompass any change, decay, or hint of ugliness (\textit{Names}, 701D). Such beauty, Barth might suggest, is
Perceptive readers may recall that the danger of abstraction (or something very close to it) was first raised in Barth’s discussion of God’s freedom, early in CD II/1. “The fact that God is free in His relationship to all that is not God means noetically that God cannot be classified or included in the same category with anything that He is not”; moreover, “…if we dare to bracket God along with other things, then, whatever may happen inside the framework of the system, God Himself cannot be spoken of, at any rate not honestly and seriously.” And so, Barth says, “in the last analysis we are not speaking of God but of the higher syntheses furnished by our controlling idea. The absoluteness of God permits of no such systematizations.”

These words of caution seem tailored to the present case. Perhaps beauty presents a special danger to theology because of the way it so easily seems to complement the content of revelation. One of the most striking aspects of Pseudo-Dionysius is the absence of any intention to systematize or abstract from the biblical witness. On the contrary, he insists at the outset of The Divine Names that, “we must not dare to resort to words or conceptions concerning that hidden divinity which transcends being, apart from what the sacred scriptures have divinely revealed.” One can fall into patterns of abstract thinking without intending to do so, or without even realizing that one has done so.

### 2.3.3.2 Barth versus Natural Theology

If the peril of abstracting beauty from revelation remains a perennial danger to theology, it nonetheless takes shape in different ways, depending on one’s cultural and historical context. Writing in the context of pre-war Germany, Barth viewed natural theology as the main peril; he describes it as a temptation, an error, an abyss to be finally incompatible with the beauty of Jesus Christ as refracted through the cross. We will examine this “crucial” aspect more closely below, under the fourth rudiment.

119 CD II/1, 310-11.

120 Names, 588A; cf. 588C, 640A. Pseudo-Dionysius speaks frankly about the difficult necessity of bearing witness to the truth, and he clearly he understands the danger of presuming to speak truly about God. “I know that I lack the words to articulate such knowledge of God. I am so far from having the kind of understanding possessed by those holy men regarding theological truth that in my reverence I would not even listen to, let alone speak of, the divine philosophy were it not that I am convinced in my mind that one may not disregard the received knowledge of divine things” (684B). Unfortunately, the treatise that follows calls these virtues into question. Pseudo-Dionysius seems genuinely unaware of the degree to which his writing elides some of the perduring differences between biblical and Platonist teaching.
avoided at all costs.\textsuperscript{121} It is helpful, therefore, to read what Barth has to say about beauty in light of his epic, mid-1930’s clash with Emil Brunner.\textsuperscript{122}

As Andrew Moore has recently argued, the seminal debate between Barth and Brunner over natural theology raises vital questions about the content of the gospel and the tasks of theology in relation to the life of the church.\textsuperscript{123} And while the theme of beauty is not engaged directly, this debate throws light on the question of how beauty is, or ought to be, conceived in relation to theology. To summarize briefly, Brunner’s view was that theology has by necessity an apologetic task, in the sense that the gospel message must be communicated in such a way as to be heard in a given culture. Those who would teach or share the gospel must, therefore, be concerned not only with the dogmatic content of the Christian message (the \textit{what}), but the rhetorical or apologetic forms by which that message is communicated (the \textit{how}). Such an approach lends itself to what might be called an instrumental use of beauty—beauty added to the gospel \textit{(via art, for example)} in order to make it more attractive to the world. Yet in order to carry out the apologetic task, Brunner believed, one must assume that humanity retains some sense of divinity apart from the special revelation contained in scripture. A chief aim of natural theology, in his view, is thus to establish this “point of contact” (\textit{der Anknüpfungspunkt}) in order to gain a proper hearing. In keeping with much of Protestant tradition, Brunner locates the point of contact corporately in the “orders of creation” and individually in the \textit{imago Dei}, understood in relation to “responsibility” or “conscience.” He envisions natural theology as a return to the ostensibly more generous thought of John Calvin and a rejection of Barth’s theology, which by its very narrowness threatens to cut the church off from the wider world of politics, science, art and culture.\textsuperscript{124}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{121} Karl Barth, “No!” in \textit{Natural Theology}, transl. by Peter Fraenkel (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 75.
\item \textsuperscript{122} For English readers both sides of the debate (Brunner’s \textit{Nature and Grace} and Barth’s \textit{No!}) are collected in Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, \textit{Natural Theology}, transl. by Peter Fraenkel (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), originally published in 1946. Hereafter referred to as \textit{Natural}. The background to this debate is helpfully sketched by John W. Hart, “The Barth-Brunner Correspondence” in \textit{For the Sake of the World}, edited by George Hunsinger (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 19-43.
\item \textsuperscript{124} \textit{Natural}, 15-60. “It is the task of our theological generation,” Brunner writes, “to find the way back to a true \textit{theologia naturalis}” (59).
\end{itemize}
In his famous reply to Brunner, Barth sharply criticizes Brunner’s exegesis of scripture and his reading of Calvin vis à vis the church’s theological tradition. However, his most prescient critique, for our purposes, is directed at the way natural theology subtly distorts the gospel and corrupts the practice of theology itself. For his part, Barth defines natural theology as “every (positive or negative) formulation of a system which claims to be theological, i.e. to interpret divine revelation, whose subject, however, differs fundamentally from the revelation in Jesus Christ and whose method therefore differs equally from the exposition of Holy Scripture.”

The building of conceptual systems, the changing of the subject, the eclipse of exegesis and interpretation—these have the combined effect of introducing other agendas into the practice of theology. From Barth’s vantage point, this is catastrophic, since theology has always and only the single task of understanding revelation as grace, and vice versa. What use is a theology based on grace and revelation, Barth asks sarcastically, if one deals with these subjects “as if one had them pocketed, as if one had the knowledge of them below one instead of always behind and in front?”

Barth, therefore, declares himself opposed to every “point of contact,” every version of “a natural knowledge of God,” save that which the Holy Spirit creates.

For Barth, obedience to the gospel demanded not eristic theology’s polemical-apologetic engagement with culture but a still deeper resolve to attend to ‘the good work of theology’. A system of thought drawing on divine revelation but in addition to that also including in its subject matter concerns other than the unique claim of Christ—such as the claims of social, political, and cultural circumstance—might seem to fit the demands of the situation, but would in fact imperil theology by setting up a demand in apparent competition with that of God.

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125 **Natural**, 74-75.
126 **Natural**, 71.
127 **Natural**, 77. Barth’s argument at this point is strongly reminiscent of the protest that marks the opening of Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*. “Even if someone were able to transpose the whole content of faith into conceptual form, it does not follow that he has comprehended faith, comprehended how he entered into it or how it entered into him” (7).
128 **Natural**, 92. D. Stephen Long explains Barth’s reasoning in a wonderfully pithy way: “No neutral realm of nature exists where ethics can be done as if God had not spoken in Christ. Barth’s putative opposition to natural theology presumes a rejection of a doctrine of pure nature. He did not oppose natural theology; he thought it didn’t exist…. If everything is created in, through, and for Christ, then there is no independent nature that can assess his claims on creation, as it were, from the outside. Where would such an outside be?” *Saving Karl Barth: Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Preoccupation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 3-4.
129 Moore, op. cit., 236.
Barth’s alternative is bracingly straightforward. Rather than join the quest to speak a relevant word, the church must trust the Word of God to establish its own hearing. Rather than using beauty instrumentally to “dress up” or decorate the truth, the church must seek to discover the inner beauty of theology itself—grounded, Barth would say, in the delight and joy that belong to God’s glorious inner being—in order to be and become a living witness to the good news of Jesus Christ in all its winsome splendor. So much, at least, is implied by Barth’s argument against natural theology.

Finally, it is worth recalling that the debate over natural theology was not purely academic in nature, but also practical and political. Barth was well aware of how respectable-sounding theological concepts (such as the “orders of creation”) could offer conceptual support to the Nazi goal of marginalizing the church and weakening its opposition to the policies of the coming Reich.

If this assessment of Barth’s context is valid, the following points may be made in summary. First, Barth’s reluctance to make beauty into a primary or independent doctrine does not reflect a stereotypically Protestant aversion to beauty, so much as an awareness of the ways in which beauty lends itself to abstract thinking and to expression as a form of natural theology. As Barth discerned, such instrumental approaches to beauty (whatever their specific form) are perilous to theology and to the church. The vehemence and strident tone of the debate with Brunner suggests that Barth was alert to the subtle dangers of using beauty for apologetic purposes, i.e., as a stand-alone mode of proof, or as a tool to serve some wider cultural programme (whether that of the church, the state, or another entity). Beauty is indeed objective and thus radiant and self-evident, but from Barth’s vantage point, its winsome and persuasive power is ‘located’ intrinsically in God’s own life, in the perfection of glory. Beauty is not, then, an impersonal force to be manufactured or manipulated, but a gift that can only be received with thanksgiving. This is what it means to say that beauty is revelatory.

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130 The issue is, of course, complicated. For an even-handed survey of the historical as opposed to the theological background, see Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich in Power* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 219-320, as well as the comprehensive work of Ernst Christian Helmreich, *The German Churches under Hitler* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979).
Ironically, it is the very winsomeness of beauty that makes it perilous. The peril posed by abstraction and by natural theology is that of forgetting beauty’s self-authenticating quality, and thus failing to focus on the what of the gospel, as opposed to the how (Barth would likely reverse Brunner’s way of putting it). “Is it possible” Barth asks, “to hear the answer given by God and the Gospel themselves, that pleasure and desire are evoked and enjoyment created by the eternal beauty, and still to seek another mode of enlightenment apart from the revelation and the Gospel of God?” For a clear model of the very different approach that Barth admired and sought to emulate, we may consider the prayer with which Anselm begins his *Proslogion*:

Let me receive thy light, even from afar, even from the depths. Teach me to seek thee, and when I seek thee show thyself to me, for I cannot seek thee unless thou teach me, or find thee unless thou show me thyself. Let me seek thee in my desire, let me desire thee in my seeking. Let me find thee by loving thee, let me love thee when I find thee.

On this evidence, the theologian of beauty is not the one with the most culturally relevant teaching or the most ingenious point of contact; rather, it is the person who learns to attend to the Word in a posture of simple humility and gratitude, and in so doing learns to delight in the Lord.

### 2.2.4 Beauty as Crucial: Luther and Barth on the Aesthetics of the Cross

How can the cross, as a grotesque instrument of torture, possibly be related to beauty? More specifically, how can Jesus’ brutal execution possibly lead to a clearer perception of the beauty of God? These are difficult questions, to which there are no easy or obvious answers.

I want to begin the discussion of this fourth and final rudiment by recounting briefly some elements of Martin Luther’s theology of the cross—arguably the most influential touchstone of Protestant thought related to the aesthetic dimensions of Jesus’ death. My aim is to show how Barth’s account of the beauty of Jesus Christ is

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131 *CD* II/1, 666.


essentially a re-framing of Luther’s classic dichotomy between a *theologia gloriae* and a *theologia crucis*. Barth seeks to preserve Luther’s emphasis on the uniqueness and the centrality of the cross, along with his insistence that human beings have no way of perceiving matters rightly, apart from revelation. Yet Barth refuses to set glory and the cross at odds, as Luther does. Instead, he maintains that the cross reveals God’s glory—and therefore God’s beauty—to a supreme degree. The cross epitomizes God’s reconciling work, a work that is fitting and perfect in every respect. It is objectively beautiful, whether recognized or not. As the rich tradition of hymns centered upon the crucifixion illustrates, however, Jesus’ death very often also evokes a sense of admiring awe, mingled with gratitude. Those who truly perceive what God has done on their behalf by means of Jesus’ death will be moved to praise and thanksgiving. This is “crucial beauty” in a subjective sense (Lat. *crucis*—“of the cross”). The deeper theological point is that, *post crucem*, every human understanding of beauty must be radically reconsidered and revised in light of what has taken place at the cross; the practical point is that beauty thus refined becomes vitally necessary for theology and for the Christian life.

### 2.2.4.1 The Aesthetic Implications of Luther’s Theology of the Cross

It is clear that Luther adamantly opposed the tradition of treating the cross as an object of beauty. To grasp the logic behind Luther’s reasoning, it helps to keep two biblical passages in mind. First, there is Isaiah’s claim that the servant of the Lord would have “no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him” (Is 53:2b). Taken at face value, the passage suggests that beauty is not a term we should use to describe the Servant, whose effectiveness in accomplishing the will of God is a matter of righteous obedience. It does not depend upon superficial appearances, nor is it deterred in any way by the vagaries of human perception (“we esteemed him not”). This text, so often read as a prophecy of Jesus, might even be taken to suggest that beauty and desire represent obstacles to an accurate reading of the Servant’s redemptive work.

The second key passage comes from I Corinthians. The Apostle Paul claims that, by sending his Son to die on the cross, God chose “what is foolish in the world to shame the wise… what is weak in the world to shame the strong…[and] what is low and despised in the world… to bring to nothing things that are” (I Cor 1:27-8). It is
no great leap from Paul’s words to the idea that God chooses what is unattractive or even repulsive in the world’s eyes in order to shame what the world regards as beautiful. This is the strain of biblical thinking that animates the Heidelberg Disputation of 1518, a debate that afforded Luther the opportunity to juxtapose two competing loci of theological perception.\textsuperscript{134}

Throughout his text (28 separate theses, with a paragraph of commentary in support), Luther draws the sharpest possible disjunction between two rival ways of seeing and naming God’s work in the world. “The theology of glory seeks to know God directly in his obviously divine power, wisdom, and glory; whereas the theology of the cross paradoxically recognizes him precisely where he has hidden himself, in his sufferings and in all that which the theology of glory considers to be weakness and foolishness.”\textsuperscript{135} In order to name God’s activity rightly—to call a thing what it actually is—the theologian must acknowledge the cross as the key to revelation.\textsuperscript{136}

Luther does not completely overturn the ordinary sense of things. He does not cast “glory” as evil and “the cross” as good, for example. He argues, rather, that without the cross, human beings are simply unable to make sense of who God is and what God has done on their behalf. “Now it is not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good to recognize God in his glory and majesty, unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross.”\textsuperscript{137} We must learn that, “true theology and recognition of God are in the crucified Christ….”\textsuperscript{138} Luther also insists that flawed perception leads to religious perversion, for “without the theology of the cross man misuses the best in the worst manner.”\textsuperscript{139} In the eyes of sinful humanity, the cross can only be the antithesis of beauty; it is a symbol of suffering and shame that people will


\textsuperscript{135} Althaus, 27.

\textsuperscript{136} Luther, \textit{Heidelberg}, thesis 21.

\textsuperscript{137} Luther, \textit{Heidelberg}, commentary on thesis 20.

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{139} Luther, \textit{Heidelberg}, thesis 24.
understandably shun and despise. Yet it is precisely in the cross, and not in what appears glorious and clear, that “the visible and manifest things of God” are to be discerned.140

The polemical edge of such claims is directed at those scholastic theologians (chiefly William Ockham, Duns Scotus, and Gabriel Biel) who, in Luther’s view, tended radically to underestimate the pervasive perversity of sin, and therefore the absolute primacy of grace for salvation. “It is not true to say that the will is able of its own volition to conform itself to that which is right…. On the contrary, without the grace of God the will produces of necessity an action which is wicked and wrong.”141 This helps to explain why Luther pressed his readers to see Jesus’ death as their own actual dying, not merely as a metaphysical transaction. Only when the cross is reckoned with in a visceral and personal way can it bring about a real, as opposed to an abstract or hypothetical, exchange between God and the sinner. For Luther, “it is not by our own works, but by [Jesus’] work, His passion and death, that He makes us righteous, and gives us life and salvation. This is in order that we might take to ourselves His death and victory as if they were our own.”142 To conceive of the Christian life in terms of divine-human cooperation—Biel, for example, stresses the need to “do what is in you”—is to fail to enter vicariously into Jesus’ death.143 As Gerhard Forde puts it,
“[w]e must, through the cross of Christ, his terrible suffering and death, be actually purchased and won…
killed and made alive. If it is to be a ‘happy’ exchange, our hearts must be captured by it.”\textsuperscript{144} The cross can never be a “work” that we do; having been done \textit{for us} (objectively), it must also be done \textit{to us} (subjectively).

The question arises: does viewing the cross aesthetically help or hinder this subjective appropriation? To speak of the heart being “captured” would seem to open the way to talking about the evocative and life-giving beauty of the cross, and yet Luther resists doing so. Instead, he aims relentlessly to remove every trace of sentimental or aesthetic attraction—to “strip the roses from the cross.”\textsuperscript{145} The most prominent way Luther does this is by underscoring the radical difference between appearance and reality. “Although the works of man always seem attractive and good,” he writes, “they are nevertheless likely to be mortal sins.”\textsuperscript{146} Human perception not only falls short of spiritual reality, it may actually delude us into thinking that we see, when in fact we are blind. For Luther, one clear implication of Paul’s defense of the cross in I Corinthians 1 is to cast doubt on humans’ ability to judge theological matters aesthetically (i.e., on the basis of what is, or is not, attractive). Whereas Augustine had cast desire as a clue to humanity’s deepest longing for God, Luther views it as a distorted index of humanity’s sinful bent. “The remedy for curing desire does not lie in satisfying it, but in extinguishing it.”\textsuperscript{147} Being insatiable, desire must be killed, not merely reformed or re-directed. Only by radical self-denial—taking up one’s own cross—is it possible to avoid becoming a

\textit{(ex puris naturalibus)} effectively cheapens grace and casts the necessity of Christ’s work into doubt (117). Why did Christ die if humanity can be good without God?

\textsuperscript{144} Forde, “Luther’s Theology,” 52.

\textsuperscript{145} Forde, “Luther’s Theology,” 59.

\textsuperscript{146} Luther, \textit{Heidelberg}, thesis 3. Thesis 4 is similar, but approaches the problem from the opposite side: “Although the works of God are always unattractive and appear evil, they are nevertheless really eternal merits.”

\textsuperscript{147} Luther, \textit{Heidelberg}, commentary on thesis 22. Of course, Augustine also argues that it is precisely the sin-caused disordering of our loves that makes desire problematic to begin with. We seek to \textit{enjoy} what we ought to \textit{use}, and \textit{vice versa} (cf. \textit{De Doctrina Christiana} I.20-30). Perhaps it is this more pessimistic (or realistic) aspect of Augustine’s thought that informs Luther’s account. Certainly is clear from the preface to the disputation that Luther intends to follow Augustine faithfully in interpreting St. Paul.
'theologian of glory.' Only by embracing the cross in all its scandalous particularity can a theologian avoid the error of promulgating “the perennial theology of the fallen race.”  

2.2.4.2 Reconsidering the Beauty of the Cross

Under the third rudiment (beauty as perilous) we noted the Protestant tendency to remain wary of the various dangers associated with beauty. Barth, I have suggested, retains something of this vigilant attitude. Yet in contrast to Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, which frequently strikes a combative and polemical tone, the theology of beauty that emerges from the beauty passage in CD II/1 is predominantly constructive, laying the groundwork for what might cautiously be described as an aesthetic retrieval of the cross.

Luther’s influence can be detected in Barth’s claim that our knowledge of God is always mediated, never direct. In faith, therefore—and only by means of faith—are we to seek God where God has sought us, “in those veils and under those signs of His Godhead. Elsewhere He is not to be found.” Similarly, Barth preserves from Luther an affirmation of humanity’s helpless state, its total dependence upon the grace of God. He notes, for instance, how it is idle to speak as if human beings retained some vestige of beauty unaffected by the fall. Rather, Barth quotes Luther with approval in order to claim that human beings become lovely as they are loved by God, who graciously seeks and creates fellowship with his creation, and does so without regard for any aptitude or worthiness on the part of the beloved. Those who would locate the motive for God’s love in some inherent human virtue or quality, Barth observes, “are not thinking of the cross of Christ, of the sin of the chosen and elect people of Israel, of the justification of the ungodly (Rom 4:5), and of faith in Him who quickens the dead and calls those things that are not as though they were

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148 This fine phrase is from Forde, On Being a Theologian, xiii.

149 CD II/1, 18-19. It is not incidental that the biblical episode that Barth discusses in this connection (Ex 33, the account of God displaying his glory to Moses on Mount Sinai) is an essential background text for Luther’s theology of the cross; cf. Althaus, 25.

150 “It is as amatus [beloved] that the loved of God becomes amabilis [lovable]” CD II/1, 278. Barth is here restating part of thesis 28 from the Heidelberg disputation: “The love of God does not first discover but creates what is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through attraction to what pleases it.” See also Forde, On Being a Theologian, 112-13.
(Rom 4:17), but of a general [i.e., an abstract and unbiblical] concept of love.” Barth also agrees with Luther that the faculties of human perception are radically flawed on account of human sin. We are prone to miss the glory of God, which “works by contraries on the man who cannot have it, just as bright light can only blind eyes unaccustomed to it.” But this metaphor already hints at a more hopeful reading of human perception in the face of God’s revelation. “The beauty of Jesus Christ is not just any beauty,” Barth avers. “It is the beauty of God.” How, according to Barth, does the revelatory beauty of God make itself known even (or especially) in the hiddenness of the cross?

By way of response, three distinctive aspects of Barth’s discussion deserve to be highlighted.

The first involves Barth’s holistic way of contextualizing the cross. Barth locates Jesus’ beauty within the wider economy of salvation—in the incarnation, the earthly life, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, conceived as a whole—not in any one episode or dimension of his person and work. What the cross does is to testify in a uniquely climactic way to the beauty of God, who “could not be more glorious as God than in this inconceivable humiliation of Himself to man and the no less inconceivable exaltation of man to Himself.”

From this it follows, second, that the cross must serve as the criterion for measuring whether a particular understanding of beauty is mindful of God’s revelation. “If the beauty of Christ is sought in a glorious Christ who is not the crucified,” Barth says, “the search will always be in vain.” This points to a key difference between Barth and Luther. Whereas Luther aims to eliminate all talk of beauty from the cross, Barth seeks effectively to describe beauty by way of the cross.

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151 The theologians Barth criticizes here include Polanus, Thomas Aquinas, and especially Quenstedt, who had argued that, *Amor Dei est, quo ipse cum obiecto amabili se suaviter unit.* (“The love of God is that by which God sweetly unites himself to the lovable object”). Rather, Barth thinks, “the basis of the love of God lies outside the man loved by Him and in God Himself” (*CD II/1*, 278-9).

152 *CD II/1*, 653.

153 *CD II/1*, 665.

154 *CD II/1*, 663.

155 *CD II/1*, 665.
God’s beauty embraces death as well as life, fear as well as joy, what we might call the ugly as well as what we might call the beautiful. It reveals itself and wills to be known on the road from the one to the other, in the turning from the self-humiliation of God for the benefit of man to the exaltation of man by God and to God. This turning is the mystery of the name of Jesus Christ and of the glory revealed in this name.  

Perhaps Barth differs most from Luther in his willingness to unite ideas or themes that in Luther appear incommensurable. Rather than ruling beauty out completely, as Luther seems to do, Barth adapts Luther’s skepticism regarding human perception in order to stress again our need to re-learn what beauty is on the basis of who God is and what God has done. “We have to ask about God Himself, about the content and substance of His revelation, and therefore also of His revealed divine being. This as such is beautiful. We have to learn from it what beauty is.” Such learning will be most difficult, presumably, but also most instructive at the foot of the cross. Barth’s approach suggests, however, that a theologia gloriae can be compatible with a theologia crucis, provided that the theologian adhere faithfully to what God has revealed.

Like Luther, Barth is interested coming to terms with the cross in an individual way (its soteriological importance, pro me). He agrees that it is part of the theologian’s task to see all reality through the lens of the cross. Barth seems far more willing than Luther, however, to describe this pro me aspect as an epiphany, an aesthetic encounter with the person of Jesus. “If we do not see this, if we do not believe it, if it has not happened to us, how can we see the form of this event, the likeness of the essence of God in Jesus Christ, and how can we see that this likeness is beautiful?” We may paraphrase Barth as saying that God’s crucial beauty must be seen to be believed—and at the same time insisting that this ‘seeing’ cannot happen apart from our coming to terms with the death of Jesus, the Son of God, on the cross.

156 CD II/1, 665.
157 One measure of this integrative or synthetic style is Barth’s way of softening the stridency of Luther’s rhetoric. Whereas Luther’s law/gospel dichotomy leads him to read against the grain of the Old Testament, Barth strives to bring the two into harmony. “In Scripture,” he says, “we do not find the Law alongside the Gospel but in the Gospel, and therefore the holiness of God is not side by side with but in His grace, and His wrath is not separate from but in His love” (CD II/1, 363).
158 CD II/1, 656.
159 CD II/1, 665.
The third aspect of Barth’s discussion I wish to mention concerns the cross as prohibition and rebuke. Viewed aesthetically, the particularity of the cross is such that no other face shows us both the human suffering of the true God and the glory of true humanity.\(^{160}\) Barth draws two provocative conclusions from this point. The first is that a Christian can be opposed to the making of images of Jesus out of a desire to respect the Savior’s incomparable beauty. Thus Barth urges artists to cease and desist from attempting to portray Jesus’ face, citing (surprisingly) Anselm of Canterbury, and not any of the Reformers, as the inspiration for his iconoclasm. “I am always indignant with poor artists when I see our Lord himself painted with an ugly form....”\(^{161}\) Barth’s second conclusion is more reminiscent of Luther: the cross serves as a standing rebuke to ways of thinking about the beauty of God that would prefer to look away from the costly truth that it stands for (Barth seems to have various modes of natural theology in mind). This claim echoes Paul’s teaching in 2 Cor 4:6; now that we have seen the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ—even Christ crucified—it would be both foolish and ungrateful to look elsewhere.

\section*{2.2.4.3 Beauty as Crucial for Theology}

One of the long-term effects of Luther’s theology of the cross, arguably, has been a reticence on the part of theologians, Protestants especially, to speak of beauty for fear of practicing a theology of glory in the pejorative sense Luther gives to that enterprise.\(^{162}\) Barth obviously agrees that beauty entails peril, but he is equally adamant that beauty be accounted for within theology. Beauty is thus crucial in the sense of being necessary or essential. What makes Barth so insistent upon this point?

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \footnotesize \textit{CD} II/1, 666.
\item \footnotesize Anselm, \textit{Cur Deus Homo} I/1 in \textit{A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham} (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), 103; referenced by Barth at \textit{CD} II/1, 656 and \textit{Anselm: Fides Quarens Intellectum} (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2009), 15.
\item \footnotesize In Balthasar’s analysis, Luther’s error here was to over-identify the theology of glory with the age to come, and thus to overlook the fact that the language of “glory” already provides a useful and biblically faithful way of describing God’s economy. \textit{Seeing the Form}, 57–8.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
As Barth sees things, speaking of beauty is the fitting consequence of divine illumination. Were God not the God of glory, human beings would know nothing about the perfections of God’s being (Barth’s first example of beauty), or God’s Triune nature, “the secret of his beauty.” They would have no cause to see in the cross, a sign of death and torture, the promise of life and healing. But if God’s glory is truly self-evident, efficacious and outgoing; if God’s gracious will cannot be thwarted by human sin or rebellion; and if God acts “as the One who gives pleasure, creates desire and rewards with enjoyment,” then the theologian’s greater peril may actually be to ignore or overlook the beauty of God’s self-revelation. Because God is truly beautiful there is, finally, no compelling reason “to take up a particularly tragic attitude to the danger that threatens from the side of aesthetics”—which is what Protestantism has too often done, in Barth’s estimation.

Attending to beauty in the practice of theology means attending to the form of God’s self-revelation, the whole as well as the parts in their myriad interconnections. Barth thinks that neglecting the beauty of this form—God condescending to be known through God’s Word—has serious and deleterious consequences. Above all, it means missing out on the joy that flows from God’s own inner life, which in turn leads to distorted understandings of the gospel. For the theologian, it amounts to a failure of vocation. “The theologian who has no joy in his work is not a theologian at all,” says Barth. “Sulky faces, morose thoughts and boring ways of speaking are intolerable in this science.” What is more, an absence of beauty casts doubt on our knowledge of God, since God is, after all, the one who makes himself known to humanity in the delightful ways Barth describes. Attending to beauty must involve the recognition that God’s beauty (kalon) is not a matter of disinterested contemplation, but an affirmation of desire in the form of vocation (kalein). It rightly evokes wonder and a deeper obedience. We may elaborate Barth’s conviction by saying

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163 CD II/1, 650, cf. Ps 27:1.
164 CD II/1, 662.
165 CD II/1, 652.
166 CD II/1, 655.
167 CD II/1, 656.
168 CD II/1, 662.
169 CD II/1, 665.
that, much as theology itself cannot be separated from ethics, so the beautiful in God cannot be separated from the joy that belongs to, and flows from, a life of discipleship to Jesus Christ.

2.4 CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have argued that Barth’s distinctive way of approaching beauty by way of the perfection of glory offers a rich and potentially fruitful resource for theology—particularly in terms of the theologian’s vocation and the approach to be followed in making sense of God’s self-revelation. Using the notion of ‘rudiments’ as a heuristic, we have seen how Barth highlights in complex ways the revelatory, biblical, perilous, and crucial nature of beauty. I have also sought to show how Barth takes an appreciative but critical stance in relation to the long tradition of Christian reflection on beauty, both Catholic and Protestant (Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, Anselm, and Luther are key sources and interlocutors). While Barth remains indebted to these thinkers at many points, he arrives ultimately at a place that resists easy categorization. Arguably, the most distinctive feature of Barth’s approach is the formal decision to use the biblical language of ‘glory’ as the path to beauty—specifically, the uniquely beautiful character of God’s being-in-action. Unlike accounts where beauty either becomes an abstraction or devolves into a form of natural theology, Barth’s seminal discussion in CD II/1 remains firmly grounded in revelation. To press the point further: where other theologians might look to nature, art, or culture, Barth points to God’s Triune nature in all its particularity as the delightful source of all beauty, and to God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ as its clearest and most self-evident display.

This accent on Christology, while typical of Barth’s larger theological project, has important ramifications for the development of a theological aesthetics. It means, for instance, that beauty is to be found not only in the familiar channels of desire, pleasure, and enjoyment, but in humble acts of self-emptying and sacrifice as well. God’s condescension in the act of incarnation proves paradigmatic. Incarnation means that created beauty must be re-conceived in light of the cross. And it means that God has graciously provided the means of coming into relationship with the deepest object of human desire.
While Barth offers a theologically clear and compelling way to think about beauty, he is (at least in CD II/1) highly reticent to elaborate the practical and ecclesial implications of his views. This reticence may be variously interpreted. Hans Urs von Balthasar praises Barth for making a “decisive breakthrough” in the beauty passage, thereby recovering the basis for an authentic theological aesthetics.\textsuperscript{170} In his view, this outcome is all the more remarkable given the tendency of Protestant thought to cycle uselessly through one of two eddies—either an overly rationalistic ‘criticism’ (epitomized in eyes by the work of Bultmann), or an existential and imageless ‘inwardness’ that has lost touch with the objective and aesthetic dimensions of the Christian faith.\textsuperscript{171} However, Balthasar deliberately chooses beauty as the first, founding word of his great theological trilogy.\textsuperscript{172} This, we may recall, is a move Barth had explicitly rejected out of an architectural concern for the total shape of Christian doctrine.

Balthasar also disagrees profoundly with Barth over the capacity of created forms to facilitate our participation in the beauty of God. In his version of the \textit{analogia pulchri}, forms such as the visible church, the institution of marriage, and the life of the saint (“to be a Christian is precisely a form”) possess a permanent or settled quality that runs counter to the actualistic tendency of Barth’s thought.\textsuperscript{173} For Barth, the issue is not simply that we come to know true and lasting beauty only by way of revelation—although this is true—but that our perception of God as beautiful is an epiphany grounded in the freedom and love that define God’s perfect being and action.\textsuperscript{174} Given these tensions, it is plausible to read Balthasar as building on Barth’s foundation in a markedly different style, and in ways that sometimes ignore or obscure the rudiments of Barth’s theology of beauty.

\textsuperscript{170} Balthasar, \textit{Seeing the Form}, 56.
\textsuperscript{171} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{172} Ibid., 18.
\textsuperscript{173} Ibid., 28.
\textsuperscript{174} On this point and for a thoughtful analysis of how the actualism of CD II/1 relates to Barth’s account of beauty, see William T. Barnett, “Actualism and Beauty: Karl Barth’s Insistence on the \textit{Auch} in His Account of Divine Beauty”, \textit{Scottish Journal of Theology}, vol. 66.3 (August 2013): 299 – 318.
A more caustic critique has recently been advanced by the Italian political theorist Giorgio Agamben. In Agamben’s view, the concept of glory functions as a “signature,” that is, as a self-deceptive ruse by which theology historically has tried but failed to disguise its own fundamental inadequacy. As he puts it: “Government glorifies the Kingdom, and the Kingdom glorifies Government. But the center of the machine is empty, and glory is nothing but the splendor that emanates from this emptiness, the inexhaustible *kabod* that at once reveals and veils the central vacuity of the machine.” Agamben interprets Barth’s discussion of glory and beauty from *CD* II/1 as a transfer of the biblical idea of *kabod/doxa* “into the neutral sphere of aesthetics,” with calamitous results. Such aestheticization is feckless because beauty inadvertently serves “to cover and dignify what is in itself pure force and domination.” Excluding politics from the discussion of glory is ultimately impossible—kingdom and glory being, as Agamben sees it, inextricably bound together. It is inevitable that politics re-emerge in an “improper form” (namely, doxology). In a striking move, Agamben invites the reader to compare the grateful posture of Christian worship—an “absolute reduction of creatures to their glorifying function”—to the obsequious behavior demanded of subjects by the “profane powers” of Byzantium and the Third Reich. In short, Barth’s reticence constitutes a hidden form of repression.

Given this accusation, it is possible that Agamben thinks that theology is impossible. In Barth’s defense, it bears observing that Agamben describes Barth as having inserted “a brief treatise on glory” into his *Church Dogmatics*. If my exegesis of the beauty passage in *CD* II/1 has been cogent, what such a description reveals is that Agamben simply has not read Barth with sufficient care. He overlooks the myriad ways in which glory (and therefore beauty) functions not as a bead on a string, but as the capstone concept of a richly nuanced account of

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176 Ibid., 214.

177 Ibid., 211.

178 Ibid., 213.

179 Ibid., 212.

180 Ibid., 215-16.

181 Agamben, op. cit., 211.
God’s perfections. Within the larger horizon of Barth’s argument in CD II/1, there is no “neutral sphere of aesthetics.” Beauty comes from God. Nor can divine glory be regarded as paradoxical. This ought to have been clear from Barth’s commentary on the Incarnation—perhaps the single-most astonishing part of his account of glory:

God could not be more glorious as God than in this inconceivable humiliation of Himself to man and the no less inconceivable exaltation of man to Himself. He is glorious in this very differentiation, this renunciation of Himself. And this, His supreme work towards what is outside Him, is the reflection and image of His inner, eternal, divine being. In this reflection and image we see Him as He is in Himself. He is One, and yet not imprisoned or bound to be merely one. He is identical with Himself, and yet free to be another as well; simple and yet manifold; at peace with Himself, yet also alive. The One who is and does what we see God to be and do in Jesus Christ can, of course, be all this at the same time. He is it without tension, dialectic, paradox, or contradiction. If the opposite seems true to us, it is our mistaken thinking, not God, which is to blame.182

Such a God, moving antithetically to the logic of worldly power through an act of self-emptying that serves to catch humanity up into the freedom and love that define the being and action of God, clearly deserves our wonder, thanksgiving, and praise—though such a God just as clearly does not need it.

My own reading attributes Barth’s reticence to spell out the practical implications of theological beauty to three main factors: first, the formal demands of his genre. In CD II/1 Barth is writing in a dogmatic, not an ethical or aesthetic register. Glory, not beauty, is his primary theme. Second, we must consider Barth’s audience in their social/political context. Barth writes in no small part to German evangelical churchmen for whom the forms of this-worldly beauty have proven a snare and a stumbling block. There is certainly a danger here of aestheticization—but it is coming from powers in the Reich and the German Christian movement, not from a politically subversive, Swiss theologian. The antidote to the ‘Hitler myth’ is not genealogy, but theology that actually attends to the truth of revelation. As John C. McDowell says of Barth, “the best apologetics is good dogmatics.”183 Third, it is also plausible to suppose that the nexus of glory and beauty opened up for Barth a genuinely new line of thought, one whose full implications were not yet clear to him. The beauty passage in CD

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182 CD II/1, 663.
II/1 constitutes a beginning, a set of rudiments. It would take time to think more broadly and play more confidently with the concept of beauty.

It is this thesis that I entertain in the following two chapters, for practical and ecclesial questions cannot be postponed indefinitely. A key question that flows from Barth’s discussion is thus: how and where do human beings actually come to encounter the beauty of God? We will look to apply Barth’s rudimentary thinking about beauty in two related areas. In terms of personal faith, we will examine the phenomenon of joy as the affection Barth most clearly and consistently links with beauty. In terms of the church’s corporate existence, we will ask what it might mean to practice Communion as a way of learning to perceive and participate in the beauty of God. These loci obviously do not exhaust the various doctrinal areas that could be illuminated by consideration with beauty. They are sufficient, however, to provide a sense of the secondary but essential role that beauty plays within Barth’s theology, and a glimpse of how the beauty of God may inform and enrich the normal Christian life.
3. JOY AND THE BEAUTY OF GOD

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The discussion of beauty in Karl Barth’s CD II/1 might appear to some readers as a meandering digression, or perhaps as an isolated treatise with few implications for theology, let alone the church. I have made the opposite case: that this passage marks the promising engagement with a neglected topic of theological and ecclesial concern, and therefore holds a broader significance that belies its brevity and unusual location. But this claim begs a very straightforward question: if CD II/1 contains a distinctive (albeit rudimentary) theology of beauty, how does Barth develop this theology? Where can we see it worked out in relation to other doctrinal loci? The clearest answer, I propose, is to be found in connection with joy (die Freude).

Why joy? It will be recalled that the constellation of desire, pleasure, and enjoyment is Barth’s preferred way of speaking about our experience of the beauty of God.1 When God’s glory reaches us—and it does reach us, Barth insists—we encounter divine beauty in the form of joy. This beauty is not self-contained, so to speak, but evokes a response in us and from us. As Robert Price says, “Barth’s concept of the beauty of God captures that distinctly affective dimension of the divine self-revelation which is often muted by Barth’s typical emphasis on revelation’s cognitive dimensions.”2 This joy is a divine gift, not a human invention. It cannot be conjured or imitated, nor does it require a certain personality type or temperament. Its source is the glorious perfection of God, who wills to be in fellowship with creation.

In all this [the glory of God] is a glory that awakens joy, and is itself joyful. It is not merely a glory which is solemn and good and true, and which in its perfection and sublimity, might be gloomy or at least joyless. […] It is something in God, the God of all the perfections, which justifies us in having joy, desire and pleasure towards Him, which indeed obliges, summons and attracts us to do this.3

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1 CD II/1, 651. At a linguistic level, Barth notes how the words for ‘glory’ in various languages (he mentions Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and German), carry connotations of what is pleasant, desirable, and enjoyable—and hence of beauty. But to talk about the way in which glory ‘spills over’ and exceeds its bounds, joy seems the preferable term. Thus Barth describes glory as God’s “overflowing self-communicating joy. By its very nature it is that which gives joy” (CD II/1, 653).


3 CD II/1, 655.
As various scholars have noted, joy is one of the outstanding themes of Barth’s theology. It appears in disparate contexts across all three volumes of the *Church Dogmatics*, and pervades Barth’s other writings. Since Barth has forged such strong links between glory, beauty, and joy, it makes sense to examine the theme of joy in more detail, with an ear for hearing how Barth applies the rudiments of beauty in a variety of contexts, and to a range of theological topics.

This chapter takes the form of a survey. We will consider the pivotal role of joy in Barth’s early commentary on *Philippians*; the analogy of delight Barth learns from Anselm of Canterbury; the close relationship Barth posits between delight and duty in his ‘general ethics’ (*CD* II/2); and his elaboration of joy as “the simplest form of gratitude”—a defining gift and goal of the Christian life (*CD* III/4). Lastly, we will offer a detailed look at Barth’s reading of the Sabbath commandment as an occasion for joy through obedience (*CD* III/2 and III/4). My argument is that, when taken collectively, these passages represent Barth’s most extensive effort to allow the beauty of God to inform his theology. They demonstrate that Barth’s interest in beauty was not a local anomaly of his doctrine of God, but a thread to be woven patiently into the rich fabric of his writing and thinking.

More succinctly, these passages prompt us to think of joy as the affection or virtue that corresponds most closely to the beauty of God. In effect, joy amounts to a form of proof—that the primal and objective beauty of God is not a rare or distant abstraction, but the most frequent and familiar way in which God’s glorious self-revelation may be subjectively met. The Psalmist’s petition, “Cast me not away from your presence / and take not your Holy Spirit from me” is followed immediately and fittingly by a second request: “Restore to me the joy of your salvation...” (*Ps 51*:11-12). As we saw in the last chapter, it is precisely this sort of asymmetrical, yet genuinely ‘inter-subjective’ quality of the relationship between God and humanity, that Barth has undertaken to illuminate through his constellation of glory with beauty and its related concepts (desire, pleasure, and especially joy). Let us therefore attend to Barth’s teaching on joy, with an eye for how it both follows from and builds upon his rudimentary theology of beauty.

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4 For a broad overview of the role of joy within the *Church Dogmatics* see, e.g., John Mark Capper, “Karl Barth’s Theology of Joy” (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 1998).
3.2 The Joy of Knowing Jesus

In general usage, the word denotes a deep and abiding gladness. It is closely related to contemporary notions of happiness as well as classical notions of well-being, or *eudaimonia*. But unlike happiness, which is generally regarded as ephemeral, joy is usually expected to possess an element of permanence. Unlike *eudaimonia*, which seems to depend upon personal virtue and favorable circumstances, joy is (in theory) available to anyone, in any condition, under any conceivable set of circumstances.\(^5\)

The prophet Habakkuk gives voice to a sense of joy as something durable and constant:

> Though the fig tree should not blossom,  
> nor fruit be on the vines,  
> the produce of the olive fail  
> and the fields yield no food,  
> the flock be cut off from the fold  
> and there be no herd in the stalls,  
> yet I will rejoice in the Lord;  
> I will take joy in the God of my salvation. (Hab 3:17-18)

Adding to the trope of joy in the midst of trial, the New Testament writers look to Jesus, “who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame” (Heb 12:2)—as well as to Paul and other witnesses who suffer for the sake of the gospel. In this world there will be trouble (Jn 16), and yet “trials of many kinds” are to be reckoned as “all joy” (*pasan charan*), for the testing of faith produces hupomone, fortitude or steadfastness (Jas 1). This is not to say that joy is a purely human achievement. It is counted,

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\(^5\) It is helpful to distinguish *happiness* in the vague, modern sense (viz., a value relative to each American, pursued in self-defined ways, for obscure reasons, to unknown ends) from *eudaimonia* in the classical sense, because they do not seem remotely synonymous. *Eudaimonia*, is more accurately regarded as an end that is always worth choosing in its own right, never for the sake of something else (Aristotle, *Nicomachian Ethics*, 1097b). Alasdair MacIntyre helpfully glosses this as “the state of being well and doing well in being well” (*After Virtue*, third edition, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007, p. 148). As such, *eudaimonia* requires virtue, and hence those lacking in virtue—the wicked, the undisciplined, those of low birth—will never reach it. How is *eudaimonia* distinct from *joy*? Despite its apparently complete and self-sufficient status, *eudaimonia* depends to some degree upon external goods such as friends, wealth, and political power (1097b). It is vulnerable to circumstances, to *fortuna*. Our well-being is marred, Aristotle admits, by both certain kinds of lack (his examples include good birth, good children, and physical beauty), and by the unpredictable course of contingent events (unwelcome life changes, not to mention death - 1099b). Barth criticizes *eudaimonism* generally for failing to do justice to the “alien” or external character of the command that tells us what we must do. “A command which transcends our actions cannot in the last analysis be merely a command which I have given myself on the basis of what I myself have seen and experienced and felt and judged of the good and the true and the beautiful” (*CD* II/2, 651). Granting Barth’s point about the hazards of extreme subjectivity, I am not sure that this critique strikes at the heart of the matter. Aristotle was not a relativist.
rather, as a gift and sign of God’s grace at work in a person’s life—hence its prominent place among the “fruits of the Spirit” (Gal 5:3). To those who remain faithful, great rewards are promised—“fullness of joy,” and an eternal “weight of glory”—that will make the hardships of this life pale by comparison (2 Cor 4:17). After the theological virtues of faith, hope and love, joy is perhaps the most prized trait in the Christian life.

The eschatological strand to the New Testament’s teaching helps to explain why, in the later Christian tradition, joy would so often be linked with beauty. Beauty serves as a summons to desire; joy combines both the anticipation and the eventual fulfillment of desire. C.S. Lewis, for example, links joy with humanity’s deep longing for beauty, a longing that this world can never satisfy:

We do not want merely to see beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words—to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it. […] Some day, God willing, we shall get in. […] The whole man is to drink joy from the fountain of joy.

Evidence for Barth’s fascination with joy as a defining mark of the Christian life can be gleaned from any number of sources. Barth’s Philippians commentary, which was based on a lecture course offered in the winter of 1926-27, offers a useful starting point. Joy, “the keynote that Paul strikes in this letter,” goes beyond what a person can have or feel or show, for “at all times it can and must take place.” Noting its many occurrences in Paul’s letter, Barth commends joy as “a defiant ‘Nevertheless!’” that is able to overcome whatever temptations the believers in Philippi face—temptations to become suspicious (perhaps of Epaphroditus, 2:28); to remain divided amongst themselves (4:2); or simply to be anxious (4:6).

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8 Epistle, 120. References to joy or rejoicing include 1:4, 1:18, 2:17, 2:18, 3:1, and 4:4.
9 Epistle, 120, cf. 83. According to Francis Watson, Barth’s interpretation of the paragraph about Epaphroditus (2:25-30) serves as “an extraordinarily vivid illustration of the ethos of joy, grace, thanksgiving, and love that the letter as a whole commends and exemplifies” (“Barth’s Philippians as Theological Exegesis” in Epistle, 102.
But what are the grounds for joy? The message of Philippians is that joy is both fitting and necessary because the entire existence of the believer is ultimately caught up with, and determined by, the death and life of Jesus Christ. Barth’s commentary on the letter illuminates this point in two distinct ways. The first may be described simply as the joy of knowing Jesus. In 1:18 Paul rejoices that the gospel is going forth, regardless of the motives of its messengers. As Barth sees it, this joy can be legitimate because Paul rejoices “neither in his opponents nor in himself but in the power of the object to which he subordinates himself”—namely, Christ, who will be magnified in any case. A more profound rendering of the same theme is sounded in the biographical passage in chapter 3: “whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (3:7-8). For Barth, Paul’s experience as a former Pharisee becomes the pattern or template for all conversions, insofar as it requires a renunciation of anything and everything that human beings might use to justify themselves.

Such is the condition of man when he lives in the manner of the new, true people of God, considering himself no longer religious except through the Spirit of God, no longer able to glory except in Christ Jesus, no longer able to rely on the flesh. He does not live as if he had found a new bridge from here to the beyond, from man to God, from destruction to redemption—a new bridge alongside of which the old one could then very well be used again too on occasion. On the contrary, he lives in the knowledge that there is no bridge from here to there, but solely the way from there to here—the way that from beginning to end and all along is God’s way.

Barth conjectures that Paul may be concerned over the reception Epaphroditus will receive from the Philippians. If he returns earlier than expected, has his service to Paul and the Philippians fallen short of the mark? What stands out to Barth from the letter is Paul’s tactful willingness to urge grace and acceptance in this potentially awkward situation. In contrast to the earlier conflict that led Paul to separate from Barnabas and John Mark (Ac 15:37), this passage expresses a pre-emptive act of welcome. Epaphroditus is to be received “in all his frailness as a messenger of joy, a living illustration of the grace in which God accepts each man ultimately just as he is and whatever his condition” (Epistle, 88). Interpreters are divided on how to best make sense of the situation with Epaphroditus. Some, contra Barth, prefer to take Paul at face value and not to read too much into his commendation (see e.g., Gordon Fee, 272-273). Nevertheless, this is one of several cases where, as Watson puts it, “Barth shows his sensitivity to the interpersonal dimension of Paul’s text. [...] Barth assumes that, beyond the pragmatic and pastoral dimension, Paul’s thanksgiving arises from theological conviction: he and his readers must think of one another on the basis not of their contingent worldly situation but of their eternal standing before God and in Christ. [...] Thanksgiving is the acknowledgment that, whatever else may be true of the other, he or she is in Christ” (xxxii).

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10 Epistle, 33.

11 Epistle, 105, cf. the detailed review of this pericope by Francis Watson, which contrasts Barth’s reading with that of E.P. Sanders: Philippians, xlv-xlvi.
The bridge to life and joy, Barth suggests, is paved by a rigorous theology of the cross. To know Christ in his sufferings and even in some sense in his death, opens the way for Paul to the hope of resurrection (cf. Rom 6:8). Barth writes about it this way: above and beyond the joy that Paul (or any person) has or feels or is able to show, there is a joy that is established and given in Christ.12 This joy undergirds Paul’s command to “Rejoice in the Lord always” (4:4). This joy is only possible in and because of Jesus Christ.

The second ground for joy is eschatological. As Barth notes of 2:18, Paul’s jubilation seems to rise up suddenly from an “awareness that those he is speaking to really will be his glory at the day of Christ, that he will not have run and labored in vain for their sakes (v.16).”13 The koinonia Paul shares with the Philippians is not for this life only. Barth helps to make clear the point that, for Paul, any answer to the question, “Why joy?” must hinge on the promise of Christ’s return. When a person—or a congregation—comes to believe and trust that “the Lord is near (4:5), glad proclamation is the fitting result: “the time of rejoicing is at the door—see that all men notice it!”14 Just as joy attended Jesus’ birth in the form of the Gloria announced by the heavenly host, joy comes with the morning of Jesus’ resurrection. This explains why rejoicing must be an imperative, “a command like any other.”15 Moreover, Barth says, the Christian’s relationship to time itself is irrevocably altered. “The Christian lives in time that is not yet suspended but thoroughly relativised, in time whose limit is known to him in Christ, not in an infinite world but in a finite one upheld at its beginning and its end by God.”16 In effect, the Christian experiences a shortening of the interval between time and eternity.

Mention must also be made of Barth’s treatment of 2:1-11 (Paul’s admonition that the Philippians complete his joy by being of the same mind, even the mind of Christ), for this constitutes one of the most intriguing and perceptive sections of Barth’s commentary. “What is the primary thing,” he asks, “the really vital point

12 Epistle, 120.
13 Epistle, 83.
14 Epistle, 121.
15 Ibid.
16 Epistle, 122. As we will see, Barth revisits the relation between time and joy in CD III/2 and III/4.
in these verses?” By way of response, Barth observes how the internal dynamic of scripture is not reducible to a single dimension. The boundaries between the personal, ethical, and dogmatic aspects of Paul’s text seem to blur, like three different circles that suddenly overlap, such that further commentary seems almost superfluous or inappropriate. For Barth there is power and wonder in Paul’s narrative tracing of the kenotic descent and ascent of Christ Jesus, such that “all explaining can only be assisting the text to explain itself.” By pointing to the intermingling of different strands, Barth is clearly trying to put his finger on what the biblical text is saying and doing, and thus to indicate what God may be saying and doing in and through the text. This intermingling of textual categories corresponds, albeit obliquely, to the intermingling of divine and human action to which Paul bears witness in these verses.

From the standpoint of our enquiry, it is striking to note how the comprehensive divine and human action which Paul undertakes to describe in Philippians, and which clearly captivates Barth, encompasses several aspects or dimensions which he will go on in CD II/1 to identify as integral to our experience of the beauty of God. These include the ideas of desire (1:8), pleasure (2:13), and especially joy. The letter also touches on participation in God’s Spirit (2:1) and transformation unto glory (3:21). In every case, God’s action is not to be confused with humanity’s response, and yet there is a dynamic sense in which the two are related. It is on the basis of such a constellation of concepts that beauty can be understood as a crucial part of the biblical witness. While it would be an exegetical mistake to isolate these concepts from the letter as a whole—as if beauty were the principal theme of Philippians—it would be obtuse not to acknowledge their significance for Paul (and ultimately, for Barth).

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17 Epistle, 50.
18 Epistle, 51.
19 Francis Watson judges Barth in this case to have correctly grasped Paul’s emphasis on the priority of divine action in human life. “It is God, and God alone, who began a good work in us and will bring it to completion (Phil 1:6); it is God who is at work in us (Phil 2:13). Yet the divine action is sufficiently comprehensive to include within its scope a human action that corresponds to itself, enabled and permitted by the prior divine action” (xxxiv). The rest of Barth’s commentary, however, is not as successful at capturing the tension or balance that Paul articulates throughout Philippians. Some of Barth’s later remarks (e.g. 2:13, “it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure”; cf. Barth, 73-74) clearly imply that human action is effectively displaced by divine action (Watson, Epistle, xxxiv-xxxv).
20 References in Philippians to joy or rejoicing are found at 1:4, 1:18, 2:2, 2:17, 2:18, 3:1, and 4:4.
3.3 Joy in God through Theology: Anselm’s Analogy of Delight

For an initial example of how Barth developed the theme of joy post-Philippians, it will be helpful to highlight the influence of Anselm of Canterbury, as reflected in Barth’s 1930 book on Anselm.\(^\text{21}\) Barth reads Anselm as a kindred spirit, a revered teacher, ignoring the intervening centuries. What Anselm offers to Barth is first of all a schema and a vocabulary for understanding the nature, the possibilities, and the limits of theology; this much is implied in the famous phrase that describes Anselm’s method, \emph{fides quarens intellectum} (faith seeking understanding). What is this schema, and how do beauty and joy fit in to the picture?

The goal of theological ‘seeking’ is an active understanding of the truth (\emph{intelligere}). This understanding, impelled by faith, brings two main benefits: joy (\emph{laetificare}) and proof (\emph{probare}). ‘Proof’ in this context connotes a demonstration of the soundness of a given proposition; it does not establish the truth of faith, which is taken for granted. What the proof does is to align one’s understanding successfully with what is already and actually the case. The ‘joy’ Anselm speaks of is the mind’s delight in perceiving the truth. We might describe this as the intellectual pleasure of grasping just how the truth is true. Anselm holds truth to be beautiful insofar as it shares in the matchless beauty of Christ, who is “beautiful above the sons of men.”\(^\text{22}\) When a theological proof is successful, i.e., when it corresponds to truth, it will naturally be delightful as well.

Barth interprets Anselm’s famous maxim, \emph{credo ut intelligam} (I believe in order that I may understand), to mean: “It is my very faith itself that summons me to knowledge.”\(^\text{23}\) The desire to know and to understand the truth—and hence the ‘seeking’ that characterizes theology—is intrinsic to faith: “just because we

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\(^{22}\) Ps 45:3, cited in \emph{Cur Deus Homo} I, 103.

\(^{23}\) Anselm, 18.
possess the certainty of faith, we must hunger after the \textit{fidei ratio}.”\footnote{Anselm, 21.} Hence for Anselm, faith serves as the starting point and not the end result of theology. As Barth puts it, “Anselm always has the solution of his problems already behind him… while, as it were, they are still ahead.”\footnote{Anselm, 26.} This way of framing things, which Barth describes it as “the aesthetics of theological knowledge,” leads to a number of surprising implications.\footnote{Anselm, 16.}

It means that theology is by nature an unapologetic enterprise.\footnote{Barth will return to this point in \textit{CD II/1} in order to stress the point that the quest to understand God is not taking place in a vacuum, i.e., by unbiased investigators who proceed without prior commitments or assumptions, through the naked exercise of reason. God is known in the church. Barth invokes Anselm as the model of a thinker whose use of reason is not compromised, but guided, by faith. “Since he believes it, he wants to know it and prove it; he wants \textit{ratione} (by means of his human reason) to make clear its \textit{rationem} (its divine reasonableness)…. None of the writings of Anselm is ‘apologetic’ in the modern sense of the concept” \textit{(CD II/1, 92)}.} Because belief (\textit{credere}) precedes understanding (\textit{intelligere}), theology may be carried out without anxiety. Instead, one finds in Anselm a “characteristic absence of crisis.”\footnote{Anselm, 26.} Truth does not depend upon the success of theology. It means also that theologians do not need to pretend to have all the answers. They are free to take up the various questions, arguments, and mysteries of faith in hope and confidence, with an attitude of humility and openness to the depths of revelation. They are free to acknowledge the provisional nature of theology, for truth is always greater, richer, more rewarding and intricate and lovely than human beings can grasp or articulate.\footnote{Barth describes theology’s provisional character as follows: “the task of theology, the quest \textit{for intelligere} in the narrower sense, begins at the very place where biblical quotation stops. Thus, any statement that is really theological, that is to say not covered by biblical authority, is… not final; fundamentally it is an interim statement, the best that knowledge and conscience can for the present construe; it awaits better instruction from God or man” \textit{(Anselm, 31)}.}

For his part, Anselm is fully aware that his ability to explicate the truth is not the measure of truth itself. This explains his reluctance at the outset of \textit{Cur Deus Homo} to take up certain difficult questions. “I am afraid to handle ‘the things that are too high for me.’ If someone thinks, or even sees, that I have not given him
adequate proof, he may decide that there is no truth in what I have been saying, and not realize that in fact my understanding has been incapable of grasping it.”30

Above all, it means that theologians may be joyful in the recognition that God not only gives himself as the object of knowledge, but illumines the minds of those who seek after him.31 Joy per se is not the goal of theology and yet the experience of Joyfulness does constitute a kind of proof. Given that joy arises when active understanding, intelligere, has been reached, it may be doubted whether a joyless theologian has attained understanding. There is no single path either to joy or to understanding—Anselm mentions the value of long searching, probing conversations with friends, and an ongoing dependence upon revelation—but it is clear that theology involves both finding and seeking.32 To arrive at joy is thus to be able to take delight in a present fulfillment—in gaining insight and understanding after much study and struggle, for example.

The theologian’s joy may also be oriented to the future, in the form of a restless longing for God. In language that echoes the desire of the desperate Psalmist or the distressed lover of Songs of Songs, Anselm looks for the beauty of Christ in prayer:

And do thou, O Lord my God, teach my heart where and how to seek thee, where and how to find thee…. What shall thy servant do, tormented by love of thee, and thy face is too far from him. He desires to approach thee, and thy dwelling is unapproachable. He longs to find thee, and does not know thy dwelling place. He strives to seek for thee, and does not know thy face. 33

The inclusion of such a confession at the beginning of a work commonly regarded as a philosophical attempt to prove God’s existence (the Proslogion), alerts us to the profoundly inter-personal and faith-driven character of Anselm’s theology. As also in the Confessions of Augustine, so clearly in Anselm’s mind, we find

30 Cur Deus Homo I, 102.
31 Anselm, 171.
32 Preface to the Proslogion, 69; Cur Deus Homo I, 102 and 103.
33 Proslogion I, 70-71. See also the comparable prayer at the end of the work.
here a recognition that joy entails self-denial, a radical re-ordering of one’s loves for the sake of beholding a higher beauty.\footnote{One place to see this is in Anselm’s ascetical exhortation: “For in this mortal life there ought to be such great love and longing to reach that for which you were made… and sorrow because you are not yet there, and fear lest you fail to reach it, that you should feel no delight save in the things that either help you on your way or give you the hope of attaining it. For you do not deserve to have what you do not love and desire for its true worth, and for which you do not grieve, because you do not yet possess it and are still in great danger of not possessing it at all. With this in mind, you must flee from repose and worldly pleasures, which hold back the mind from the true repose and pleasure, save in so far as you know that they support your purpose of attaining that end” (\textit{Cur Deus Homo} XX, 137).}

For Barth this cannot help but underscore the need to dissolve the artificial boundary between theology and ethics, between what ostensibly belongs to the realm of doctrine, and what to the lived expression of faith. This is a point to which Barth will return when speaking of the beauty of God in \textit{CD} II/1: “it must not be forgotten that there is actually something here which must be perceived rather than discussed and that the theologian has good cause for repentance if he has not perceived it.”\footnote{\textit{CD} II/1, 657.} In a passage mentioned previously, Anselm models such repentance by confessing that his soul looks but fails to see God’s beauty.

\begin{quote}
It listens, and does not hear thy harmony. It smells, and does not sense thy fragrance. It tastes, and does not recognize thy sweet savor. It touches, and does not feel thy softness. For thou dost possess all these qualities, O Lord God, in thy own ineffable way, while thou hast given them to things created by thee in their own perceptible way. But the senses of my soul have been frozen and stupefied and blocked up by the ancient enfeeblement of sin.\footnote{\textit{Proslogion} XVII, 84-5; cf. Augustine, \textit{Confessions} X.6.8. and chapter one of this dissertation, p. 15.}
\end{quote}

To relate this point to the problem of our larger study: what the theological vocation does, according to Anselm, is to make us long for the reconciliation of beauty, while at the same time demolishing any confidence we might have in our own capacity to bring about such a reconciliation. As Barth also will later maintain, the beauty of God is never in question, only our finite ability to perceive and partake of it.

In addition to a schema for unapologetic and joyful theology, we noted in the introduction how Anselm provides Barth with a particular construal of the analogy of delight. By this I mean a pattern and an implicit critique of reasoning from the experience of temporal pleasures upwards, as it were, to their transcendent source. “[I]f there are many great delights in delightful things, what wonderful and great delight is to be
found in him who made the delightful things themselves!” If—to take an example that might have appealed to Barth—Mozart’s Piano Concerto no. 24 in C minor is deemed beautiful, how much more beautiful will be the music of heaven? The value of this way of thinking is that it seems to accord with the character of the God who, as Paul says, is “able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think” (Eph 3:20). Moreover, if God as the Creator were not beautiful in some transcendent sense, the diverse and delightful phenomenon of this-worldly beauty would beg for explanation. Conversely, the weakness is that reasoning ‘upwards’ in this way is inherently speculative. How do we know anything, really, about music in heaven? Hence the vital thing to note here is not the mere presence of an analogy of delight, but the particular use to which Anselm puts it; i.e., the accent he places on the radical dissimilarity between instances of this-worldly beauty and the beauty of heaven. When he comes to consider beauty in CD II/1, Barth will likewise be sanguine about the prospects of reasoning upwards from instances of this-worldly beauty.

Anselm’s use of the analogy of delight undergoes a significant shift in the two final chapters of the Proslogion. First, Anselm draws from the treasury of scripture in order to discipline the analogy. “Does beauty delight thee? ‘The just shall shine as the sun.’ Does swiftness or strength or the irresistible movement of the body delight thee? ‘They shall be like the angels of God…. If any pleasure which is pure, and not impure, delights thee, God shall ‘make them drink of the torrent’ of his ‘pleasure.’” By keying instances of this-worldly beauty and joy to specific biblical promises, the analogy becomes vivid and persuasive, not speculative. It becomes a ‘proof’ in Anselm’s sense of the word. Then, in a way that perhaps anticipates Barth’s three examples of the divine beauty, Anselm points to humanity’s eschatological participation in the perichoretic life of God as the highest possible delight. The saints, he says,

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37 Proslogion XXIV, 89.
38 As is well known, Barth champions Mozart’s music as already being worthy of heaven, insofar as it expresses and discloses all that could be hoped for within the frame of creation. See Barth, Wolfgang Amadus Mozart, translated by Clarence K. Pott (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2003).
39 Interestingly, the chapter heading calls the argument from the delights of creation a conjectatio—a conjecture, inference or guess—implying a degree of tentativeness, as compared to the probatio (a proof made certain through testing) that would ordinarily be sought through theological reasoning.
40 Proslogion XXV, 90, citing Mt 13:43, 22:30, Ps 36:8.
shall love God more than themselves, and each other as themselves; and God shall love them more than they love themselves, for they love him and themselves and each other through him, while he loves himself and them through himself... […] What joy there must be, what great joy, where there is such a good, and so great a good!\footnote{Proslogion XXV, 91.}

Anselm reasons that joy by its nature seeks fulfillment in communion with others; it is difficult to be joyful alone. And if (and since) heaven consists of the redeemed community of those who love God with heart, mind, soul and strength, it must have the character of perfected, reciprocal joy: “in that perfect charity of countless blessed angels and men, where no one will love another less than himself, everyone will rejoice for each of the others just as he does for himself.”\footnote{Proslogion XXV, 91.} The promise of joy animates the future as well as the present.

In light of the vital role of joy in Anselm’s schema and his use of the analogy of delight, I believe we are justified in seeing Anselm as a key source and inspiration for the rudimentary theology of beauty Barth develops in \textit{CD} II/1. As a seeking after understanding, theology brings joy as the truth is apprehended in its coherence and radiant beauty—a beauty that is given in scripture, reflected in tradition, and entered through adoration and prayer. This approach corresponds closely to Barth’s first two rudiments (beauty as revelatory and as linked to the scriptural witness). What Anselm realizes—and what Barth so admires—is that God has both given himself as the object of the theologian’s knowledge, and illumined the theologian’s mind that she might know God in truth. Apart from this event there is no proof of God’s existence. Fortunately, Barth comments, “in the power of this event there is a proof which is worthy of gratitude. […] Just because it is the science of faith about faith, theology possesses light but it is not the light of the theologian’s faith.”\footnote{Anselm, 171.}

“My God and my Lord, my hope and my heart’s joy,” Anselm writes, “tell my soul if this is the joy of which thou sayest to us through thy Son: ‘Ask and you shall receive, that your joy may be full.’ For I have found a joy that is full and more than full.”\footnote{Proslogion XXVI, 92.} This joy of which Anselm speaks offers Barth both a method and a

\footnote{Anselm, 171.}
model for Barth’s own way of linking glory, beauty, and joy through the practice of theology. Because joy ultimately is anchored in the splendor and truth of God's being and activity, human joy is not irrational, accidental, or purely subjective; rather, it issues from God’s gracious way of drawing people to a fuller knowledge of himself.45

3.4 Duty as Delight in Barth’s Ethics

There are few places in the *Church Dogmatics* where joy stands out as clearly as it does in the doctrine of election and the subsequent ethical sections of *CD II/2*. Barth’s way of presenting this material reflects the logic of the beauty passage in *CD II/1* in subtle but important ways.

3.4.1 God’s ‘good-pleasure’

Barth speaks of joy in the form of the delight God takes in his people, and particularly—in light of Eph 1:5-6—in the work of making us his children. In electing, Barth says, “God decides according to His good-pleasure, which as such is holy and righteous. And because He who elects is constant and omnipotent and eternal, the good-pleasure by which He decides, and the decision itself, are independent of all other decisions, of all creaturely decisions.”46 Contrary to appearances, this does not mean that God is distant and removed from the world; or that God is uninterested in the well-being of God’s creatures; or even that God’s ‘good-pleasure’ (Grk. *eudokia*, Ger. *das Wohlgfallen*) comes at humanity’s expense. Rather, it means that our creaturely notions of what is good and desirable must be re-thought and re-formed along the lines of God’s eternal purpose to save, to

45 It is a telling measure of Anselm’s influence that Barth recapitulates Anselm’s insights into the knowledge and existence of God in the opening pages of *CD II/1*. Like Anselm, Barth is interested in proceeding theologically on the basis of the givenness of revelation: “if the life of the Church is not just a semblance, the knowledge of God is realised in it.” Because God is known in the church through his Word, anxiety is “not only superfluous but forbidden.” The church “cannot retreat from its own reality” (*CD II/1*, 4).

46 *CD II/2*, 19.
bless, and to welcome humanity into fellowship. This means that, “[e]ven human nature and human history have no independent signification.” Their meaning is to be found primarily in relation to Jesus Christ.

Barth will develop this relation throughout II/2 under the rubric of ‘covenant,’ for it is through the covenant that God takes ownership for humanity’s lost cause and makes it his own. As a result, grace can be recovered and received really as grace. “For what kind of grace is it,” Barth asks, “that is conditioned and constrained, and not free grace and freely electing grace? What kind of a God is it who in any sense of the term has to be gracious, whose grace is not His own most personal and free good-pleasure.” In other words, it is precisely God’s complete freedom to be with us and for us in the person of Jesus Christ, which makes God’s election a matter of pure grace. This explains Barth’s suggestion that God’s good-pleasure is not to be sought outside of God himself—for example, in some part of the creation, or in some aspect of humanity’s moral striving. Those who would understand the origin of grace ought instead to think of nothing other than Jesus Christ.

Joy is by no means limited to God’s own delight; the joy that human beings experience is intimately related to their election by God. Thus, in a rare moment of personal commentary, Barth mentions his own sense of pleasure in working through the dogmatic material of CD II/2. That joy should spring forth from election, a doctrine with an unparalleled reputation for inducing fear and uncertainty, is surprising to say the least. And yet Barth assumes that his own discovery of joy will be shared by all those come to see election in a new light. “It is itself evangel: glad tidings; news which uplifts and sustains. […] Its content is instruction and elucidation, but instruction and elucidation which are to us a proclamation of joy.” Barth insists that election is “not a mixed

47 CD II/2, 8.

48 See, e.g., the important statement at CD II/2, 642-3: “Without a knowledge of the transcendent divine decision executed in the grace of the covenant between God and man, or an awareness of the Law which God has eternally established in Jesus Christ and revealed in time, we can think and speak of responsibility only in a diluted form which does not do justice to the real significance of the term… How can it be Christian ethics if it does not know and take into account the fact that the divine covenant of grace with man is the beginning of all God’s ways and works, and that the human situation grounded in this covenant is, therefore, the situation of every single man?” In a way that foreshadows his bold use of covenant as the counterpart to creation (CD III/1, 42f.), Barth here makes covenant a key concept for understanding the relation between God’s sovereign will for humanity (election) and humanity’s determined response (ethics).

49 CD II/2, 19.

50 CD II/2, 112; cf. II/2, 3-13.

51 CD II/2, x.
message of joy and terror, salvation and damnation.”52 Through its unwavering insistence on this joyful and evangelical note, Barth’s treatment of election contravenes almost the entire history of theological reflection on the topic, and opens up a tremendous vista of the unshakeable purposes of God to redeem and reconcile all things through the Son.

In the second half of CD II/2, the interplay between God’s gracious action and humanity’s joyful response comes to the fore. Barth’s rehearsal of the law/gospel dialectic, for example, is designed to show how God’s good pleasure is mirrored in human experience by a life of free and joyful obedience. When we come to know God as the giver of the law, and Jesus Christ as the one who has fulfilled it on our behalf, any weight or burden that the law might impose is effectively removed. “He gave Himself for us in order that we might live before Him and with Him in peace and joy.”53 What appears initially as duty is transformed into delight, and the law is rightly perceived as a form of the gospel.54 Conversely, if the marks of God’s beauty—joy, pleasure, and desire—are absent, it may be asked whether we have yet heard God’s command in all its freeing fullness. As in the theology of Anselm, joy serves as a marker of understanding.

Barth develops these claims in §37 initially by rejecting a number of rival bases for ethics. He then constructively sets forth the unique role of Jesus Christ in modeling the obedience God desires. In the following synopsis and discussion I will follow the general course of Barth’s exposition, focusing especially on the ways in which joy characterizes humanity’s response of vicarious obedience.

**3.4.2 The Need for a New Basis for Ethics**

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52 CD II/2, 12-13. This strain is helpfully summarized by Adam Neder: “Joy, not terror; incomprehensible light, not incomprehensible darkness; clarity, not obscurity, result from the realization that in Jesus Christ God is freely and graciously for humanity rather than against it—and, indeed, that this is not merely one variation of God’s will, but God’s only will for humanity.” See Participation in Christ: An Entry into Karl Barth’s Church Dogmatics, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 16.

53 CD II/2, 585.

54 CD II/2, 586.
The “general ethics” of CD II/2 begins with a series of intriguing questions regarding the basis of the divine claim. Why should humanity obey God? Why only God and no other authority? And what is the source of God’s authority over humanity? These are the sorts of questions that need answering, according to Barth, if humanity’s obedience is to be genuine and free, not the result of coercion.

Among the possible answers, Barth highlights three for consideration. First, God’s power, though undeniable, is inadequate because the use of power as such cannot compel people’s obedience. Second, Barth likewise rejects the idea of God’s goodness as a basis for human obedience. To participate in the Good humanity would need to have some share in it, some way of access or point of contact. What humanity actually has and shows, Barth says, is an idolatrous desire to be equal to God. Ironically, the very thing that should enable our ascent effectively closes us off from creaturely participation in God’s goodness. The third option Barth rejects has to do with a self-centered conception of human need. Barth seems to have in mind the person who chooses God, believing that God can and will meet all of his needs, and for whom, then, every subsequent instance of God’s command is “ultimately only a confirmation, a condition, of the fulfillment of this human claim.” When this happens, faith is reduced to a form of enlightened self-interest. God becomes merely as the best of the available options. “We hold to God because and to the extent that finally we want to uphold ourselves.”

Now Barth obviously does not wish to reject these three positions outright. God is powerful and good; humanity’s deepest satisfaction is to be found in God. Yet he believes that these three positions are

55 CD II/2, 55f. Colin Gunton describes this as “one of the most interesting ethical sections in Barth.” Gunton, Lectures on Barth (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 127.

56 CD II/2, 552-3. On the broader theological and political significance of articulating God’s power in a non-coercive way, see Gunton, The One, the Three, and the Many (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 22-27. It is worth recalling that Barth began work on this volume in the fall of 1939, as Europe was rapidly being engulfed by war (cf. Busch, 301-2). Britain and France declared war on Germany on 3 September, following the Nazi invasion of Poland. The spring of 1940 would see the Nazis invade Denmark and Norway, then France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands in turn.

57 CD II/2, 554, echoing Gen 2.

58 CD II/2, 555-6.

59 CD II/2, 556.
inadequate as grounds for ethics. A more faithful approach will seek to re-conceive power, goodness, and self-interest along Christological lines. The good news is that the decisive step has already been taken—from God's side. Paraphrasing Barth's argument, we could say that living ethically is a human possibility because it was first a divinely enacted reality.

As against all our ideas about Him, all our arbitrariness and self-will in face of Him, He actually comes as the Almighty, as goodness in person, as the One without whom there is no satisfaction, binding us so strongly that any evasion or flight is rendered impossible, and we are really brought to a reckoning and responsibility.  

A crucial step in the Barth's re-grounding of ethics is to describe God's power in terms of divine permission (die Erlaubnis), rather than divine coercion. Ordinarily the notion of 'permission' implies liberty. The choice to respond in a particular way is, strictly speaking, optional: we may, or may not, do what we are permitted to do. And yet the permission Barth speaks of has a binding quality to it:

It is the God in whom we may believe, and He alone, who calls us in such a way that we must not only hear but obey; who orders us in such a way that in all freedom we must recognize the force of His order; who claims us in such a way that the claim is valid and we necessarily find ourselves claimed.

Barth expects that Christians will in fact do that which they are permitted to do. But what kind of motivating power is this, given that Barth has already ruled out coercive power as a ground for ethics? Exactly how does the subjunctive (what we may do) become an imperative (what we will and must do, albeit freely)? More to the point of this chapter: how does ethics (as Barth conceives it), with its language of duty—replete with words like reckoning, responsibility, command, claim, and so forth—relate to joy and beauty?

Anyone who has an inkling of the wider scope of Barth's theology will not be surprised that the answer to such questions involves Christology. The grace of God in Jesus Christ constitutes a “proclamation and establishment of [God's] authority” over us who have been made in God's image, yet marred by sin and

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60 CD II/2, 560-1.
61 CD II/2, 585.
62 CD II/2, 556.
rebellion. Grace functions as ‘proclamation’ in the sense that, apart from revelation, human beings do not have a clear picture of either their potential for glory, or their desperate depravity. The gospel speaks of both. Grace is ‘establishment’ in the sense that God’s eternal saving purposes will not be thwarted by sin. Jesus Christ both restores our status as creatures made in imago Dei and negates our status as those who, like Adam, have sought to make themselves equal to God. For Barth, faithful human action finds its source and its goal in the person and work of Jesus Christ. What is, perhaps, surprising is the ‘aesthetic’ way in which Barth opts to develop these theological claims. By this I mean that the patterns of reasoning he makes use of here are the same as, or very similar to, those he developed and displayed in the ‘beauty passage’ of CD II/1. Let us look at one clear example.

**God’s Majesty in Condescension**

In chapter two we saw that nothing is more characteristic of Barth’s nascent theology of beauty than to discipline the often amorphous and abstract language of beauty by grounding it in the objective reality of God, as witnessed in revelation. According to Barth, God’s glory has a peculiarly self-authenticating quality: in its character as light, glory brings about illumination. In its character as the weight of God’s presence, glory brings to fruition whatever God does. Glory, he says, summarizing “the older theologians,” is “the fullness, the totality, the sufficiency, the sum of the perfection of God in the irresistibility of its declaration and manifestation.” To speak of the beauty of God in relation to glory is then to indicate how the objective radiance of God’s own act and being become subjectively realized by the creature in the forms of joy, desire, and pleasure. It is this outgoing, attractive quality to God’s own being that renders the concept of beauty essential if we are to understand the nature and the character of God.

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63 CD II/2, 560.
64 CD II/2, 560.
65 CD II/1, 645.
In *CD II/2*, §37, these patterns of reasoning reappear as Barth turns to consider the basis of the divine claim upon humanity. What is the source of God’s authority over man, and why should man obey God? What Barth wants most to avoid here is divine coercion—a view that attributes God’s claim over humanity solely to God’s superior power. Yet Barth also wants to ground the possibility of faithful human action in the being and act of God, rather than in some feature of human existence.

Barth’s solution to this dilemma borrows from the language and rhetoric of the beauty passage in *CD II/1* in two distinct ways. The first is to affirm God’s power, but to describe it in terms of persuasion rather than coercion. Thus Barth speaks of God as “the basis that summons man, that wins and convinces him, that moves to the doing of the good….” And Barth identifies this power more specifically as God’s majesty (die Majestät des Gottes)—a close synonym of glory. The complex idea of ‘majesty’ encompasses notions of power, goodness, and human satisfaction—the three rival bases for ethics that Barth had earlier dismissed—but it also calls to mind images of radiance and overwhelming splendor. This passage clearly echoes Barth’s exegesis of the perfection of glory.

The second move that Barth makes is to reinterpret God’s character with reference to Jesus Christ. Typically in human affairs, majesty connotes impossible distance. A monarch is rarely seen in person, and never touched by a commoner, for example. In the event of the incarnation, however, the King does not remain at a far remove, but seeks out his people in order to make his dwelling among them. Whatever claims this King would make upon his people he takes upon himself to fulfill. In Barth’s words,

God has given us Himself. He is not only mighty over us. He is not only the essentially good. He is not only our complete satisfaction. He has given Himself to us. He has graciously turned to us. He has made Himself ours. With His divine goodness He has taken our place and taken up our cause. He is for us in all His deity. Although He could be without us—He did not and does not will to be without us.  

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66 *CD II/2*, 552.
67 *CD II/2*, 564-5.
68 *CD II/2*, 556-7. What God demonstrates and maintains through reconciliation is “His own glory, His authority and majesty” (560).
69 *CD II/2*, 557, cp. *CD II/1*, 662, 671. Barth continues in this vein to redefine divine majesty: “… without ceasing to be God, [God] has made Himself man’s own and has made man His own. He is the God who
Since God has graciously elected human beings to a life of fellowship, believers may hope and expect this life to be characterized supremely by a deep and unshakeable joy—the fitting, creaturely reflection of God’s original delight. Perhaps for this reason, Barth singles out Paul’s command to “Rejoice!” as the epitome of all apostolic exhortation. “How can any part of what Paul demands of Christians be rightly done if in the first instance it is not done with joy, as an ‘ought’ whose seriousness lies at bottom in the fact that it is a ‘may,’ something permitted?” Much as the perfection of divine glory reveals beauty and gives joy, so here God’s majesty is conceived as exhibiting a winsome persuasiveness that leads to rejoicing.

The first rudiment of Barth’s theology of beauty, we have suggested, is that the church must learn from God’s self-revelation what beauty truly is. A similar stress on revelation characterizes Barth’s understanding of theological ethics; it is “from what God has done for us that we must learn to read what God wants with us and of us.” It would seem that Barth has applied the rudiment (beauty as revelatory) in a new context, in order to show again the relation between God in his glory and the life of joyful obedience that this perfection of God opens up and makes possible.

### 3.5 Joy as the Simplest Form of Gratitude

Much in the way that the theme of beauty springs up irrepressibly in the context of glory, joy irrupts in the course of Barth’s long meditation on human freedom and what it means to live rightly in the light of God’s command. This is arguably Barth’s single-most important text on joy in the *Church Dogmatics*. In the
passages we have looked at so far, joy is, like beauty, an important but secondary theme. In these few pages, by contrast, joy receives Barth’s undivided attention. Although the passage is brief—ten pages or so in English translation—Barth makes a potent case for joy as perfectly compatible with obedience. To persuade us of this, Barth shows how joy is grounded in God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ.

3.5.1 Longing for Joy

The immediate context (§55.I) finds Barth elaborating on what it means to show reverence for human existence.73 Barth begins by listing and describing seven premises that, in his view, provide a kind of topography of the ethical terrain—those creaturely conditions within which we live, move, and have our being. Human beings are first of all creatures, who (2) have their lives on loan from God. We are, each one of us, (3) unique persons who (4) live in time as (5) free subjects, implying that (6) we are determined for freedom by God—a freedom which is (7) to be exercised and discovered in fellowship with others.74 Reverence on these varied grounds will involve a comprehensive and counter-intuitive obedience. “The freedom for life to which man is summoned by the command of God is the freedom to treat as a loan both the life of all men with his own and his own with that of all men.”75 Such freedom is counter-intuitive because the notion of being answerable to God not only for the way in which one lives, but for one’s very existence, runs counter to the quintessentially modern notion of life as a solo project of autonomous self-creation. Far from liberating human beings, it seems an affront to their freedom and a threat to the sacred pursuit of happiness. How can I possibly be happy if I owe my very being to someone else? Nevertheless, this is the paradox Barth’s ethics in this volume will cheerfully explore.

73 The standard translation’s “respect for life” at this point is arguably too weak of a rendering of the German phrase, die Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben. “Reverence” communicates more accurately the awesome sense of personal responsibility that Barth’s exposition seeks to cultivate.

74 CD III/4, 327-332.

75 CD III/4, 335.
When Barth turns to the theme of joy, he starts from the observation that the good life involves more than success in one's chosen endeavors. It is not enough to make a difference in the world; nor “to contend for that which is good and beautiful”; nor even to follow the great commandment, loving both God and neighbor. Above and beyond every worthwhile use of time and talent—or perhaps to be woven into the fabric of their pursuit—is a deep desire for enjoyment, a longing not only to spend one’s life in meaningful ways, but to experience delight in doing so. Barth likens this desire for joy to other fundamental, human desires that affirm the goodness of everyday life: “eat, drink, sleep, be healthy, work, stand for what is right and live in fellowship with God and neighbor.”\textsuperscript{76} Just as the fitting response to food, sleep, health, \textit{etc.} is thanksgiving, so Barth’s understanding of joy in this passage hinges on the recognition that all of life comes to us as a gift. Joy, he says, constitutes “the simplest form of gratitude” and “a provisional fulfillment of life received with gratitude.”\textsuperscript{77}

As earlier in the general ethics of \textit{CD} II/2, an absence of joy is taken as something of a warning sign. Now, in light of the seven conditions that Barth has sketched for his readers, a new question is raised: “What does it mean to be joyful in obedience?”\textsuperscript{78} Far from being frivolous or arbitrary, this is just as necessary and serious as any other ethical question. Barth’s answer—wide-ranging, circuitous, and sketchily brilliant—can be summarized under four related headings.

\section*{3.5.2 The Moment Made Eternity}

Barth notes how joy often presents itself through moments where the flow of time seems temporarily to be halted. We find ourselves to have arrived at a good place, to have earned a favorable result, or to have been blessed by a gift of one sort or another. “When we are joyful time stands still for a moment… it has fulfilled its meaning as the space of our life-movement and, engaged in this movement, we have attained…

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{76} \textit{CD} III/4, 375.
\item \textsuperscript{77} \textit{CD} III/4, 376, 384.
\item \textsuperscript{78} \textit{CD} III/4, 375.
\end{itemize}
the goal of our striving.” Barth’s description echoes an insight of the poet William Wordsworth, who realized that even the memories of times spent in the presence of beauty “have no slight or trivial influence” on our ability to love. The joy which follows from beauty heightens our faculties of perception, such that we feel ourselves again to be part of the world, and not severed from it.

… with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

The writer Sheldon Vanauken describes this phenomenon as a “moment made eternity”—one of those rare experiences where after the fact it is difficult to say whether minutes or hours have passed. Sometimes the goal of our striving has been long in coming, and so the pleasure of accomplishment is a reward for the hard work of many months or years. At other points joy comes in spite of the fact that our task remains unfinished. Either way, life seems to pause and to smile in blessing. At such moments it is typical to want the moment to last, and indeed, Barth suggests that a desire for duration is one of joy’s essential characteristics.

In his treatment of God’s perfections, Barth had invited readers to think of eternity as characterized precisely by the duration lacking to time. Barth’s concern in that instance was to recover something of the

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79 CD III/4, 376.


82 CD III/4, 377. Pastor and writer Richard Lischer provides a vivid illustration of the time-suspended joyful moment. He tells in his memoir of a particular visit to Busch Stadium in St. Louis. His companion that afternoon is a boy name Max from a troubled family in Lischer’s nearby parish. They share a great sense of anticipation because it is Max’s first big league game and Lischer’s first trip to the Cardinals’ new ballpark. The scene gathers poignancy not only from the sensory richness of the place—the vivid sights and sounds of the game, the taste of ballpark food—but from the shared knowledge that Lischer himself will soon be leaving his role as pastor and moving away: “After the last out, we remained in our seats as the rest of the fans filed out. The stadium was a haven where one could find peace, if only temporarily. The flags rested in the absence of an afternoon breeze. The field lay still and as geometrically perfect as a Burgundian garden, as apt a figure for eternal life as either of us could imagine. Max studied the entire scene as if for the last time and said, ‘I could stay here forever.’ ‘So could I.’ And we left.” Lischer, Open Secrets (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 228-9. It is interesting to speculate whether Barth might have warmed to baseball, what with its defiantly a-temporal logic of outs and innings, keen interest in local tradition (nowhere in greater evidence than St. Louis), regular reminders of the virtue of hope, and the highly liturgical pacing of the game.

83 CD II/1, 608.
positive richness of eternity, over against what he felt to be a hardened dichotomy between time and eternity. To this end Barth had cited with approval Boethius' definition of eternity as “the complete, simultaneous, and perfect possession of unending life.” By treating eternity as a perfection of God, and not as a theological abstraction or a mere extension of the concept of time, Barth was able to claim and affirm that God really does have time for us. What richer proof of this could there be, than the fact that the eternal God entered time to redeem it for the sake of eternity?

Joy, Barth now suggests, has something of this eschatological character. Moments of joy gather up and fulfill the past by suspending and intensifying the present. Joy is experienced when a person is, as we say, ‘fully in the moment.’ But even on such occasions, joy tends to be fleeting. It points forward to the future and the prospect of a fuller life with God. As Barth notes, most joy is anticipatory.

3.5.3 Readiness for Joy

The Bible frequent enjoins the people of God—and indeed, the whole creation—to rejoice. “Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth” (Ps 100:1). Strange as it may sound, human beings have an ethical responsibility to be joyful, so far as it lies within their power. Barth sets this imperative within the overarching framework of showing reverence for life, characterizing it as a need to hold oneself in readiness for joy. But what, concretely, does such readiness involve?

To hold oneself in readiness for joy is to believe, over against much evidence to the contrary, that there will be moments of joy. It is “to expect that life will reveal itself as God’s gift of grace.” It is to watch for such moments, to prepare for and welcome them, keeping in mind, however, that joy is in the end not

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84 CD II/1, 610.
85 CD II/1, 612.
86 CD III/4, 377.
87 Ibid.
88 CD III/4, 378.
something human beings can conjure or create. Joy must be received, not made. Readiness for joy is “the hope for a receiving and not the covetous glance at a grasping, at an event to be enacted and established by ourselves, at a condition which we shall construct in some way…” With this dynamic in mind, Barth compares joy to the mysterious working of the Holy Spirit. There is true joy only when the Spirit comes and is present—yet the Spirit blows when and where it pleases. The clear implication is that, just as one may live in such a way as to keep in step with the Spirit, so one can watch and wait and pray for joy.

A similarly important qualification is that joy is very often social in nature. It wants to be shared and spread around. Joy arises in the company of others and for others; it comes to us as we seek to give it away. Barth notes perceptively that the mutuality of joy involves more than simply taking whatever pleases us and offering to share it with others. A better practice is to ask, what will bring joy to my neighbor? Joyful people take the empathetic risk of going outside themselves, imagining the well-being of the other, and attempting to reach out on that other-centered basis.

As with beauty, joy may come in wildly different forms. Joy is not, like happiness, a singular state (as ordinarily used the word ‘happiness’ has no plural). Both beauty and joy admit of diverse objects and expressions. Just as beauty can be found even in the extreme of the cross, joy can emerge from the darkest and most difficult circumstances. Some joys are deeply personal: “the heart knows its own bitterness, and no stranger shares its joy” (Prov 14:10). Others—dancing, feasting, playing a game—are profoundly communal in nature. This is what Adam Potkay has called “the modal aspect of joy”; because joy requires a narrative context, there are innumerable contingent circumstances that conduce to our surprise and delight. Barth makes the point in this way:

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89 Ibid.
90 CD III/4, 379.
91 CD III/4, 380.
92 Ibid.
Those who seek true joy are not tied to certain modes of joy. They need not expect and seek it always along the same lines. They are capable of manifold joys. They know the great freedom of life itself, which allows its fulfillments to shine through in different ways. Hence they are simply grateful for what comes and for the way in which it comes.\textsuperscript{94}

To live in readiness for joy, according to Barth, is to accept that a certain degree of uncertainty always accompanies life as we live it. Such uncertainty might seem to threaten or even eliminate the possibility of joy, but since such uncertainty is unavoidable, we ought not to be afraid or to let the natural human penchant for structure and routine close off the prospect of joy. Barth suggests that we have to ask ourselves honestly what it is that really gives us joy.\textsuperscript{95} A discerning openness is needed if people are to choose wisely between the sources of real joy and its counterfeits.

3.5.4 Enemies of Joy

As with many Protestant thinkers and writers stretching back to Martin Luther, Barth’s positive concern for joy is matched at points by a worry over joy’s absence.\textsuperscript{96} Early in CD III/4, he reminds us by way of a Latin proverb that joy in God is something high and rare, \textit{res severa verum gaudium}.\textsuperscript{97} Perhaps it need not be so in theory, but in practice the achieving of joy can be compromised, delayed, or thwarted in various ways.\textsuperscript{98}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{94} CD III/4, 380.
\textsuperscript{95} CD III/4, 382.
\textsuperscript{96} In a most illuminating essay, Potkay traces the theme of joylessness from Luther to John Donne and Crusoe, showing how anxiety over joy’s absence was for many early Protestants the inverse, or dark side, of the new emphasis on the role of the emotions and (for lack of a better word) dispositions deemed fitting for those who would claim to be Christians. See \textit{The Story of Joy}, 73-94.
\textsuperscript{97} CD III/4, 69.
\textsuperscript{98} We find a vivid account of the difficulty of achieving lasting joy in Edmund Spenser’s epic poem, \textit{The Fairie Queene}, which in Canto five recounts a battle between holiness and joylessness, as represented by the Redcrosse Knight and his aptly named enemy, Sansjoy. The poet’s florid description of the fight gives a measure of the spiritual cost of the battle:

\begin{verbatim}
The cruell Steele so greedily doth bight
In tender flesh, that streames of blood down flow,
With which the armes, that earst so bright did show
Into a pure vermillion now are dyed:
Great ruth in all the gazers harts did grow,
Seeing the gored woundes to gape so wyde,
That victory they dare not wish to either side. (v.9)
\end{verbatim}
\end{quote}
Who or what are the enemies of joy? There are several. In Barth’s analysis, people may well become their own worst enemies, either by closing themselves off from joy, or by thinking that joy can be attained autonomously through one’s own plans and schemes, or by refusing to put the joy of others before our own.99 Work, too, proves problematic. As Barth admits, “not every kind of work can give joy.”100 Some obviously can—Barth’s shortlist includes the work of skilled artisans and artists, scholars, farmers, and preeminent ministers—but much does not. Moreover, work can be an idol if it prevents us from keeping the Sabbath. Whoever “does not join in the rejoicing, who does not rest from his work in this joy, despises God’s goodness and faithfulness and puts his hope, not in God’s election, but in his own work.”101

Ironically, another enemy of joy is a cult-like devotion to beauty, or what Barth calls “the exclusiveness and totalitarianism of aestheticism.”102 While he thinks it is a good thing to look for beauty, to train one’s senses, and to cultivate an appreciation for the aesthetic side of life, Barth notes that many of those who do so end up with a strange inability to take pleasure in anything except the very highest or purest pleasures. Such aesthetes are neither happy nor cheerful, and “mostly incapable of spreading much… joy in their

Unlike an earlier battle for faith, in which Redcrosse had successfully defeated Sansjoy’s elder brother Sansfoy (“faithless”), this combat scene ends inconclusively. Just when it looks as if Redcrosse will prevail, a mysterious cloud appears, hiding Sansjoy from his sight. Within the allegorical world of Spenser’s poem, the episode suggests not only that joylessness is a deadly serious foe, but that victory will be elusive whenever a believer’s ability to fight has been compromised. Redcrosse has been compromised by his inability to distinguish true beauty from its worldly imitations. It is telling that the battle takes place in the garishly painted house of Pride, home to the seven deadly sins, where Redcrosse can expect little help or favor. Moreover, at this point in his quest, Redcrosse has been separated from the Lady Una, whose steadfast devotion and prayers of intercession play such an instrumental role in helping the knight to his eventual triumph over the dragon. The lovely but false Lady Duessa, with whom Redcrosse has been traveling and for whom he has pledged to fight, is in truth a deceitful sorceress working to weaken him at every turn. It is not surprisingly, then, that Redcrosse should retire from the field grievously wounded. What Spenser shows us is that the fight against joylessness is often undertaken on enemy territory, under conditions of self-deceit, far from the friendships and supporting structures that would help grace more readily to win out. The best Redcrosse can manage at this point in the story is to escape from the house of Pride with his life, wounds still bleeding. Edmund Spenser, The Faerie Queene, Book One (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2006), 69-86. I owe the suggestion of this episode, though not the interpretation, to Adam Potkay, op. cit.,74.

99 CD III/4, 378-80.
100 CD III/4, 381.
101 CD III/4, 51.
102 CD III/4, 381.
surroundings.” Why not? Arguably, it is that a desire for some distant ideal of beauty blinds a person to the presence and possibility of beauty lying closer to hand. In terms of Barth’s rudiments, aestheticism works with a view of beauty that has no room for the cross.

If, for example, we determine that joy is to be found only among a certain company of friends, now scattered and separated by time, what real chance do we have to enjoy the people with whom we find ourselves in the present? If we decide that joy is only possible out in certain environments—in Colorado, for example, with its endless mountains and miles of forested trails—how drab must the flat fields of Indiana appear? Or—to choose an extreme example from the heart of German Romanticism—if the one person we love most is pledged to another, must despair and suicide really follow as the only options?

Romantic thinkers such as Friedrich Schiller had conceived of aesthetics, the contemplation of beauty, as a bridge by which a person and indeed an entire culture could transition from a state of brute, physical existence to the higher plane of moral reasoning. Confronted on one side by the need for expediency in politics, and on the other by the inexorable demands of law, they posited aesthetic contemplation and creativity as “building unawares a third joyous realm of play and of appearance,” in which humanity would be freed from all restraint. As Barth suggests, and as the subsequent history of Romanticism arguably demonstrates, this hope is fundamentally misguided. “[T]hose who do not honour the small joys are not worthy of the great, and it may well be that in a given case a very little joy which we do not miss (or bestow upon another) is at the moment by far the highest possible fulfillment.”

Beauty is not an all-or-nothing proposition, but a discipline of learning to give thanks in every circumstance.

103 Ibid.

104 These are the two cases Barth mentions (people and nature), although I have obviously filled in particular details in an effort to bring out his point. CD III/4, 381.

105 I refer to the premise and plot of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s landmark novel, The Sorrows of Young Werther (1774), which for all the artistry of its composition inspired a wave of suicides across Europe.


107 CD III/4, 381.
Even in the midst of gratitude for an effected fulfillment, our thoughts often run on ahead in hopes of discovering the next delight. This actually is a crucial point, for whenever people attempt to go back and retrieve or re-live a moment when joy was present, the result is always the same: futility and a poignant sense of loss. Even for those with the greatest powers of memory, such as Wordsworth, the past is not a portal to joy, as C.S. Lewis explains:

If Wordsworth had gone back to those moments in the past, he would not have found the thing itself, but only the reminder of it; what he remembered would turn out to be itself a remembering. The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not in them, it only came through them, and what came through them was longing.

One of the great threats to joy is thus nostalgia, a desire to stop time in a way that refuses to receive the promise of good things to come. Barth writes, “[i]n all the provisional forms in which we actualize it here and now the will for joy must be the will for the eternal joy and felicity which in all cases of joy is the only one in which it can be lasting and complete joy, the definitive revelation of the fullness of life accomplished for us and addressed to us by God.” Joy does make the present moment seem like eternity, but that seeming must be received as a real foretaste—but only a foretaste—of God’s greater future. The kinship between joy and beauty at this point is very close. “So long as we find anything beautiful, we feel that we have not yet exhausted what it has to offer, and that forward-looking element is… inseparable from the judgment of beauty.”

There are, finally, false joys, or what Barth labels “demonic pseudo-joys” (dämonische Pseudofreuden). The term encompasses every so-called delight that functions as a distraction, a substitute, or an evasion from the joyful obedience commended by God’s command. Barth mentions the risk of triviality, and of allowing material joys such as food and drink to “gain a strange and shameful prominence.” He alludes to “a whole sphere of so-called pleasure which cannot really give any pleasure for the simple reason that it means the

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108 The Orson Welles classic *Citizen Kane* and Christopher Nolan’s *Inception* are only two of the many films to play on this trope.


110 *CD* III/4, 384-5.

very opposite of pleasure for many others…. Joy should not come at the cost of a person's health or work. It cannot be justified at the expense of one's neighbor or one's conscience. It ought not to presume upon the grace of God in what might be called a Mardi Gras fashion—treating God’s forgiveness as license for sin. In any particular instance, we do well to ask: does this ‘joy’ refresh, console, and encourage? Or does it cause weariness, satiety, and ennui? Is it edifying or enervating? What Barth’s questions and criteria reveal is not only an acute awareness of perils that threaten the Christian’s joy, but a recognition that God must continue to act graciously day by day, if joy is to prevail.112

3.5.5 Joy in the Shadow

It is clear that, for Barth, true joy is distinguished by its ability to deepen one’s reverence for life. “Joy” names the miraculous phenomenon of coming to gladness out of sorrow, beauty from ashes. Given how much ethical and spiritual trauma is recorded in scripture—the darkness of human sin, Israel’s rebellious failure to keep the covenant, the agony of the prophets on Israel’s behalf, and creation’s groaning in captivity—Barth finds it remarkable that the call to rejoice and celebrate rings out loud and clear.113 That so much beauty shines through creation and culture in spite of the damage caused by human sin, seems a miracle. Barth marvels that joy almost seems to arise specially from the darkest episodes of the Bible—as if the light of God’s saving grace shines out brighter for the contrast. How is joy possible when the human condition is so utterly marred by slavery, exile, and defeat? When life is punctuated by catastrophic episodes of pain, loss, and tragedy? The short answer is that it isn’t—unless God, “the Creator and Lord of life acts and speaks here, taking the lost cause of man out of his hand, making it His own, intervening majestically,

112 The material I have cited and paraphrased here is from CD III/4, 381-2.

113 CD III/4, 375. Presumably this has again to do with the way in which God’s glory triumphs over every would-be source of resistance. “The fact of evil in the world does not cast any shadow on God, as if evil, i.e., opposition to Him, had any place either in Himself or in His being and activity as the Creator” (CD II/1, 504).
mercifully and wisely for him.” In this way, by reminding us of God’s eternal redemptive purpose, Barth links the idea of joy to Jesus’ death on the cross.

The cross represents God’s judgment on the world, a once-and-for-all judgment upon sin that brings hope and the promise of eternal life. Nevertheless, life as we know it proceeds “under the shadow of the cross,” and “all the provisional light which we believe we can recognize and enjoy as such really breaks forth from this shadow.” Barth is calling for an acceptance of whatever comes to us. “We must not object to the fact that we have to seek the manifestation of God’s glory and the glory of our own life in the concealment of this shadow.” Is this perhaps because the cross has the power to alter radically our perception of beauty? What if—Barth asks the question rhetorically—the most refreshing and enduring joys await us in the very places and situations where we would never of our own volition dare to seek them? Joyful obedience then requires that we be radically open to God’s way of ordering our lives, however strange or threatening that might appear.

We search for joy and try to discover “the real pleasure of our real life,” but only God knows what is truly best for us. Hence, Barth says, “the real test of our joy… is that we do not evade the shadow of the cross of Jesus Christ and are not unwilling to be genuinely joyful even as we bear the sorrows laid upon us.” Barth is not suggesting that suffering is beautiful, or even that it necessarily leads to joy. One can only hope that this will prove to be so. But hope for Barth is not an insignificant thing, and obedience is not without reward. Since we are commanded to rejoice irrespective of our circumstances, and since God’s command is good, the command itself may be taken as a promise that suffering and shadow do not have the last word.

114 CD III/4, 375.
115 CD III/4, 383.
116 As in Barth’s critique of eudaimonism, the critical question is whether we will trust that God has our well-being in mind and obey God’s command even when we cannot (yet) see the practical benefit of doing so. As Barth puts it in an early sermon, “it is such a pity that we always think Jesus has nothing other to say and give to us than what a good person knows and does anyway, because then we pass right by Jesus. The whole point with Jesus is that he says and brings more to us than the best and most pious persons; he is more than John the Baptist. The gospel consists in this ‘more than,’ and this is where Christianity begins.” Sermon on Mt 9:14-15 in Karl Barth and William H. Willimon, The Early Preaching of Karl Barth (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 99-100.
117 CD III/4, 383.
God’s No will be followed by God’s Yes; the darkness that seems never-ending will be followed at last by dawn.

At issue here is a graced recognition of the times in which we are called to live. God’s judgment against human sin has been decisively rendered, but for now, life still proceeds “under the shadow of the cross on which this judgment has been accomplished for the salvation of the world and our own.” Following the example of the apostle Paul, Barth asks his readers to look beyond the sufferings of this present time and to trust that God has joys in store for them. The command to rejoice is the good news we need because we are always most likely to lose faith when things appear to be at their darkest. To obey by rejoicing in trial is to trust that God will work all things to our good.

3.6 JOY ON THE SABBATH DAY

Because Barth links the beauty of God with the human experience of joy, we began this chapter by asking about the nature of joy and then examining several contexts in which Barth’s approach to joy echoes or in some way recapitulates the rudiments of his theology of beauty. How, though, does joy take root in the life of the believer and in the church? If divine beauty is inherently participatory, and if joy is for Barth the affective (or subjective) dimension of beauty, then it will be worthwhile to look for a practical, ecclesial answer to this question.

In this final section I want to highlight Barth’s treatment of the Sabbath commandment. Barth is clearly fascinated by the theological content of the Sabbath commandment. He sees it as explaining all the other commandments, insofar as it deepens the freedom that befits the believer individually and the church as a whole. At the level of ethics, Barth is willing to reflect critically both on specific perils that threaten the Sabbath (such as legalism), and on specific forms of obedience (like worship and feasting), that seem necessary if the Sabbath is to be kept in ways that foster a sense of delight, rather than duty. In this respect,

118 Ibid.
119 CD III/4, 33.
Barth’s account of the Sabbath shows how a theology of beauty that begins with the perfection of God may be worked out holistically and practically in everyday life. Let us look briefly at some of the main aspects of Barth’s account of the Sabbath, with an eye to discerning how this unique day trains God’s people to be joyful—and thus to live with a grateful and disciplined awareness of God’s beauty.\textsuperscript{120}

\textbf{3.6.1 Time and Eternity}

To make theological sense of the Sabbath is to make sense of time. In the broader Christian tradition, language about eternity often functions as a way of securing God’s transcendent otherness or “distance” from the world. Barth, however, prefers to place the accent on how God has forever implicated himself in the world through the creation of time. “Even the eternal God does not live without time. He is supremely temporal.”\textsuperscript{121} Time and eternity are not mutually opposed but closely related aspects of reality. Eternity, Barth says, is the sphere of “authentic temporality”—not time’s end but in some sense its fullness, completion, and source.\textsuperscript{122} Eternity possesses the precise quality of duration that time lacks. Meanwhile, joy names the human longing for this duration. Strangely enough, this longing is itself a source of delight, for it gives us a foretaste of what is to come (in this respect, Barth’s thinking is quite close to that of C.S. Lewis). The gift of the Sabbath offers a resting place, as it were, for our longing; each week we have an opportunity to participate in God’s own delight in creation.

\textsuperscript{120} For what follows I will be depending on two primary texts. In \textit{CD III/2}, 437-511 (“Jesus, Lord of Time”), Barth discusses the Sabbath briefly under the rubric of theological anthropology, as part of a broader enquiry into what may be learned from Jesus’ earthly lifetime. The focus is on the relation of time and eternity, the revelatory significance of the resurrection, and the logic of resting on the seventh day. Barth interprets the Sabbath as a dramatic enactment of God’s covenant with humanity, and as a sign that points forward eschatologically to “the day of the Lord.” Barth then offers a second and more detailed account of the Sabbath at the outset of his “special ethics,” \textit{CD III/4}, 47-72 (“The Holy Day”). Here he covers much of the same ground, but seeks to elaborate the Sabbath as a form of “renouncing faith” that gives visible expression to the belief that “we are not our own, but the Lord’s.” Barth is keen to highlight the positives that derive from this apparently negative command. Sabbath observance both displays the grace of God and equips the church in readiness for the gospel.

\textsuperscript{121} \textit{CD III/2}, 437.

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.
From Barth’s vantage point, the commandment to keep the Sabbath underscores a profound reciprocity: God makes time for humanity and humanity, when it obeys, discovers that is has time from God and for God. This dimension is finely described by Abraham Joshua Heschel. “The love of the Sabbath is the love of man for what he and God have in common.”123 Barth will draw attention to this “common” quality of the day in several ways. He speaks, for example, of the way in which the Sabbath effectively provides time for God to be his own witness. God deigns to share the day, such that “every seventh day shall have for the creature the same content and meaning as the seventh day of creation has for God Himself.”124 Yet it is precisely this divine sharing that renders obedient humanity into a grateful witness. The time humanity is given, Barth notes,

is... the time to be a witness of God’s completion of His work and His rest, sharing in His Sabbath freedom, Sabbath festivity and Sabbath joy; the special time to be with God, the God who in this special time finishes His work and rests from it, no longer being the God who wills to be without the world and man but to be with him.125

As this statement implies, the sharing of the Sabbath day also has a strikingly asymmetrical quality. In the Genesis account, God’s seventh day is humanity’s first day. Barth interprets this to mean that only God comes to the holy day able to contemplate a body of finished work. Humanity cannot do this—but may nevertheless join with God in doing so. This, Barth thinks, is a parable of grace. The life of humanity begins with rest, and not work; with freedom and not obligation, a holiday instead of a task; with play rather than toil; under the gospel, not the law.126 Tasks and toil will come in due time, but they will always be secondary. The primary thing Genesis establishes is that humanity belongs to God and with God. By obeying the commandment we thereby come with joy to share in the time the eternal God has made and set aside for us.

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124 CD III/4, 52.

125 CD III/2, 457.

126 CD III/2, 458.
3.6.2 The Lord’s Day as the Day of the Lord: Sabbath and Resurrection

The Sabbath is both a beginning and an ending. “This was the day,” Barth says, “to which time was already moving with its creation… Time was intended for this day, the day in which God thus committed Himself to the world and man. Time was intended for this day as the day of the Lord of the world and of man; as the day of Lord of the covenant between Himself and His creatures.” Of course the same might be said about Christmas, Good Friday, Easter and the day of Jesus’ second coming in glory.

Mindful of these theological possibilities, Barth plays on the rich semantic ambiguity of the biblical phrase, “the day of the Lord,” in order to bring out the deep connections between the Sabbath and the life of Jesus as, comprehensively, the time of salvation. In particular, Barth singles out the day of resurrection and the “Easter time” which follows as that which definitively establishes Jesus’ lordship over all time. Subsequent to Easter everything the apostles know and recall about Jesus is illuminated by this event. By appearing to his followers for forty days, the resurrected Lord provides a concrete demonstration “of the God who has not only a different time from that of man, but whose will and resolve it is to give man a share in this time of His, in His eternity.” In an echo of the language he uses to speak of the Sabbath, Barth can thus describe Easter as “the time of all times” and the goal of creation. It establishes the covenant in a new and permanent way.

Seen retrospectively through the lens of Jesus’ resurrection, the Sabbath becomes, along with the year of Jubilee, an eloquent type of the time of Easter. Barth suggests that the early Christian switch to Sunday as the holy day was not an innovation so much as a rediscovery of the inner logic of Genesis. As in the beginning, the first day of the week is recognized as the day on which God has completed his work—the finished work of atonement—and declared it to be good.

127 CD III/2, 457.
128 CD III/2, 442.
129 CD III/2, 451.
130 CD III/2, 455.
131 CD III/4, 52-3, cf. 56-7.
The Christian Sabbath may thus be understood as “the day of the Lord” in a threefold sense. It looks back to what God has done in grateful remembrance. It looks at the present with new eyes, seeing and celebrating the arrival of God’s promise and the opportunity to enter God’s rest (Heb 4:9). It also looks ahead to Christ’s second coming.

The first Christians saw in the resurrection of Jesus the first and isolated but clear ray of His final return in judgment and consummation, the prophecy of the future general resurrection of the dead, and the security and pledge of redemption and restoration, of the revelation of the coming kingdom and of eternal life. They solemnized this day as the day of the Lord who on Easter Day appeared in His glory and who will come again in the same glory, but now comprehensively and definitively revealed. On this special day they waited specially upon Him because, in their remembrance of the past on this particular day, they were summoned by Him to wait for that other and great particular day of His future as the last day.¹³²

When “the Lord’s Day” is recognized in this biblically and temporally nuanced way as being “the Day of the Lord,” it becomes clear that the Sabbath ought to become for the Church a day where memory takes the form of hopeful anticipation and grateful praise.

### 3.6.3 A Renouncing Faith and Sabbath Freedom

The problem, of course, is that this ideal is often far from reality. Barth acknowledges, for example, that attempts in the Reformed tradition to codify Sabbath observance have sometimes resulted in a self-serving legalism tailored to the spiritual convenience of the ruling class.¹³³ Yet how is it possible that the commandment should be clear, but deceptively difficult to follow?

It is here, arguably, that the logic of Barth’s theology of beauty most clearly informs his understanding of the Sabbath. Much as theologians have cause to repent if they have failed to witness the beauty of God through the lens of theology, so congregations and Christians have cause to repent if they have not learned

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¹³² *CD* III/4, 57.

¹³³ *CD*, III/4, 65-68. Presumably, a similar critique could be made of other Christian traditions. It also has to be said, however, that some branches of the Reformed tradition have developed a very rich theology and practice of the Lord’s Day. For an incisive overview of this more positive expression, see Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship that is Reformed according to Scripture* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984), 29-37.
to welcome the Sabbath day as a day of feasting and celebration. Barth suggests that Christians could learn much from Jews about receiving the day in the right spirit of reverence and expectation. Abraham Joshua Heschel’s gloss on the biblical account of how God blessed and hallowed the seventh day is in keeping with this goal. “To the prohibition of labor is added the blessing of delight and the accent of sanctity…. The seventh day is a palace in time which we build. It is made of soul, of joy and reticence. In its atmosphere, a discipline is a reminder of adjacency to eternity.”

One of the great mysteries of the Sabbath is how a day marked out by prohibitions and abstentions should come to be regarded as supremely desirable and attractive. For Heschel, the abstentions are not to be viewed as an obstacle, but as the key to the peculiar beauty that inheres in the Sabbath. “These restrictions utter songs to those who know how to stay at a palace with a queen.” For Barth, likewise, the notion of self-denial or renunciation (die Entschagung) is absolutely central to understanding the particular faith that the Sabbath day both enables and requires. Such “renouncing faith” does not see treat Sabbath observance as an empty religious exercise, but as “an invitation to keep to God’s grace and rejoice in it.” It seeks to find beauty in the holy day—in essence, to hear the gospel breaking through and asserting itself in the commandment.

Barth speaks of “renouncing faith” not because Christians are required to give up their faith—the standard translation is infelicitous here—but because the Sabbath commandment is defined in negative terms. On the first day of every week, believers are asked to forsake the ordinary way of doing things in favor of a different mode of life. Barth interprets this negative dimension as a check on the natural human temptation to become satisfied with our own plans, achievements, abilities, or wishes. In his view, the commandment

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134 CD III/4, 68. More broadly, Barth also asks why so many festivals are decidedly un-festive, CD III/4, 379.
135 “One of the best traits in the orthodox Jewish celebration of the Sabbath is its traditional ability to give this day its joyous character. What better could one desire throughout the whole of life than continually and sincerely a ‘good Sunday’?” (CD III/4, 68).
137 Heschel, ibid.
138 CD III/4, 64.
139 Ibid.
rules out every form of “justification and deliverance” which we can invent for ourselves or accomplish on our own strength.\textsuperscript{140} It requires us “to cease and abstain from all our own knowledge, work and volition, even from all our arbitrary surrenders and inactivity, from all arbitrary quiescence and resting….”\textsuperscript{141} When Barth says that the renunciations demanded by the Sabbath are not arbitrary, he means that it is not up to us to offer a meaningful account of our own existence. Because we cannot do so at the last judgment, we must not attempt to do so in the present time. What matters is not what we have made of ourselves (or wish we had made of ourselves), but “that which we will be on the basis of the will and according to the judgment of God.”\textsuperscript{142} Renouncing faith is required if we are to trust and believe that the Sabbath commandment with its prohibitions will actually help us become the people God wills us to be, both individually and corporately.

Because the crucial issue with this commandment is the practice of faith and not simply the following of rules, Barth is reticent to prescribe definitively what must or must not be done on the Sabbath day; nevertheless, he insists that the commandment is clear and that it always needs to be expressed concretely. To quibble about the meaning or application of the commandment would be to evade the fact that the Sabbath has been given to us in order that we might learn to use our freedom in constructive ways.\textsuperscript{143} In Barth’s words:

\begin{quote}
the man who is called to obedience in [keeping the Sabbath] is not left to his own devices or opinions, but set on a definite path by God and required to take definite positive and negative steps. The only open question can and will be whether he hears the Word of God and hears it rightly, whether he obeys it and obeys it fully.\textsuperscript{144}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{140} \textit{CD} III/4, 55.  
\textsuperscript{141} \textit{CD} III/4, 58.  
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{143} \textit{CD} III/4, 62.  
\textsuperscript{144} \textit{CD} III/4, 65.
What, then, counts as true Sabbath obedience? It is joy—the affection that most closely corresponds to
God’s beauty—that serves as the “infallible criterion of Sabbath observance.”145 To rest from one’s labors
does not mean ceasing all activity, but living more humanly by imitating God’s original Sabbath rest. On
this day God’s people are to celebrate, rejoice, and be free to the glory of God.146 Joyous freedom is the
rule. Whatever accords with the goal of making people ready for the gospel is permissable.147 Barth suggests
that, because the Sabbath day belongs to God, it ought to have a basically open or spontaneous quality to it;
what we do matters less than the spirit in which we do it—a spirit of gladness and gratitude. “On Sunday,
whether quietly or with great zeal, one would then do just as much and as little as the day might bring,
without grasping after it anxiously or eagerly.”148 Rightly understood and practiced, the day exudes a sense
of possibility. It is a gift of time, a decisive break from the routines which so often wear people down
throughout the week.

To those living in a secular society awash with consumer desire, for whom Sunday is nothing more than a
day for self-indulgence of one form or another, Barth’s praise for freedom and possibility might sound like
a recipe for expressive individualism run amok. Read in context, the sense is different. Barth most certainly
does not mean that Sunday is a “day off” for Christians to spend doing whatever suits their fancy. Although
joy (as a feeling or emotion) is certainly personal, its main sources and the settings in which it flourishes are
communal in nature. Barth describes the Sabbath as “a communal benefit and a communal duty” with
worship at its heart.149 This means that keeping the Sabbath is not only a matter of personal choices and
private devotion, but of the multitude of decisions made by every member of the community of faith.

There is a sense in which the Sabbath depends not only God’s faithfulness, but the Church’s faithfulness in

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145 CD III/4, 69. The underlying logic of this claim is the same as what we saw in Barth’s general ethics: if one
does not hear the Sabbath commandment as good news, one has not heard it at all.
146 CD III/4, 50.
147 CD III/4, 51.
148 CD III/4, 67.
149 CD III/4, 69.
cultivating a joyful common life. “Can we really exercise renouncing faith, as the Sabbath commandment demands, if on this day every man desires to go his own private way…?”

3.7 Joy and the Rudiments of Beauty

Joy has been in the foreground of this chapter, beauty mostly in the background. Yet if beauty is that aspect of God’s character that bestows and elicits joy, then we are justified in tracing the close relation between these two concepts, and in arguing that Barth’s abiding interest in joy represents a sustained development of his rudimentary theology of beauty. Let us list again some of the main ways in which Barth’s long-standing interest in joy aligns with the four rudiments of his theology of beauty.

The revelatory dimension of beauty is most clearly reflected in Barth’s emphasis on the utter gratuity of joy, which is not an earned reward of our hard work (valuable as that may be), but a gift that we cannot earn or create. This point is vividly demonstrated by Barth’s doctrine of election. Because God has, in Christ, taken up their lost cause and made it his own, human beings are able to look back, as it were, in gratitude, gladly receiving God’s command as those who have already been redeemed and placed on a path to goodness and glory. Law, which might otherwise appear as a burdensome duty is rendered delightful (as in Psalm 119) and festive (as with the Sabbath commandment). Barth’s endorsement of Anselm’s theological schema is another area where the revelatory nature of beauty can be clearly seen. For Barth, as for Anselm, the truth of faith may be taken for granted. The ‘proof’ sought by the theologian does not establish the truth, so much as provide a rational and subjective confirmation of what is already, objectively, the case. What needs highlighting is how the working assumption of Anselm’s theological reasoning—that God freely reveals himself, opening the ears and eyes of those who seek after him—echoes the dynamic of divine glory that Barth will go on to describe in CD II/1. Much in the way that the truth of faith abundantly declares itself, bringing joy to the theologian, God’s glory ‘spills over’ and makes itself known in creaturely life as desire, pleasure, and joy.

150 CD III/4, 69-70.
The *biblical* dimension comes through in many places, but is probably most apparent in Barth’s goal of retrieving the Sabbath as a day of freedom and possibility, characterized by joyful worship and feasting. This attitude—seeing the commandment as a gift rather than a burden—is a fair reflection of Old Testament teaching; it naturally brings Barth into close proximity with Jewish ways of thinking about the Sabbath. What many Jews have remembered (and many Christians forgotten) is the unparalleled beauty of the Sabbath. To take but one example: the expectation of an upcoming feast has a profound retroactive effect on the days leading up to it. Barth asks, “Will the week be set in its light...?” In the biblical mindset, keeping the Sabbath is not a question of how to live on one day only, but of how to live on six days for the sake of the one day that the Lord has hallowed and set apart. The other days of the week become days of preparation. Our ordering of time throughout the week, and not just on the day of rest, may serve as a spiritual discipline. It follows that the church’s attitude towards the coming day of the Lord—will it welcomed like a beloved guest, or dreaded as an interruption of personal plans and projects?—speaks volumes about whether we are truly receptive to the joy that God has given in the Sabbath.

The *perilous* dimension can be heard in Barth’s critique of worship services that focus on something other than the hearing of God’s Word. If the church wants to preserve the fundamentally open and joyous character of Christian obedience, it needs to tend carefully to the content of its proclamation, lest the gospel be hijacked by other agendas (Barth mentions here “the law of various religious and moral ideals, programmes and works, under the guise and in the dress of the Gospel”). Worship ought to be “the festive heart of the holy day,” for there is a strangely direct correlation between the service and the Sabbath day as a whole. Whenever worship loses its meaning—when, for example, it becomes a religious

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151 Barth sees the ability to give the day its joyous character as a standout quality of Orthodox Judaism (*CD* III/4, 68).

152 *CD* III/4, 70.

153 *CD* III/4, 69. On the other hand, worship will become joyous and not gloomy if ministers take care to proclaim Christ’s Lordship through “the judging, attacking, critical, yet clear and unambiguous Yes of God to man.”

154 *CD* III/4, 63.
production, or is performed mainly out of a sense of obligation—then the holy day, too, is drained of its spiritual significance. Stewarding the form and content of worship is vital, lest the church fail to realize the deep freedom the Sabbath is intended to instill in human beings through their obedience in time.

The crucial dimension of beauty comes to the fore most clearly in Barth’s meditation on joy in relation to the hardships of this life (“shadow”), and specifically to the hope of remaining joyful even in the midst of suffering. Much could be said on this difficult subject. At the level of spiritual formation, an obedient willingness to know joy even in the midst of trial and travail gives credence to the gospel claim that God is with us and wills our good in all things. As Barth sees it, the possibility of joy in shadow sets the Christian understanding and experience of joy definitively apart from the pagan virtues it most closely resembles.\textsuperscript{155}

When Barth speaks of beauty in this context, he has in mind the beauty of God’s economy as it is worked out in the particular details of each person’s life story.

It is a matter of the proof of our joy in the fact that our capacity for enjoyment shows itself to be also a capacity for suffering, a readiness to accept with reverence and gratitude and therefore with joy the mystery and wonder of the life given to us by God, its beauty and radiance, and the blessing, refreshment, consolation and encouragement which it radiates as the gift of God, even where it presents itself to us in its alien form.\textsuperscript{156}

Christologically speaking, joy is possible even in shadow and suffering because we have One who has suffered on our behalf and in our place, emerging victorious over death. The joy experienced in trial can become a means of knowing Christ in a deeper way.\textsuperscript{157} On an ecclesial level, joy carries an indelibly communal aspect; suffering becomes bearable when we bear one another’s burdens, as members of Christ’s body, the church (Gal 6:2). Eschatologically, joy has the salutary effect of whetting the church’s desire to

\textsuperscript{155} CD III/4, 384.

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{157} Barth does not expound the wider implications of Jesus’ vicarious death and life until later in the Church Dogmatics, but already it is evident that the costly joy in question is not a kind of Christian heroism—as if we could do anything on our own strength—but a profound experience of identifying with Christ. As the apostle Paul writes, “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh” (1 Cor 4:8-11). For a broader treatment of this theme, see Christian D. Kettler, The God Who Rejoices (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2010), 134-181.
come into the presence of God. The “one thing” sought by the Psalmist—“to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD” (Ps 27:4)—is not therefore to be conceived as an escape from trials and tribulations, but as a durable hope that will one day be fulfilled. As Barth points out, all joy is finally anticipatory. “Everything that we recognise and experience as joy here and now, whether easy or difficult, whether on the bright side of life or the dark, is a provisional fulfillment.” It is, Barth says, “the great prelude to what will one day be revealed….”

In relation to our larger study, joy effectively captures the ‘inter-subjective’ dynamic that Barth attributes to the beauty of God, in that it is at once both given and chosen. For this reason, joy is rightfully seen as the subjective affection or virtue that corresponds to the objective beauty of God. How might we express this idea in less technical language? In CD II/1, Barth had coined a remarkable neo-logism—the “joy-streaming-out element” (jenes Freudestrahlende)—in order to describe the irresistibly winsome quality of God’s being in action. To miss this, he says, would be to miss the intrinsically attractive goodness of the “good news,” that quality of the divine life which makes God eminently desirable and delightful. In CD III/4, Barth recapitulates and adds to this theme when describing how the human experience of joy is utterly transformed by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ:

Joy is now joy before the Lord and in Him. It is joy in His salvation, His grace, His law, His whole action. But it is now genuine, earthly, human joy: the joy of harvest, wedding, festival and victory; the joy not only of the inner but also of the outer man; the joy in which one may and must drink wine as well as eat bread, sing and play as well as speak, dance as well as pray…. [Hence] the man who hears and takes to heart the biblical message is not only not permitted but plainly forbidden to be anything but merry and cheerful.

What Barth’s teaching on joy shows us is that the beauty of God is not remote and inaccessible, but ever-present; not an abstraction, but a personally life-giving and character-shaping power that can meet us in any and conceivably every possible circumstance. In brief, God does not keep beauty all to himself: as and because God is glorious, God’s divine life flows out irresistibly (“like shining from shook foil,” Hopkins

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158 CD III/4, 384.
159 CD II/1, 655.
160 CD III/4, 375-6.
says), to the end of filling God’s creatures with joy. In Barth’s doctrine of creation as in his doctrine of God, the myriad joys of creaturely life find their source in the beauty of God.

4. BEAUTY IN COMMUNION

A critical engagement and reflection on contemporary praxis

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In chapter two we saw how Karl Barth introduces the theme of beauty as a way of explicating the perfection of divine glory. His approach lays the groundwork for a distinctly christological way of conceiving God’s relationship to creation; it is in Jesus Christ, fully God and fully human, that we most clearly glimpse the beauty of the Triune God. Then in chapter three we considered the theme of joy, so prevalent throughout Barth’s writing, as evidence of a wider development of his theology of beauty. What we found was that joy serves in Barth’s theology to link the beauty of God to the normal Christian life. Joy is the affection that most nearly corresponds to divine beauty, and thus a sign and proof of the beauty of God within the sphere of human subjectivity.

Barth’s treatment of joy, like his constellation of beauty and glory, leaves open and unanswered a number of critical questions. Among the most pressing are questions regarding the ecclesial implications of Barth’s theology. As John Webster admits, Barth “has a rather slender account of the moral processes of common life.”\(^1\) Given the revelatory beauty of God, how does it happen that the community of faith becomes attuned to this beauty? What virtues or practices are involved in learning to perceive what God reveals? The answer, on Barth’s terms, clearly entails becoming joyful. But this answer is bound to be incomplete unless and until it takes the work of the Holy Spirit in the church into account.

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\(^1\) John Webster, *Karl Barth* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 161. Along similar lines, Colin Gunton laments Barth’s reticence to provide much detail regarding the relationship of faith between God and the believer: “It is not much good being told that God’s account is always particular unless a reasonably clear account can be given of how this particularity takes shape.” Gunton, *The Barth Lectures*, 133, with reference to the ethics of *CD II/2*. Barth does, of course, discuss some particular ethical issues in *CD III*. For a concise description of Barth’s emphasis on the particular (as opposed to the universal or abstract), see George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 32-35.
Responding to these concerns, the goal of this chapter will be to treat Communion as a “test case” of the rudimentary theology of beauty we have identified in CD II/1. The plan is as follows: in four sections corresponding to Barth’s four rudiments, we will explore how the notion of God’s beauty as revelatory, biblical, perilous, and crucial may inform and enrich the church’s theology of Communion. We will look closely at Barth’s views, but widen the discussion to include other Reformed voices—significantly, those of Zwingli and Calvin, along with more recent theologians such as T.F. Torrance.

There are two reasons why it makes sense to use the rudiments as a heuristic for thinking about Communion. The first is that Barth’s own sacramental theology is something of a moving target. During the mid-to-late 1930’s (roughly speaking, the time period during which Barth developed his rudimentary theology of beauty), his thinking about Communion is frequently insightful, but rarely original. As we shall see, however, Barth later changed his mind in a way that seems to undercut or even to reject the traditional notion of sacramental mediation. Our aim is not to map the entire course of this shift, much less to defend Barth at every turn; focusing too narrowly upon either “the early Barth” or “the late Barth” would keep us from hearing all that he has to say on the subject. Instead, the rudiments will allow us to engage critically with Barth’s teaching about Communion, in the service of a larger question; namely, how this particular practice may become a means by which the church learns to perceive the beauty of God.

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2 By “Communion” I refer to the church’s familiar act of remembering Jesus through a symbolic meal of bread and wine. For the purposes of this chapter, the various names given to this meal—“Eucharist” and “the Lord’s Supper”—are treated as equivalent (the standard German term, das Abendmahl, can be translated by any of the three). I opt for “Communion” in this chapter not only because it reflects common usage among Protestants, but because it also helpfully draws our attention to notions of ‘union’ and ‘community’ that a theology of beauty will tend to emphasize.

The second reason follows from the essentially ecclesial and practical nature of the subject matter. Whereas some dogmatic subjects might be treated in a more-or-less timeless fashion, the meaning of an act of worship is more accurately assessed when its historical and cultural context is taken into account. Barth’s views on Communion were shaped to some degree by his concern for the health of the church in his time; the needs and challenges faced by the church today are bound to be different in critical ways. Thus, our task is not to replicate Barth’s liturgical prescriptions, but to ask how the practice of Communion might enable his theology of beauty to be worked out faithfully within a North American context. The rudimentary character of this theology makes it transferable, in other words, in a way that allows us to learn from Barth without agreeing with him at every point.

Linking beauty with Communion may be new or strange to some Christians, Protestants especially, for whom the sacramental meal is not unimportant, but often relatively peripheral compared to other more central concerns. In a great many Protestant churches in North America, Communion does not function as an essential part of the normal Sunday service. It is seldom explicitly connected to evangelism, education, or the other main ministries of the congregation. The rite provides a useful opportunity to recall Jesus’ death on the cross and reflect on the meaning of his sacrifice—nothing less, but seldom anything more.4 I intend to show how Barth’s four rudiments point the way towards a richer and more dynamic understanding of Communion. They press the church to discover (or perhaps re-discover) dimensions of the meal that have been overlooked or obscured by the liturgical and cultural status quo. These include the notion of Communion as a rite in which the action of God in the past, present, and future is primary; in which the church has occasion to share in an essentially joyous celebration of Jesus’ death, in keeping with scripture; in which the material qualities of the meal helpfully render the Word of God concrete; and in which the

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4 These are broad generalizations, of course, derived largely from personal experience and anecdotal evidence. For confirmation of my basic thesis—that Communion occupies a relatively marginal place within American Protestantism—we might look, for example, to a document like the 2000 statement of “The Baptist Faith and Message” (http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfm2000.asp). In this concise summary of core Christian teaching, pride of place is naturally given to the doctrines of God, Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and the authority of scripture. Among the other topics considered, however (the list includes evangelism, missions, baptism, education, cooperation among Christians, social order, the family, peace and war, and religious liberty), none receives less attention than Communion, which merits but a single sentence.
potential peril of empty religious observance is acknowledged, but avoided by linking sacramental participation to local mission.

In all of these ways, Barth’s theology of beauty invites us to view the meal as integrally related to the church’s missional calling, and thus as a means of deepening personal and corporate devotion to Christ. My argument is not that Communion is the solum bonum of church life—God’s beauty may be glimpsed wherever the Spirit is active in the lives of God’s people—but that Communion is an underutilized resource for undertaking the sort of spiritual formation the church must undergo if it is to perceive and participate in the beauty of God. Looking at Communion through the lens of Barth’s theology of beauty can help us to see both why and how this is the case.

4.2 The Revelatory Beauty of Communion

Under this first rudiment—beauty as revelatory—we will look at Barth’s understanding of how God makes use of creaturely forms such as the sacraments in the course of revelation. We will also consider Barth’s analysis of the dialectical nature of corporate worship, which has its ground in the presence and action of Jesus Christ, and we will review his argument for Communion as the essential complement to God’s Word within the worship service. These aspects of Barth’s thought will enable us to offer a provisional answer to the question of what it means to speak of Communion as revealing the beauty of God.

4.2.1 Form and Revelation

The doctrine of revelation developed by Barth in CD I/1 maintains that the world does not exist on its own terms, in a state of unbridgeable separation from God. Having been spoken into being, creation remains the object of God’s love and lives by God’s creative Word. Even the catastrophe of human sin does not alter God’s unshakeable will to reconcile and redeem all that he has made. In Barth’s words, “there is no self-enclosed and protected secular sphere, but only one which is called in question by God’s
Word, by the Gospel, by God’s claim, judgment and blessing, and which is only provisionally and restrictedly abandoned to its own legalism and its own gods.”5 Revelation, in other words, presupposes a dynamic view of the relationship between God and the creation. While there does exist an “infinite qualitative distinction” between Creator and creature, God has bridged this gap by becoming human in the event of the incarnation. “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor 5:19). For Barth, this action definitively displays the beauty of God. “The beauty of Jesus Christ is not just any beauty. It is the beauty of God.”6 The practical challenge is to find theologically productive ways of talking about revelation’s implications, in relation to specific creaturely forms and the ongoing life of the church.

Barth’s distinction between primary and secondary objectivity implies that revelation always involves the use of creaturely forms; there is in other words no ‘direct’ or ‘unmediated’ revelation.7 It follows that the practice of Communion may serve as a form of divine revelation, and this is what large swaths of the Christian tradition have maintained in describing the meal as a “means of grace.”

Barth himself, however, is wary of conflating sacraments with revelation in such a straightforward fashion—just as he is wary of speaking of the Bible as the Word of God in an unqualified sense. Barth is keen to remind the church that God’s Word is not reducible to a general truth accessible to reason, nor is it ever a Word we could speak to ourselves.8 Although God’s Word is spoken in the church and for the church, it is also in a profound sense over and above the church. It is always a gift to the church, never a possession of the church.9 Something like this holds true for the sacraments, as well. If we are to speak of the beauty of Communion (i.e., the beauty of God as encountered through Communion), we must be clear

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5 CD I/1, 155.
6 CD II/1, 665.
7 See my earlier mention of this distinction in chapter 2, p. 2, as well as CD II/1, 16.
8 CD I/1, 140-1.
9 Here I am thinking of Barth’s argument in CD I/1, 99f., regarding the peculiarly self-attesting quality of the scriptural canon. “After any exegesis... even the very best, [the church] has to realize afresh the distinction between text and commentary and to let the text speak again without let or hindrance, so that it will experience the lordship of this free power and find in the Bible the partner or counterpart which the Church must find in it if it is to take the living successio apostolorum seriously” (107).
that this beauty derives from God’s own self-revelation, and does not inhere in the elements of bread and wine, the eucharistic liturgy, the administrative role of the clergy, or the congregation that receives it. T.F. Torrance explains this point in a way that reflects Barth’s teaching:

[T]he Eucharist is both the act of Christ and the act of the Church in his name, but in the nature of the case the act of the Church is one which serves the act of Christ and directs us away from itself to Christ. The Eucharist is what it is not because of what it is in itself as act of the Church but because of what it is in its grounding beyond in what God in Christ has done, does do, and will do for us in his Spirit. Very serious problems arise when the focus of attention is shifted from that objective ground to the ritual act in the foreground, that is, from the person of the Mediator, God manifest in the flesh, to the sacramental rite as a means of saving grace….10

Perhaps Communion should be termed a “means to grace” rather than a “means of grace.” At any rate, Barth and Torrance agree that the creaturely form is never fully the church’s to command or control.

One distinctive and unusual note to be heard in Barth’s sacramental thought at this relatively early stage of his career, is the suggestion that Communion can be described in terms of divine revelation. Barth’s discussion of revelation in *CD I/1* implies that the beauty to be discerned in Communion is at once plain and yet hidden. Just as the Bible is not a book miraculously fallen from heaven, but a collection of writings that bears all the marks of its historical composition, so, Barth says, “[t]he sacrament [of Communion] is also in fact a symbol in compromising proximity to all other possible symbols.”11 Its beauty may not be readily apparent. Viewed on a purely horizontal level, Communion is not unique; it may be evaluated from other perspectives besides that of faith. A sociologist of religion, for example, might usefully compare it to other religious rituals involving food and drink. Barth sees this quality of mundane visibility as characteristic, also, of the church; participation in faith entails a kind of perception that God must bring about in some way or another.

Even the Word of God may be described in the same way. As many readers of the *Church Dogmatics* have pointed out, the primary sacrament in view in Barth’s doctrine of revelation is not Communion, but


11 *CD I/1*, 165. While Barth’s reference to the meal is in this case just an illustration in the stream of a larger argument, it would not work even as an illustration if Communion were not recognized in the Church as a form of revelation.
preaching. This is perhaps to be expected from a robustly Protestant theologian. Yet Barth employs Communion as a privileged metaphor for understanding the curious nature of gospel proclamation, in order to explain the nature of preaching. In essence, the sacramental meal provides an analogy for how God’s Word is truly conveyed through ordinary human speech, though without a miraculous transformation. “Bread remains bread and wine wine.”

In a similarly anti-gnostic passage, Barth takes special care to note how the concept of what is ‘spiritual’ must not be understood in a way that would exclude or downgrade the material creation. He writes, “[t]he Word of God is also natural and physical because in the creaturely realm in which it comes to us men as Word there is nothing spiritual that is not also natural and physical.” The force of Barth’s comparison would obviously be lost if the Communion elements of bread and wine were understood to be miraculously transformed (as in the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation), or merely symbolic (in the anaemic sense often attributed to Zwingli, and common among modern churches). If through preaching and even in the text of the Bible, the Word of God is necessarily veiled in secularity, how much more must the dynamic of divine ‘veiling’ apply to Communion, where the ordinary elements of bread and wine are employed in such a way as to point beyond themselves to the mystery of God’s being with us and for us in Jesus Christ?

4.2.2 The Divine Initiative in Worship

12 CD I/1, 95.

13 CD I/1, 134, emphasis added. From this vantage point the problem with the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation is not that it purports to explain what is essentially a mystery (Christ’s presence in the elements), nor that it depends on a priest for its effectiveness, but that in becoming the body and blood of Christ, the bread and wine effectively cease to be bread and wine. Barth’s view rules out such docetism.

14 See CD I/1, 162-186, for Barth’s discussion of the “secularity” of God’s Word. In formal terms, we could say that the thing to avoid in the dialectic between form and revelation is, on one side, an absolute identification between the two, and on the other side, a gap or breakdown such that the relation is called into question. As applied to Eucharistic theology, these extremes can be correlated with Tridentine Catholicism on one side, Zwinglianism on the other. In the early volumes of the Church Dogmatics, Barth’s preferred approach is to affirm the necessity of the form (preaching, sacraments) while placing maximum emphasis on revelation (the presence and activity of Jesus Christ).
For his Gifford lectures of 1937-38, Barth chose to expound the Scots’ Confession (1560), a document that had lapsed by that time into relative obscurity. In several of these lectures, Barth attempts to map out the relationship between God and humanity in relation to worship. While the aesthetic aspects of Communion and the human capacity to worship via the senses are not insignificant, Barth seeks consistently to emphasize God’s initiative and action.

In the first of two lectures touching on the sacraments, Barth describes the church’s Sunday service as exhibiting a sort of Chalcedonian logic. Worship is a fully divine and fully human activity, but the divine element takes precedence: “all that we ourselves can choose and do in it takes second place.” Similarly, Barth notes how the service is “an opus Dei, which takes place for its own sake.” The ground of worship must be located in the presence and the action of Jesus Christ, who is the meaning and goal of history. Ultimately, the worship service matters not because it is attractive to outsiders or inherently enjoyable—would that these things were true more often!—but because it is here that Christ reveals himself to the church.

From speaking about Christ as the ground, Barth moves on to consider faith as the content of worship. It is here, according to Barth, that we glimpse the profound significance of the sacraments for the Christian life. Baptism has to do with the church’s existence, and Communion with the church’s continuance in the faith. This is a key point. It implies that the meal is an essential, and not an optional or occasional, part of worship—a point that Barth will go on to develop at greater length in the second lecture. The assumption of the Confession, and apparently Barth as well, is that baptism and Communion together comprise a template for the Christian life; that is, they provide a practical and liturgical framework within which believers may usefully attend to the Word of God.

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16 Gifford, 192. The two lectures on worship are XVII and XVIII.

17 Gifford, 194.

18 Gifford, 195.
Even so, Barth insists that the specific impetus for gospel proclamation always rests with God: “The Holy Spirit does not let Himself be quenched, and will see to it that the church service must consist constantly in the preaching of the gospel.”

To the ears of contemporary readers, the notion of worship as consisting of constant preaching may sound overly verbal and didactic, as if words were the only approved mode of communication. Yet Barth insists that attending to the Spirit does not mean neglecting or denigrating the aesthetic and embodied character of worship. What is “spiritual” (e.g., “faith”) does not exclude material reality, but comes to expression through such as ordinary elements as bread and wine. Worship properly includes both dimensions. “The service is faith becoming audible and visible, just as it is the proclamation of revelation.”

Along these lines, Barth observes that Communion encapsulates the worship service as a whole, precisely insofar as it is Eucharist—the divinely-appointed way for the church to give thanks to God. Acts of worship that express and demonstrate the people’s gratefulness to God are presumably to be encouraged, in a variety of media.

Although the lectures treat the subject of worship dialectically, it would be a mistake to infer that the divine and the human aspects are equally balanced. While the form of the worship service is indeed appointed by God, it remains creaturely form; i.e., it does not become the conduit of pure, divine content (whatever that would be). So Barth insists that the worship service “is not itself revelation and faith, nor is it in itself the work of the Holy Spirit.” At best, the service provides a fitting occasion for God to act in ways that we can understand and experience: “while the work of the Holy Spirit is taking place, use is made of this form and it is permitted to serve.”

True to the Reformed tradition, Barth consistently places the accent on what God, not the church, does in worship.

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19 Gifford, 197.
20 Ibid.
21 Gifford, 197.
22 Gifford, 199.
23 Gifford, 200. In this passage Barth applies Augustine’s classic distinction between signum and res in order to underscore the essential difference between the material elements and the spiritual reality to which they point.
Applying this train of thought specifically to the sacred meal, Barth carefully delineates the role of the bread and wine:

They point out and characterize, bear testimony and mediate. Through the service they render we eat and drink the true body and blood of Jesus Christ. It is just for that end that they are instituted. Yet in this very function assigned them by God they are not themselves that end for which they serve but as a means.24

With such statements Barth gives careful expression to a classic Protestant concern; namely, to avoid thinking that the church has the right or the power of its own accord to dispense the grace of God. We might summarize this theme as Barth’s unwavering concern to let God be God in the midst of the church’s worship. As he puts it, “concrete, creaturely media are in no sense at the mercy of man’s imagination or his likes and dislikes.”25 Even if—perhaps especially if—the church is to celebrate the sacraments as in some sense exceptional and necessary and a fitting means of encountering the revelatory beauty of God in worship, they must, from Barth’s point of view, always to be seen as operating under God’s free initiative, within the sphere of God’s gracious rule.

### 4.2.3 Linking Word and Sacrament

We have already noted how Barth regards regular Sunday worship as an ordained event in which Word and Sacrament, gospel proclamation and eucharistic celebration, ordinarily take place. How then does he describe the basic content of worship, viewed as a human activity? Barth answers this question in a way that will be familiar to any reader of the early volumes of the *Church Dogmatics*: “in the whole world there exists no more intense, strenuous or animated action than that which consists in hearing the Word of God— hearing it, as is its due, ever afresh, better, more loyally and efficaciously. Everything beside this is waste of time here. It is in this act that the content of the church service consists.”26

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24 Gifford, 199, emphasis added.
25 Ibid.
26 Gifford, 210.
Now obviously such a stringent focus on the Word could be interpreted and applied in ways that
marginalize the sacraments—and who can doubt that this is exactly what has happened in many Protestant
congregations?—but Barth does not do so. Instead, he strikingly calls attention at this point to the ways in
which the practice of Christian worship has yet to recover from the wounds of the Reformation. In Barth’s
analysis, Roman Catholics typically fail to attend properly to the Word, while Protestants still miss the
abiding significance of the sacraments by treating Communion as an optional part of the liturgy. Blame is
equally to be shared.

We do not any longer even realize that a service without sacraments is one which is outwardly
incomplete. […] Would the sermon not be delivered and listened to quite differently and would we
not offer thanks during the service quite differently, if everything outwardly and visibly began with
baptism and moved towards the Lord’s Supper?27

Such a statement, directed primarily to a Protestant audience, may be heard as a kind of ecumenical lament.
The intrinsic beauty of the church’s worship has been disfigured by centuries of disunity between
Christians. A service that lacks devoted attention to the Word or to Communion is inherently broken,
unfinished, and can only be seen as a “torso,” not as a unified whole. Barth may also be acknowledging the
need for a form of worship attuned to the kind of creatures that we are. Where preaching is primarily
cognitive and affective, aiming to reach the mind and heart of the congregation, the sacraments engage the
senses and involve the body in a way that preaching seems ill-equipped to undertake on its own. There is
here at least a tacit suggestion that sacramental participation allows for a more fully human experience of
worship.

Still, what rings out most of all from these lectures is the note of God’s gracious initiative, even in a context
(the church’s regular corporate worship) that might appear to be made up entirely of human actions. Like
John Knox (author of the Scots’ Confession), Barth forthrightly renders that divine action in Trinitarian, and
especially Christo-centric, terms, but he presses beyond Knox in setting the sacraments within the wider
context of Christian worship. He also concentrates rather more than Knox does on the necessity of
distinguishing between the divine and human aspects of worship. The motive for this is not to reject or

27 Gifford, 211.
diminish the goodness of creation, but to understand its limits, and through those limits, to laud the
greatness of the God who condescends to meet us where and as we are. A passage from the concluding
section of Barth’s first lecture brings these classic Reformed themes into fine focus:

Jesus Christ has not rendered Himself superfluous through the human institution of the church.
Without Jesus Christ Himself we can do nothing. This is the Reformed confession’s denial of the
realistic doctrine of the sacrament. Yet one must not for all that miss the affirmation behind this
denial. It is the affirmation made by adoration which seeks God in the highest, just when He has
come right down to us. It is the affirmation of miracle, of pure miracle which for that very reason is
an admirandum and not a stupendum. It is the affirmation of God who even in the creation which serves
Him remains Lord alone, the only one to whom glory is due.28

By highlighting God’s majesty and freedom as enacted in and through Jesus Christ, Barth provides a strong
corrective to every form of self-congratulation that can mar the church’s thinking about worship. The
Word (in the form of preaching) and sacrament (sharing in Communion) together serve the church as
divinely appointed means by which it can hear and obey the one Word of God. This, from the human side,
constitutes the main content and task of worship. It follows that the value of creaturely forms can be
affirmed, even if the status of those forms is strongly qualified and relativised by the fact that they remain in
the sphere of human action.

In review, then, the first rudiment names beauty as ‘revelatory’ in order to emphasize how the objectively
beautiful form of God’s own being creates a subjective response. Barth’s ‘early’ thinking about sacraments
and the nature of worship places the accent squarely on the action of God, and yet implies that creaturely
forms such as Communion are instrumental in communicating God’s beauty to humanity. Indeed, we
might go farther and say that the logic of Barth’s position requires there to be such forms, since revelation
is never unmediated. To repeat one of Barth’s most striking formulations, “in the creaturely realm… there
is nothing spiritual that is not also natural and physical.”29

28 Gifford, 200.
29 CD I/1, 134, emphasis added. From this vantage point the problem with the Roman Catholic doctrine of
transubstantiation is not that it purports to explain what is essentially a mystery (Christ’s presence in the
elements), nor that it depends on a priest for its effectiveness, but that in becoming the body and blood of
Christ, the bread and wine effectively cease to be bread and wine. Barth’s view rules out such docetism.
4.3 BEAUTY IN COMMUNION, ACCORDING TO SCRIPTURE

Barth’s second rudiment invites us to welcome beauty as an essential, though usually secondary, theme in the Bible. This raises the question of how, or where, beauty appears in the various passages that speak of Communion; describing the sacrament in aesthetic terms would obviously make no sense, if the texts that authorize its practice fail to do so. Given Barth’s desire to ground the church’s understanding of beauty in the text of the Bible, it seems safe to assume that perceiving the beauty of God in Communion will require a hermeneutic that takes the goodness of creation seriously. Should we fail to acknowledge this goodness, we would be hard-pressed to perceive the practice of Communion as beautiful in a way that reflects the beauty of God.

The argument I wish to make in this section is part hypothesis, part exegesis. The hypothesis is that the relative absence of beauty in the way that modern Protestant churches practice the Lord’s Supper can be traced to a failure to read scripture rightly. A key figure in this story is Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531), the Swiss pastor and leader of the Reformation in Zurich, whose reading of the classic bread of life discourse in John 6 establishes a rigid dichotomy between the things of the “flesh” and things of the “spirit.”30 One outcome of this interpretation has been to sever participation in the meal from participation in Christ.

The exegesis takes the form of a close reading of John 6. Over against the Zwinglian interpretation, this text can be read as commending participation in Jesus’ life by means of both Word and Sacrament. The two forms, Word and Sacrament, can be distinguished from each other, but to divide them sharply as Zwingli does runs counter to the deepest logic of John’s gospel, namely, that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Arguably, the beauty to be discerned in this text is the strange and unsettling beauty of One who alone speaks “words of eternal life” (6:68) while promising to give his flesh “for the life of the world” (6:51).

In addition, and although it is not specifically concerned with the gospel of John, Barth’s early account of divine sign-giving (CD I/2) provides a bracing theological corrective to the sort of dualistic thinking represented by Zwingli. Barth helps us to see that Communion is not to be treated as an isolated event of an abstract grace, but as part of the historical pattern of revelation detailed throughout the entire Bible—a pattern characterized by God’s steadfast, free, and loving engagement with all that God has made. Once this wider pattern of divine action in creation is recognized, it becomes possible to read what the scriptures have to say about Communion in a new light. The material dimensions of human existence need not be opposed to the spiritual, for all of creation remains under God’s sovereign care. Indeed for Barth, the very concreteness of the sacraments may preserve us from the error of supposing that spirituality—and beauty—is somehow separate from ordinary, embodied existence.

4.3.1 Misreading Scripture: John 6

The bread of life discourse in John 6 deals with complex matters of who Jesus is, what he offers, and what he requires of those who would follow him. Using highly metaphorical language drawn from the story of the Exodus, Jesus challenges his hearers to trust in him, and so receive “the true bread from heaven” (v. 32). This is not a passage about beauty in any straightforward sense, but perhaps fits Barth’s qualification of having beauty as a secondary theme, for the question of beauty is raised implicitly in relation to desire. Jesus’ statement in verse 51, “the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh,” presses his hearers (and by extension, the readers of John’s gospel) to determine whether the prospect of eating with Jesus and in some sense feeding upon Jesus is supremely desirable—or rather grounds for abandoning the way. We learn that, after having grumbled and disputed over the meaning of Jesus’ words (vv. 41, 43, 52, 61), “many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him” (v. 66). It is not entirely clear from the text whether this exodus is due to the visceral shock of Jesus’ imagery, the sheer audacity of his claim to be the manna from heaven, or the sobering recognition that Communion with Jesus will prove costly. “This
is a hard saying; who can listen to it?” (v. 60). It is clear that Jesus’ words in this passage are winsomely attractive to some, but deeply scandalous and repellant to others.

In light of the confusion and conflict the passage records, it is perhaps not surprising that the meaning of Jesus’ words should be hotly debated during the Reformation. In the view of the Huldrych Zwingli, the Lord’s Supper needed to be reformed, both theologically and in practice.\(^{31}\) The link between sacramental participation and Christian discipleship appeared to be utterly broken; what prevailed among his flock was a form of superstition, disguised as faith:

We have fancied that we do something worthwhile if we have high sentiments about holy things, though holiness has been ascribed to them by ourselves, or if we talk about them in most polished terms, and yet ourselves teem the while with all uncleanness, just like whitened sepulchres.\(^{32}\)

Zwingli’s desire for reform is animated by his pastoral concern for a purer church. He laments the sorry state of the wider church, noting that, “there are numberless persons, alas! Who eat and drink the body and blood of Christ sacramentally, and yet are not in God nor God in them….”\(^{33}\) During the time of writing the influential *Commentary on True and False Religion*, Zwingli’s own convictions are being buffeted by theological controversy and debate, not only with Roman Catholic opponents, but with other Protestants as well. Thus, Zwingli does not have the luxury of pondering the gospel text in a state of quiet contemplation; his interpretation is shaped less by exegetical concerns, than by the polemical demands of the situation.\(^{34}\)

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\(^{31}\) For a judicious account of the historical context, see W.P. Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 5-49 and 180-255. It is a measure of the sense of urgency driving Zwingli’s programme that the reform of the Mass is deemed comparable to Israel’s recovery of Passover under Hezekiah or to the Jews’ return to Judah after the Babylonian exile. “No doubt, all believers are well aware of how much damage and apostasy from God have resulted heretofore from the great mass of ceremonies [surrounding the Supper]” (“Action or Use of the Lord’s Supper, Easter 1525” in *Liturgies of the Western Church*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961, 149).

\(^{32}\) *Commentary*, 199.

\(^{33}\) *Commentary*, 206.

\(^{34}\) The *Commentary* was published in 1525. Against the Catholics Zwingli argues that sacraments were not sacred or secret things, mysteries in the traditional sense, but “nothing else than an initiatory ceremony or a pledging” (181). Thus, they have no power to forgive sins or free the conscience. Against the Lutherans, Zwingli denies that sacraments function as an outward sign of an interior spiritual work. In taking this line Zwingli was evidently concerned to defend God’s freedom, and not to bind or commit God through any rite. “For in this
These are some of the contextual factors that lead him to make a decidedly non-sacramental reading of Jn 6 the centerpiece of his theology of the sacraments.

When Jesus says, “Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you” (v.27), Zwingli holds that “food” here means nothing other than faith; “…they are utterly wrong who think that Christ in this whole chapter is saying something about sacramental food.”35 Similarly, the “bread” to which Jesus refers is not the consecrated bread of the eucharist, but the gospel, the word of life. Believing is thus equivalent to “eating,” but not vice versa.

Indeed, for Zwingli, nothing in the entire chapter says anything whatsoever about material things; it cannot, for “whatever is body, whatever is an object of sense, can in no way be a matter of faith.”36

This last statement hints at the two principles that Zwingli regards as decisive. The first is that Jesus is a means of salvation not by being eaten sacramentally, as the Catholics and Lutherans would have it, but by being killed on the cross.37 Hence, to eat Jesus’ flesh and drink his blood (vv. 53-55) cannot possibly involve participation in the sacrament. It means believing only in his saving death.

The second principle—and arguably the most problematic aspect of Zwingli’s discussion—is the dualistic divide separating created things from things of the spirit: “body and spirit are such essentially different things that whichever one you take it cannot be the other.”38 In order to secure his polemical goal of denying any sacramental reference in Jn 6, Zwingli paints an absolute difference between flesh (which profits nothing) and spirit (which gives life); between the “inward teaching from the Father” and the outward ceremony of the supper; or again, between the testament God has established in Christ (which matters greatly) and the document by which we learn of it (which matters not at all, being comparable to the piece of way the liberty of the divine Spirit which distributes itself… to whom it will, when it will, where it will, would be bound” (183). Strangely, this leads to a picture of the sacraments as strangely redundant; any Christian learned enough to confess the faith in the required detail would not need baptism, since her life would already offer sufficient evidence of faith.

35 Commentary, 201. He adds that only faith satisfies the hunger and thirst of the soul (202).

36 Commentary, 227; cf. 208, 214 for similar statements.

37 Commentary, 205.

38 Commentary, 214.
paper on which a will is written). This line of argument is most vividly expressed when Zwingli puts in Jesus’ mouth a paraphrase of what is essentially his own reading of Jn 6: “The thing of which I am speaking is a spiritual thing, and has nothing to do with bodily things.”

It is this teaching that provides the basis for a theology of dis-incarnation. Applied on a practical level, it led Zwingli to strip away the ceremonial aspects of Communion in an attempt to restore the meal to its primitive simplicity. On an ecclesial level, it contributed greatly to the fracturing of the early Reformation. And Zwingli’s way of strictly separating the spiritual from the material would in time shape the way that Protestant churches in North America think about Communion. This was an unfortunate development, theologically, insofar as it weakened both the objective and the subjective meanings of the supper.

Objectively, Christ was no longer regarded as being present in any meaningful way, and thus sacraments have no value for the assurance of faith. It is not the case, he writes, that “the sacraments are signs which make a man sure of the thing that has been accomplished within him.” Subjectively, participation in the meal was reconceived as a matter of religious obligation, rather than an opportunity for spiritual delight. As

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39 Zwingli employs the flesh/spirit dichotomy as a hermeneutical key (212, 218, 220, 227, 231). The notion that “the inward teaching” makes the ceremony expendable is at 207; the testament/document distinction is introduced at 229.

40 Commentary, 208, paraphrasing the overall sense of Jn 6; cf. 214, 227. Zwingli’s dichotomous thinking has the status of a metaphysical axiom: “How… could water, fire, oil, milk, salt, and such crude things make their way to the mind? Not having that power, how will they be able to cleanse it?” (181).

41 “We … think it best to prescribe as little ceremonial and churchly custom as we can for our people’s use of this Supper—which is also a ceremony, but instituted by Christ—lest we yield again, in time, to the old error” (Zwingli, “Action or Use” in Liturgies of the Western Church, 149).

42 Some of the historical lines are tangled and difficult to trace, but a helpful account is provided by John D. Witvliet, “The Americanization of Reformed Worship” in Worship Seeking Understanding (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2003), 163-178

43 Commentary, 183. It should also be said that the mature Zwingli (writing, for instance, in the Exposition of 1531) came to a more nuanced and biblically grounded view of the Lord’s Supper—at any rate, something quite different than the “mere memorialism” with which he has so often been charged, and which still prevails in so many Protestant congregations in North America. Brian Gerrish helpfully summarizes this change: “[t]he signs, as Zwingli views them, engage the senses, turning them from whatever normally distracts them and employing them to support and strengthen faith. The senses become faith’s handmaidens; the sacraments, to change the metaphor, bridle the senses and so may be said to help the contemplation of faith by conjoining it with the strivings of the heart” (“Discerning the Body; Sign and Reality in Luther’s Controversy with the Swiss” in Continuing the Reformation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 66). For an example of recent scholarship that seeks to rehabilitate Zwingli on the issue of sacraments in general and the Eucharist in particular, see H. Wayne Pipkin, The Positive Values of Zwingli’s Eucharistic Writings (Leeds: The Yorkshire Baptist Association, 1984).
an “ordinance,” the ritual must be observed on account of Jesus’ explicit command, but it offers no spiritual benefits to those who participate.

Not surprisingly, many Christians today, including some Protestants traditions influenced by Zwingli, are seeking for a richer understanding of eucharistic theology and practice. Often, these believers are unaffected by the kinds of polemical and political considerations that once so sharply divided Protestants from Catholics, or Protestant groups from one another. How, though, might a congregation learn to perceive beauty in Communion, if the theology it has inherited is lacking, and the form in which Communion has been practiced fails to display the goodness of creation, and therefore (albeit indirectly) the beauty of creation’s Maker? From the vantage point of Barth’s second rudiment, the best path to reform is to seek first a more faithful reading of scripture. Let us now go back to John 6 with the relation between beauty and Communion in mind.

Re-reading John 6 as a Figure of Word and Sacrament

Looking back with the benefit of modern scholarship and without the warping influence of polemical debate, it is possible to gain a clear picture of why Zwingli’s reading is problematic. On closer examination, the text actually contains two different but complementary strands. In the first part of the passage (roughly verses 25-50), the ‘bread’ Jesus speaks of does indeed seem to be his teaching, and ‘eating’ entails believing (v. 29). Zwingli was correct about this. But in the second part (vv. 51-58), when Jesus intensifies the idea of feeding by explicit reference to his flesh and blood, it seems plausible that the church’s practice of Communion is in view—although these verses serve to clarify and deepen what has been come before. If this is correct, then there is no black-and-white choice to be made between the Word and faith on one side, and rote partaking of the sacrament on the other. There is no exegetical reason to see the sacrament as

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44 See Raymond E. Brown, *New Testament Essays* (New York: Image Books, 1965), 123-7, for an expanded version of this reading. An interesting hermeneutical question is whether the default assumptions of pre-critical exegetes prevented them from perceiving how the community of faith is already implied in the gospel narratives, although (synchronously speaking) it has not yet come into being.
inimically opposed to the Word; rather, what the sacrament does is to presuppose, follow, and ultimately confirm the Word, strengthening the disciples’ resolve, even as many fall away.

After the intense imagery of eating flesh and drinking blood, John’s narrative reverts to the irreplaceable and life-giving primacy of Jesus’ teaching. Peter says, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God” (6:68-9). According to Raymond Brown, what this tells us is that “Jesus is the food of man, not only as divine wisdom but also in the sacrament.”45 A similarly nuanced interpretation has been put forward by Dale Bruner, who draws attention to the way in which this particular passage dovetails with John’s larger interest in the redemptive work of incarnation:

The Bread that Jesus “will give” is not only heaven-sent (sent down into the In-carnate one), it is also earth-bound: “for the… world” (delivered up onto the Cross). It is not only from divinity; it is for humanity. Jesus is not only the great Revelation from God to human beings downward, he is the great Reconciler of humanity with God upward. He and his work in the world are not only deeply spiritual; they are eminently, very “fleshy.”46

Bruner refers readers back to the climactic statement of John’s prologue: “the Word become flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (1:14). The flesh of Jesus is, strange to say, the flesh of the divine Word. And since this is the case, Jesus’ statement in 6:63 (“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is of no avail”) cannot possibly be used to justify an absolute dichotomy between the spiritual and the material realms, or to downgrade the role of the body in the life of faith.

Within the sphere of Reformation-era commentary, John Calvin agrees with Zwingli that to eat and drink the flesh and blood of Jesus is to receive him spiritually, by faith. But alongside this spiritual eating and drinking, he maintains that we also have to reckon with Communion as an ecclesial praxis. As Lee Palmer Wandel explains, Calvin identifies participation in the supper as “an ongoing dynamic in a process of

45 Brown 127, 130. See 130-131 for Brown’s defense of the claim that Jn 6 prefigures the church’s later pattern of word and sacrament.

deepening faith and increasing capacity to discern God in the world.”47 Barth makes a similar point when he says that “we should learn from Jn 6:52-8 that to our eating and drinking unto eternal life there necessarily corresponds a perfectly definite corporal eating and drinking.” In his view, “[w]e can never understand these and similar passages too realistically.”48 The passage is applied “realistically” when the church recognizes the deep correspondence between spiritual and physical eating. The bread and the wine do not magically turn into something else, but neither are they “bare figures” that do nothing to link us to the divine reality they represent, namely, “the invisible food that we receive from the flesh and blood of Christ.”49

Because the sacramental meal has been given to the church by Christ himself and carries his promise, it really does serve to unite believers with Christ by faith. Calvin makes this point clear in his comments on Jn 6:51 (“the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh”).

By these words [Jesus] doubtless means that his body will to us be as bread for the spiritual life of the soul, for it was to be made subject to death for our salvation; moreover, that it is offered to us to eat, when it makes us sharers in him by faith. Once for all, therefore, he gave his body to be made bread when he yielded himself to be crucified for the redemption of the world; daily he gives it when by the word of the gospel he offers it for us to partake, inasmuch as it was crucified, when he seals such giving of himself by the sacred mystery of the Supper, and when he inwardly fulfills what he outwardly designates.50

We may summarize this improved line of interpretation by affirming that, yes, there is a stark division at play in Jn 6, but it is not between ‘flesh’ and ‘spirit’ in the sense of a polar division between physical and non-physical reality. The division at issue involves two kinds of eating and two modes of human response, with some disciples being drawn irresistibly to Jesus’ teaching and others provoked to grumble and turn

48 CD I/2, 231.
50 Calvin, Institutes, IV.xvii.5, 1364.
away. As David Ford observes, John’s gospel is “fascinated by the different ways people come to believe and also by the ways they resist belief or refuse to believe.” With respect to the theme of beauty, we might describe Jn 6 as a passage about learning to desire and even to savor the gifts that Jesus seeks to give, however unattractive those gifts may initially appear to us. In this connection, it is worth recalling Barth’s claim that the beauty of God in Jesus Christ evokes desire in all those who come to know him truly. If the reading proposed by Brown and Bruner is correct, what we learn from Jn 6 is that the believer’s desire to follow Jesus will be deepened and rewarded in two ways: through Jesus’ words and through sacramental participation in his body and blood. While the Word and Sacrament can of course be distinguished, they ought not to be divided. John’s text gives us reason to think that those who believe will come to taste and see the beauty of God in and through Communion.

4.3.3 Communion and the Biblical Pattern of Divine Sign-giving

I have argued that the weakness of Zwingli’s eucharistic theology stems largely from his polemical desire to use Jn 6 as a proof text. The remedy for such mis-reading is to read the scriptures in a more holistic fashion, locating texts such as Jn 6 within a wider frame of reference. A faithful theology of sacraments will seek to account for the breadth as well as the depth of the biblical witness. It will include passages where the meaning is unambiguously clear, as well as those where the meaning is contested. Moreover, it will attempt to attend to the bigger picture of scripture and set out a view of the whole in light of the various parts. We can see Barth engaging with scripture in these ways in the account of divine sign-giving he puts forward in CD I/2.

For Barth the sacraments, while subject to the logic of a general theory of signs, are ultimately grasped only when they are seen in relation to what God has done in Jesus Christ, and continues to do through the work of the Holy Spirit. For this reason, signs such as Communion are fundamentally to be received as gifts. In

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regards to the immediate context of CD I/2, Barth begins in the mode of Christology, offering a sustained exposition of the incarnation as the decisive salvific event, the objective ground of revelation (§13-15). He then (in §16-18) turns to consider the work of the Holy Spirit as the subjective aspect of revelation. Part of the Spirit’s work, Barth suggests, is to use certain, definite signs in order to justify and sanctify the people of God. Signs serve to link the twin aspects of revelation; through them, the Spirit brings the objective reality of what God has done in Christ home to humankind, making it real and applicable in the subjective sphere of personal history and experience.

What signs, exactly, does Barth have in mind? He notes how, in the OT, God had made use of a wide range of signs, principally the people of Israel; institutions such as the prophets, the priesthood, and the monarchy; the Mosaic Law; the tabernacle and temple; and the promised land itself. The coming of Christ marks a radical change, but not the abolition of sign-giving, as such. In the NT, the signs God elects to use are simplified and concentrated along two more-or-less ecclesial lines. On one hand there is the church’s task of witnessing to Christ (primarily through preaching, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper); on the other hand, the church’s very existence as a gathered people in response to the gospel proclamation. Such signs constitute the creaturely means by which the Word is apprehended by humankind. Barth describes them as the further speaking of God’s Word in the world and as “the moving of an instrument in the hand of God.”

Given Barth’s well-established concern for the interplay of revelation and Christian proclamation, it is of particular interest to see how he handles the question of why the traditional sacraments should be necessary. Why not preaching alone? The most cogent of Barth’s arguments has to do with the historical particularity of the Christian gospel, and therefore with the need to root out theological abstraction. A sacrament asserts—ironically, “with relatively greater eloquence” than a sermon—that the justification and

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52 CD I/2, 224-6.
53 CD I/2, 226-7.
54 CD I/2, 223.
55 CD I/2, 227.
sanctification of humankind rests not on an idea, but on a particular historical event. By their very tactile concreteness, Barth argues, baptism and Communion usher us into a reality that is qualitatively different than the abstract realm of philosophical doctrine or popular conviction. The difference is that, in Jesus Christ, God’s Word has become “both spiritual and corporeal, the act of a Creator who is above the antithesis between the corporeal and the spiritual.” As in his Gifford lectures, Barth is here resolutely opposed to the dualism so characteristic of modern thought.

If justification and sanctification are indeed “the meaning of all divine sign-giving”, sacraments help to ensure that these works of the Spirit in human lives cannot be rendered abstract, “treated as a problem and isolated, as we can always do with an idea or a doctrine or a conviction.” Preaching may declare that the Word became flesh, yet Communion underlines the truth of the incarnation in a way that preaching can never do. “The Word became flesh”—these are precisely the words that must be underlined, Barth insists, if we are to grasp the objective nature of the church in all its given-ness, not merely as a sociological phenomenon, a purely human community, but as God’s new creation, the body and bride of Christ.

Quite apart from the historical controversies that have surrounded Baptism and (especially) Communion, Barth also affirms that these signs are effective in God’s ongoing work of revelation. To attempt to supercede or supplement what the church has been given—the Word in holy scripture, the work of preaching, the two primary sacraments—would be both unwise and ungrateful. It would mean forgetting that the Holy Spirit is not only the Spirit of the Father, but of the Word. As Barth puts it, “the Holy Spirit

56 CD 1/2, 230.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid., citing Heinrich Vogel. Barth’s argument at this point closely parallels a point stressed by Calvin: “…no one should think that the life that we receive from him is received by mere knowledge. As it is not the seeing but the eating of bread that suffices to feed the body, so the soul must truly and deeply become a partaker of Christ that it may be quickened to spiritual life by his power” (Institutes, IV.xvii.5).
61 CD 1/2, 230.
certainly comes to us, not by an independent road which bypasses the Word and its testimonies, but by the Word and its testimonies.”\(^{62}\)

The second rudiment, “beauty as biblical,” reminds us of Barth’s resolve to allow the witness of scripture to shape his theological understanding of beauty: to know what beauty is, we need to attend carefully to God’s revelation. But just for this reason, a misreading of scripture may occlude the church’s vision of beauty—as has happened, I argue, in the case of Zwingli’s dualistic interpretation of Jn 6. A more faithful reading of this passage brings the theme of beauty back into focus. Barth is helpful here in two ways. Not only does he resist the implicit dualism of Zwingli’s position, but his a-polemical account of divine sign-giving enables us to read passages like Jn 6 in light of the broader biblical evidence. In effect, Barth’s theology of beauty helpfully draws our attention to the scriptural stress on the goodness of creation. Later we will explore some of the liturgical implications of this re-reading. In particular, we will ask how Communion can become a formative practice for learning to taste and see the beauty of God.

### 4.4 The Perils of Communion

The picture of Communion that emerges from our investigation of Barth on the topic is, on the whole, a positive one. Perhaps it would be an exaggeration to describe the *Church Dogmatics* as a “fundamentally liturgical dialogue,”\(^{63}\) but connections between theology and worship are by no means inconsequential to the form and content of Barth’s theology. He clearly rates Communion as a vital part of the church’s life, and adverts to it frequently on a wide variety of topics. A reader who only came into contact with the sources cited so far could be forgiven for thinking of Barth as holding a relatively “high” view of the sacrament.

There is another side to the story, however. The goal of examining Communion through the lens of Barth’s theology of beauty is complicated by the fact that Barth’s views on Communion are inconsistent and in

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\(^{62}\) *CD* 1/2, 236.

\(^{63}\) Matthew Myer Boulton, *God Against Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 10, passim.
some ways controversial. They are inconsistent because Barth eventually changed his mind about the nature and purpose of sacraments. Barth’s views are controversial in that the substance of his late critique of sacramentality stands at odds with almost the entire Christian tradition. In a further complication, Barth was forced by illness and old age to abandon work on the *Church Dogmatics* before completing a last, planned section on the Lord’s Supper. Thus, his writing on this theme has an uncommonly unfinished character.

Under the rudiment of “beauty as perilous,” we will seek to engage with some of the tensions and questions raised by Barth’s ambivalent thinking about Communion. I hope to show how Barth’s severe critique of “religion as unbelief” is the product of a concern for the severance of worship from discipleship. Similarly, the “neo-Zwinglian” character of Barth’s late thinking about sacraments stems in part from his observation that an overemphasis on religious ritual and ceremony can produce a church that is closed in upon itself, not extended out towards the world in mission or upwards to God in prayer and thanksgiving. Barth recognizes, in short, that self-righteousness and an insular mindset are perennial dangers for the church, and that these quietly destructive attitudes can be exacerbated by the pomp and circumstance of worship. It can be perilous to regard Communion as beautiful (beautiful either in purely aesthetic terms, or as a privileged site for perceiving the beauty of God).

This is not the end of the matter, however. Barth’s response in *CD II/1* to the potential danger of beauty was not to abandon the theme, but to ground beauty more securely in the being and action of God. Adopting this approach with Communion in mind leads us to this question: how might the church’s theology and practice be reformed in order to minimize or avoid these perils? De-emphasizing the significance of the sacraments is certainly one possible solution, as Barth would demonstrate late in his life, but this arguably severs form from content in a way that does damage to both. In churches that celebrate Communion in a deliberately ‘unbeautiful’ way—for example, by using stale, tasteless crackers in the place

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64 James J. Buckley alludes to the complicated nature of Barth’s thinking about sacraments when he suggests that Barth speaks from *within* and *about* and yet *against* the church. See “Community, Baptism and Lord’s Supper” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, 196f., for a defense of this claim.
of actual bread, or by packaging the ‘wine’ in tiny, disposable, plastic cups—no one is likely to be caught up unhelpfully in the pageantry of the presentation. To become attached to such religious rituals for their own sake simply makes no sense. But no one is likely to discover the joy of being in the presence of Christ through the meal, either. Faced with this conundrum, I wish to argue that the true peril of Communion should be located elsewhere—in theologies or forms of practice that treat eucharistic “remembrance” in essentially static terms, and so fail to facilitate the church’s vicarious participation in Christ.

4.4.1 Religion as Unbelief

In a well-known passage from the Church Dogmatics I/2, Barth posits a fundamental antithesis between revelation and religion. Revelation is the truth that God is God and therefore the Lord, to whom every creature owes both praise and thanksgiving. This is a truth that human beings ought to know, but need to be told, owing to their inveterate sinfulness. Religion, on the other hand, is vividly described as “the one great concern of godless man” and “the attempted replacement of the divine work by a human manufacture.” Indeed, it “is the contradiction of revelation, the concentrated expression of human unbelief.” This critique yields a number of important implications for our discussion. Insofar as worship stands at the heart of “religion” (so-defined), the practice of Communion threatens to divide humanity from God, rather than uniting the two; clearly, it must be seen as problematic and perhaps even perilous to the well-being of the church. How does Barth account for the continued celebration of Communion, given this state of affairs?

Broadly speaking, the Communion-related peril that concerns Barth is a kind of liturgical narcissism. This we may describe as the condition of being so enamored with the programme and paraphernalia of piety, that the church’s mission becomes muted and its calling forgotten. Such narcissism is not uniquely linked to worship, of course, but it would not be difficult to find historical examples of the eucharist being made into

65 CD I/2, 301.
66 CD I/2, 300; 302; 303.
an aesthetic spectacle, detached from the wider purposes of the Christian life.\textsuperscript{67} We can hear Barth’s dismay with all such distortions of worship in a postwar address:

\begin{quote}
[The gospel] does not say, ‘Go and celebrate services!’ ‘Go and edify yourselves with sermon!’ ‘Go and celebrate the Sacraments!’ ‘Go and present yourselves in a liturgy, which perhaps repeats the heavenly liturgy!’ ‘Go and devise a theology which may gloriously unfold like the \textit{Summa of St Thomas}!’\textsuperscript{68}
\end{quote}

The church may have occasion to do any or all of these things, but its most central and defining task is to witness to the good news of Jesus Christ and to make disciples. Whenever Communion becomes a step in a religious scheme that is assumed to have a kind of timeless, spiritual value, the church is in danger of forgetting its evangelical mandate. By contrast, Barth says, “[a] Church that recognizes its commission will neither desire nor be able to petrify in any of its functions, to be the Church for its own sake.”\textsuperscript{69} A petrified church gradually loses the ability to see what God is doing in the world, and misses its opportunity to join in God’s work.

There is a clear echo of this concern in one of the late volumes of the \textit{Church Dogmatics}, where Barth insists upon God’s freedom to work outside the walls of the church:

\begin{quote}
[The living Lord Jesus Christ who encounters and deals with man wholly from without is not bound to preaching and the sacraments in the work of His Holy Spirit seizing and altering man within, but may very well, \textit{extra muros ecclesiae} and independently of the ministry of His community in the world and humanity reconciled to God in Him, know and tread the very different ways of very different possibilities of most effective calling.\textsuperscript{70}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{67} A modern American equivalent might be the congregation for whom worship has become an immensely complex technical production, with dozens of staff and volunteers—musicians; audio, video, and lighting personnel; greeters and ushers; teachers and leaders for the coincident but separate service for youth—working to present a highly polished liturgy, calibrated to inspire and timed to the minute. Given such conditions, it is easy to see how Communion could appear as an outmoded and empty ritual, an interruption rather than the completion of the church’s worship. As a result it is often omitted from the service. The excessive self-regard remains, but the focus has shifted from the spectacle of the Eucharist to the more typically Protestant “sacraments” of music and preaching. For a thoughtful critique and discussion of the ways by which such technique-driven worship undermines the goal of forming worshippers into disciples of Jesus, see Kent Carlson and Mike Lueken, \textit{Renovation of the Church: What Happens When a Seeker Church Discovers Spiritual Formation} (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011).

\textsuperscript{68} Barth, \textit{Dogmatics in Outline} (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), 147.

\textsuperscript{69} Barth, ibid., 146.

\textsuperscript{70} \textit{CD IV/3.2}, 516.
It is not that Barth rejects the notion of ordained ministry, or believes that the church is peripheral to God’s work in the world. As we have seen, Barth adheres closely to the Reformed ideal of worship in the pattern of Word and Sacrament. He is cognizant, however, of the ways in which routine performance of churchly rituals may foster the vices of pride and sloth. The outcome (or perhaps the cause) of such vices is a limited, and limiting, view of the sovereign Lord.

Matthew Myer Boulton has recently argued that Barth’s critique of religion is not a one-time concern or the jeremiad of an increasingly cranky old theologian, but a recurring Leitmotiv of Barth’s theology.71 Let us look briefly at the contours of this critique and some of the contexts in which it appears.

In the second edition of his famous Romans commentary, Barth attacks religion as a subtle form of institutionalized idolatry, as in fact “the most radical dividing of men from God.”72 Significantly, this is not a polemic against religion gone astray, e.g., in the form of church corruption or scandal. Rather, it is religion by its very nature—religion as the highest and best that humanity can offer—that is liable to induce dreams of spiritual grandeur. “Religion is the supreme possibility of all human possibilities; and consequently grace… can never be a possibility above, or within, or by the side of, the possibility of religion. Grace is man’s divine possibility, and, as such, lies beyond all human possibility.”73 The acts of religion are comparable, in Barth’s view, to building the tower of Babel. Religion is, or implies, a kind of fall away from intimacy with God. And if worship lies at the heart of religion, then it must be not the cure, but the occasion for sin.74

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71 Boulton, 15-16.


73 Romans, 241-2.

74 According to Boulton, what Barth helps us to see is that “the proclamations and choreographies of religion, and above all of worship, decisively disclose the impotence of leitourgia. They demonstrate the emptiness of offerings delivered in order to stand aright, the catastrophe of sin and separation from divine friendship…. And for this very reason, religion is indispensable. Without it, the true circumstances of human life would go unrecognized” (53). Given this accounting, it becomes easier to see why Barth is so eager to speak of the divine initiative in worship. Without the vital action of the Word of God and the presence of the Spirit, worship is vain and lifeless.
Barth takes a similar tack in an address from 1922, when he traces his own outlook to the contrarian witness of Kierkegaard, Luther, Paul, and Jeremiah—a legacy of prophetic figures who found it necessary to oppose established religion. As Barth’s sees it, each of these figures recognized how patterns of piety can choke out the demands of the gospel; each spent his life wrestling with the dilemma posed by the Word of God. This dilemma is that God’s Word must be proclaimed, and yet the fulfilling of this task is impossible, humanly speaking, for “only God himself can speak of God. The task of the minister is the word of God. This spells the certain defeat of the ministry. It is the frustration of every ministry and every minister.” The solution to the dilemma is not the perfection of religion, but confession of sin. Faithful ministry requires a cultivated and constant awareness of the church’s total dependence upon the God of grace.

Considered in its entirety, Barth’s address stands as a brusque warning against Christian presumption, however well-intentioned. While he does not address Communion specifically in this talk, Barth’s argument carries obvious implications for sacramental theology. A minister cannot simply presume that he is able to speak God’s message, but comes to his task with fear and trembling. If this is true—and what is more basic to Protestant worship than the sermon?—then the minister’s suitability to administer the sacraments must be called into question. It would be perilous to practice Communion in the tacit belief that the church has in this particular ritual the means to conjure Christ’s presence, effectively bringing God down to our level. To do so would radically distort the nature of the grace that Christ offers there.

Some fifteen years later, Barth carried this line of argument farther in the second of two Gifford lectures on the sacraments, where he disparages the specifically religious value of Communion (i.e., its excellence as a ritual re-enactment of Christ’s sacrifice). The Catholic mass, he admits, is a “religious masterpiece,” a service perfectly tailored to a human conception of spiritual need. It has been “based on profound thought

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75 As Barth notes, Luther’s protest was not against impiety, but precisely against the piety of his age. See “The Task of the Ministry” in The Word of God and the Word of Man (Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, 1978), 196.

76 Barth, “The Task of the Ministry,” 214.
and genius and formed and hallowed by the co-operation of centuries….”  

But what does such a “masterpiece” have to do with the demands of the gospel? “Religion with its masterpieces is one thing, Christian faith with its obedience another.”

The question we have to answer is not how the [worship service] may best correspond to our conceptions of solemnity, beauty, the drama, education, psychology, mystery, etc., or how these points of view are to determine it. […] On the contrary, the question we have to answer is how it might best correspond to… the gracious will of Jesus Christ present and active in the midst of the Church. Hence we are asked about our obedience, not about our needs and possibilities.

Barth distinguishes true obedience from the web of customary ways by which worship is conceptualized and carried out in the church. What matters is not the faithful maintenance of a given form, but obedience to the clear command of God.

Just as Barth’s earlier critique of religion was not directed against a specific form (e.g., Roman Catholicism), or a particular problem case (the ‘prosperity gospel’), so here Barth’s critique is more than a piece of anti-Catholic polemic. A traditional Anglican service of Evensong with its elegant weaving of psalms and canticles; a Saddleback Church “seeker service” with its market-driven aim to be relevant; and even a classic Presbyterian service of Word and Sacrament, are alike indicted insofar as their worshippers trust in a system, an ethos, a rubric or style or philosophy of ministry, rather than devoting themselves anew to the hearing of the Word of God.

The reader might well ask whether liturgical form really interferes with obedience in the way that Barth seems to suggest, but in any case, his concern is for congregations who, through worship, may be unwittingly susceptible to spiritual pride and presumption—forces that are the more vicious for appearing in the guise of good intentions. Perhaps we can summarize Barth’s critique of religion as a persistent reminder that the church perennially faces the temptation to focus on the sacrament in ways that are

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77 Gifford, 207.
78 Gifford, 206
79 Gifford, 207. Given that Barth is in this context critiquing the Roman mass, it seems fair to apply what he says about the worship service more narrowly to the practice of Communion.
When it closes in upon itself, gazing too longingly at its own reflection, the church loses sight of the world to which it is called, and of which it is until the eschaton inextricably a part. The integral tie between Communion and mission unravels, and the church loses the thread of its calling. Conversely, Barth’s hope for the church is to maintain a lively sense of God’s initiative and action—to live by faith, we might say, constantly relying upon God, rather than assuming that human efforts are the operative factor in faith.

4.4.2 Barth’s Late, “Neo-Zwinglian” Critique

If we have no definitive statement of Barth’s mature thought on Communion, it is possible to make an educated guess. He invited his readers to deduce from the final fragment on baptism (CD IV/4) how the section on Communion would have been worked out. Barth proposes to treat the Lord’s Supper within the ethics that would correspond to his doctrine of reconciliation. He describes such an ethics as “the free and active answer of man to the divine work and word of grace.” As he envisioned it, the Christian life would be laid out as a progression, “beginning with recollection of the divine gift that demands this answer and makes it possible, and continuing with a description of the answer thus posed for man as a task.” In concrete terms, this would mean beginning with baptism, then moving on to consider the practices of prayer and the Lord’s Supper. All three topics would appear “under the guiding concept of calling upon

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80 A similar argument is voiced by Trevor Hart, “Calvin and Barth on the Lord’s Supper” in Calvin, Barth, and Reformed Theology, ed. Neil B. MacDonald and Carl Trueman (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster Theological Monographs, 2008), 52. See CD IV/4, 71 for the baptism-related version of this concern.

81 For a more detailed sense of what this entails, the summary offered by Paul Molnar, op. cit., 136-146, and the introduction to John Yocum, Ecclesial Mediation in Karl Barth (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2004) are both helpful.

82 CD IV/4, ix.

83 Ibid.
God.” Barth promises to expound the Supper as “the thanksgiving which responds to the presence of Jesus Christ in His self-sacrifice and which looks forward to His future.”

Barth’s treatment of Communion would likely have been grounded in fresh attempts to interpret the relevant biblical passages. He surely would have taken account of classic texts such as the Last Supper (Mt 26 and parallels) and Paul’s words of institution (1 Cor 1), but may also have considered passages less prominent in the tradition, such as Jesus’ feeding miracles (e.g. Mk 6:30f.) or Luke’s summary of how believers in the early church devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers (Ac 2:42). Just as his late treatment of baptism pays close attention to the scriptures’ use of “focal images” such as new clothes, a new heart, and the new birth, so Barth presumably would have weighed and discussed the scriptural significance of the many biblical images related to Communion.

Israel’s observance of Passover, for instance, with its rich array of symbols and rituals, could usefully be brought into constellation with the church’s practice of Communion. As throughout the Church Dogmatics, Barth’s aim in a finished CD IV/4 would presumably have been to develop a comprehensive view of the matter at hand in such a way as to draw coherence and strength from the witness of scripture.

It also seems likely that Barth would have addressed the fraught relationship between what the Bible has to say about Communion and what the church through the centuries has taught and sought to practice. Yet Barth did not live to do this. And this is an interpretive problem to the extent that Barth may have assumed

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84 Ibid.
85 Barth identifies his son Markus’s book on baptism as instrumental in changing his mind on the sacraments, and it is not difficult to imagine him following a similar procedure for Communion. Markus Barth, Rediscovering the Lord’s Supper. Communion with Israel, with Christ, and among the Guests (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988).
86 CD IV/4, 6-8.
that sacraments could be treated generically—as if Communion, being the same sort of thing as baptism, could have the same sorts of things said about it.\textsuperscript{88}

As it stands, the critical tone in Barth’s thinking about sacraments becomes very strident in this final, unfinished volume of the \textit{Church Dogmatics}. “The Church,” Barth says bluntly, “is neither author, dispenser, nor mediator of grace and its revelation. It is the subject neither of the work of salvation nor the Word of salvation. It cannot act as such.”\textsuperscript{89} The fragment of \textit{CD IV/4} that Barth did complete centers upon Baptism, not Communion, but the tenor of the argument suggests that Barth would no longer have described Communion as a creaturely form used by God to feed and sustain the church.\textsuperscript{90} Indeed, this point emerges with startling clarity in \textit{The Christian Life}, a set of unedited lectures that were slated to become the ethics of IV/4:

Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are not events, institutions, mediations or revelations of salvation. They are not representations and actualizations, emanations, repetitions, or extensions, nor indeed guarantees and seals of the work and word of God; not are they instruments, vehicles, channels, or means of God’s reconciling grace. They are not what they have been called since the second century, namely, mysteries or sacraments.\textsuperscript{91}

Barth is not saying that God is not active in the church or in the world – that would indeed be a reversal of all his prior theology! He is, however, forging a much sharper distinction between God’s action and human action than what we see in his earlier theology. In effect, Barth is calling for a complete demystification of the sacraments and placing the church much nearer to the margins of God’s economy. Even granting a

\textsuperscript{88} The lack of exegetical foundation is arguably a major weakness of the (anticipated) eucharistic theology of \textit{CD IV/4} (on this point see Trevor Hart, “Calvin and Barth on the Lord’s Supper,” 54, and the instructive discussion he cites in Alasdair Heron, \textit{Table and Tradition} (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), 55-56. Of course, had Barth lived to work through the relevant biblical passages with the same level of care and attention that characterize the exegesis threaded through the \textit{Church Dogmatics} as a whole, his argument might well have been different.

\textsuperscript{89} \textit{CD IV/4}, 32. This being the case, baptism is not to be regarded as “a divine work or word of grace which purifies man and renews him” (\textit{CD IV/4}, 128; cf. 102). Barth goes on to argue that true reform in the area of sacraments will necessarily obviate the practice of infant baptism (cf. 153-194).

\textsuperscript{90} In the words of Trevor Hart, “the Lord’s Supper was [by the time of IV/4] no longer to be identified as a place where God appropriates creaturely realities to serve extraordinarily as bearers of divine meaning, lifting us up to know him more fully through our participation in the signifying relation.” op. cit., 48.

\textsuperscript{91} Karl Barth, \textit{The Christian Life} (London: T&T Clark, 1981), 46, cited by Hart, op. cit., 51-2. The volume by Barth will hereafter be cited as ‘\textit{TCL}’
degree of continuity between CD IV/4 and Barth’s earlier criticisms of religion, this seems like a more extreme position. What prompted Barth to take this step?

One line of explanation has looked for clues from the broader cultural, political, and ecclesial context in which Barth was writing. Because no theology develops in a historical vacuum, what he has to say about Communion has to be measured in light of his provisional and pastoral assessment of the situation in which he found himself called to teach, write, and serve.92 From this vantage point, Barth’s change of mind on the sacraments may well be a function of his shifting assessment of the church’s calling. During the years leading up to WWII, when it was plainly urgent for a beleaguered evangelical church to recover its true identity in the face of Nazi pressure to capitulate, it made sense that a view of Communion grounded deeply in the Reformed tradition would be part of that recovery.93 The sacramental theology of the Gifford lectures hews closely to the Scots’ Confession, and so reflects a classically Calvinist understanding of the Supper. The later Barth, by contrast, writes to an overconfident, establishment church – a “church in

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92 On this point, see James J. Buckley, “Christian Community, Baptism, and Lord’s Supper” in The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 195-211. Buckley observes, for example, that Barth offered in the course of his career at least two different narratives aiming to make sense of the church’s task in society and culture. The first, a history of Protestant theology written during the 1930’s, highlights the way in which the church was gradually co-opted over the course of the eighteenth century, “the Age of Absolutism,” and made to serve one or another of the idolatrous ideologies of modernity. Most notably, the rival ideologies of the totalitarian state and the autonomous, private individual (on this, see Barth’s Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century, new edition, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002). Much later, Barth put forth an account that “was more focused on the church’s dispersal throughout democratic nations than its captivity by totalitarianisms of the right or left” (197). Barth found it striking and indeed providential that the disintegration of Christendom should coincide with both the church’s turn to the world (e.g. in the great revival of mission in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), and its recovery of interest in the doctrine and dynamic role of the Holy Spirit (198). This point is elaborated in the “fine print” section at CD IV/3.1, 11-38.

93 The main concern of the Barmen Declaration (1934) is to affirm in a clear and vociferous way the unique Lordship of Christ, over against the idolatrous pretensions of the State in the form of the German Christian movement. “Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death” (8.11). That said, the confession takes Communion to be constitutive of the Church: “The Christian Church is the congregation of the brethren in which Jesus Christ acts presently as the Lord in Word and Sacrament through the Holy Spirit” (8.17). “The Theological Declaration of Barmen” in The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Part I - Book of Confessions (Louisville, Kentucky: The Office of the General Assembly, 1999).
excess” – that needed, in his view, to be pruned of its religious hubris and reminded even more forcibly of its missional vocation.94

Other scholars have stressed the theological rationale behind Barth’s change of mind. He evidently came to see the sacraments as a theologically unworkable and unfixable way of talking about the interplay of divine and human action. As Trevor Hart puts it, an overemphasis on the rites “both detaches the signs from their proper relation to what God has done for us in Christ and neglects the need for a wider and radical discipleship as the form of the outworking of… redemption.”95 Along the same lines, John Webster hypothesizes that Barth came to believe that most of the tradition had, in fact, gotten the wrong answer to the question of “how the objectivity of Jesus Christ and his salvation becomes subjectively real to the Christian believer.”96 If Christ’s work is truly perfect, then it needs no additional human mediation; our

94 Barth describes the “church in excess” as “the church exceeding the limit within which alone it can be the church of Jesus Christ…. The threat is that it will serve its own needs instead of him, that it will become its own means of life and glory. Insofar as the church here is primarily interested in itself, and in its Lord only for its own sake, one might call it, in relationship to him, the introverted church. In whose honor is so much pomp put forth, for whom is there such energetic and skillful propaganda?” (TCL, 136). Such “excess” is by no means restricted to Roman Catholicism, in Barth’s view; indeed, his critique makes for an uncanny and uncomfortable indictment of much in American Protestantism.

95 Trevor Hart, op. cit., 52. Barth saw clearly that, a) if the Lord’s Supper is construed as an occasion where God is active in applying Christ’s once-for-all benefits to us; and b) if the meaning of the event lies primarily in the union with Christ that is thereby accomplished; then c) “an ex opere operato view of the rite will no doubt always be lurking in the shadows…” (Hart, 52). Traditional sacramental thinking, in other words, can amount to a kind of in-house idolatry, justified by the very best of intentions. T.F. Torrance expands on this point, noting how the meaning of Communion has at various points in church history been flattened by ecclesiocentric or unduly subjective thinking. In the former case, the meal is regarded as a necessary repetition of Christ’s sacrifice; in the latter, its meaning is held to depend on the response of the participants (Theology in Reconciliation, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 108). Neither view reflects the nuanced richness of the biblical and patristic teaching. In the end, though, Torrance reaches a radically different conclusion than Barth, based chiefly on the book of Hebrews and the Fathers’ attendant claim that Jesus’ human nature provides the basis for humanity’s participation in the life of God. “In so far as the Eucharist is the act of the Church in his name and is also a human rite, it must be understood as act of prayer, thanksgiving and worship, i.e., as essentially eucharistic in nature, but as act in which through the Spirit we are given to share in the vicarious life, faith, prayer, worship, thanksgiving and self-offering of Jesus Christ to the Father, for in the final resort it is Jesus Christ himself who is our true worship” (109). The view of Communion I develop below, under the notion of “crucial beauty,” is similarly inclined to describe Communion as a divinely-given means to closer union with Christ.

96 Webster, Barth’s Ethics, 126. Typically, for Roman Catholics this is understood to happen through the church and her sacramental ministry; for Protestants, it comes about most often through some form of privileged religious experience. Barth himself had Bultmann’s existentialism in mind (a contemporary, North American example might be the legitimizing role played by a “born again” conversion experience in evangelical communities, or “speaking in tongues” in some charismatic or Pentecostal circles). Such institutional and individual ‘solutions’ no longer seemed adequate to Barth by the writing of IV/4.
subjective appropriation of the cross is already, so to speak, encompassed within the objective event. And if this is the case, then the ritual ‘remembrance’ that takes place in Communion must be categorically different than the historical event it commemorates.  

4.4.3 Some Practical Implications of Barth's Neo-Zwinglian Turn

For all the differences that might be enumerated between sixteenth century, Reformation-era Zurich and twentieth-century, post-war Basel, there exists a pronounced affinity between the late non-sacramental theology of Barth and that of Zwingli. What historian Brian Gerrish says of Zwingli could well apply to Barth’s late view: “there is no hint that an actual bodily presence of Christ, or indeed anything else, might be mediated through the signs. Any such thought is excluded in principle: Signs are indicative and declarative, not instrumental.” Indeed, Barth describes the position he has sketched out in *CD IV/4* as “neo-Zwinglian.” Both theologians regard the Lord’s Supper as an *attestation* of the grace that God has given in Jesus Christ, and not as a means of that grace. Both insist on discipleship as the basic purpose and precondition of the meal. And both render Communion in starkly horizontal terms: the meal is not to be understood as Christ’s gift to the church, so much as a pledge or form of testimony that Christians give to one another. The accent falls on the free response of human beings, such that partaking of Communion becomes a way of informing the gathered community of one’s standing in that faith.

The appeal of this approach is twofold: first, it promises to reinforce the ties between worship and ethics. What believers do by taking part in the meal is understood to be an expression of their sincere desire to follow the way of life that Jesus has made possible. By partaking of the Lord’s Supper, Zwingli says, “we

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97 John Webster helpfully paraphrases Barth’s position: “As the risen one, Jesus Christ lives as Word, lives in an ongoing activity of self-communication, a self communication whose dynamism requires no intermediate agencies for its actualization” (*Barth’s Ethics of Reconciliation*, 128; cf. *CD IV/1*, 296). Adam’s Neder’s concise discussion of this material also remains pertinent: *Participation in Christ* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 81-84.


99 *CD IV/4*, 127.
give proof that we trust in the death of Christ, glad and thankful to be in that company which gives thanks to the Lord for the blessing of redemption which he freely gave by dying for us.” And second, it would seem to relieve the church of its tendency towards pride and sloth. A church that celebrates Communion along neo-Zwinglian lines is not likely to be tempted to think that its performance of this particular ritual is somehow vital for salvation. Where Communion is not perceived as a means of participating in the life of God, the peril of inordinate desire—loving the beauty of this way of worshipping as an end in itself—would seem not to be a problem.

Other implications of this viewpoint are deeply troubling, however. Barth’s theology of beauty—and in particular, his close linking of beauty with revelation—should prompt us to ask whether hard and fast distinctions between flesh and spirit, physical and spiritual, external and internal, sign and signified, or form and content, are theologically defensible. Thomas Torrance puts this objection with characteristic precision:

In the ordinance of Christ, through His command and promise, the outward sign and the inward reality belong together as form and content of the sacramental Communion; although the form is not the content, and the participation in the outward sign as such is not the Communion, nevertheless it is the form in which the content is communicated to us, so that apart from the specific form commanded and to which the promise has been attached we cannot conceive or receive the reality. Wherever the outward sign or form is neglected or repudiated the inner content inevitably goes with it.

Is this the situation that prevails in many Protestant churches today? Has a justified concern to avoid an empty ritual led to neglect of the “form” of the meal, and thus to a loss of “content”? Torrance’s analysis suggests that an impoverished liturgy and a lack of care regarding the aesthetics of the meal presents a serious obstacle to faith.

In the present North American context, the need arguably is for a theology that attends to both the form and the content of Communion. Thus, to keep in step with Barth’s rudimentary theology of beauty is to go against the grain of his late critique, perhaps by reviving Barth’s earlier argument that religion, though flawed and often false, can become true by the grace of God—that is, by the name and intervening power

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100 Commentary, 184; cf. 200.

of Jesus.\textsuperscript{102} At any rate, it would seem wiser to locate the peril of Communion in relation to theology and practice that fails to bring about the believer’s vicarious participation in Christ. From the standpoint of Barth’s rudiments, the more excellent way seeks to reform eucharistic practice in ways that highlight the inherent beauty of the meal—beauty that reveals to the church the person of Christ, reminds the church of the truth of scripture, admonishes the church to participate in faith, and invites the church to see the celebration of the meal in conjunction with Christ’s death, resurrection, and ascension. Carrying out such a reform is admittedly a daunting prospect, but Charles Wesley gives us an indication of how the singing that accompanies the meal might help to facilitate this vital work:

\begin{verbatim}
See where our great High-Priest
Before the LORD appears,
And on his loving Breast
The Tribes of Israel bears,
Never without his People seen,
The Head of all believing Men!

With Him the Corner Stone
The living Stones conjoin,
CHRIST and his CHURCH are One,
One Body and one Vine,
For us he uses all his Powers,
And all He has, or is, is Ours.

The Motions of our Head
The Members all pursue,
By his good spirit led
To act, and suffer too
Whate’er He did on Earth sustain,
’Till glorious all like Him we reign.\textsuperscript{103}
\end{verbatim}

There is much to admire here. Contextually, the use of a hymn to comment upon the meaning of the sacrament suggests, first of all, that participation in the meal is not to be construed as a religious duty devoid of pleasure or purpose, but as an exuberant act of corporate worship. Lyrically, Wesley’s words give evidence of a richly biblical imagination; who else has brought the “holy attire” of Leviticus and Psalm 96 into constellation with the theology of Hebrews and Ephesians, in the context of the Lord’s Supper? And in a way that Barth would appreciate, Wesley highlights Christ’s gracious initiative (“For us he uses all his

\textsuperscript{102} CD I/2, 325f.

\textsuperscript{103} John and Charles Wesley, \textit{Hymns on the Lord’s Supper} (Bristol: Felix Farley, 1745), no. CXXIX.
Powers…”), while also stressing the obedience that faith requires (“By his good spirit led / To act and suffer too…”), until Christ’s glorious reign is achieved in its fullness. One need not insist that this particular hymn be revived, in order to imagine how the creative use of such elements in the worship service could effectively re-frame Communion as a joyous meeting between Jesus and his followers. As Wesley says (in all-caps no less), “CHRIST and his CHURCH are One.”

To conclude this section, let us recall that Barth’s third rudiment is essentially a recommendation that beauty be treated with caution. With respect to the practice of Communion, this means wrestling seriously with Barth’s description of “religion as unbelief,” as well as acknowledging the potential danger of churches becoming overly enamored with the ceremony that attaches itself to the meal. More broadly, Barth is alert to the possibility that churches fixated upon their own ministry and maintenance will neglect their calling to be witnesses to God’s work in the world. In his late theology (i.e., CD IV/4), Barth coped with these hazards by downgrading the importance of the sacraments. I have argued, to the contrary, that the practice of Communion should be reformed in ways that clarify and, if possible, deepen the inter-relationship of form and content. The aim of such reform is to facilitate the church’s participation in Christ, by means of a “eucharistic aesthetics” that is no less spiritual or theological for attending to the material aspects of the church’s practice.104

4.5 **Crucial Beauty and the Practice of Communion**

The notion of “crucial beauty,” the beauty of the cross, is not (at least in the first instance) an aesthetic claim. This term refers either a) to the way in which Jesus’ death fittingly evokes a sense of profound wonder and gratitude, as for example in the hymn, “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross”; or b) to the fitting quality of God’s economy of salvation, which reaches its dramatic _crux_ in the event of Jesus’ saving death. These are, respectively, the subjective and objective senses of the term “crucial beauty.”

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The question to be probed in this final section is: what implications does such a notion of “crucial beauty” have for the practice of Communion? How, in other words, does participation in the meal enable, encourage, or enrich the church’s engagement with Jesus’ death?

In taking up this question, I am mindful of the need to navigate a number of contextual issues. First and foremost, there is the issue of Barth’s late change of mind. As we have seen, the general direction taken by Barth in the unfinished CD IV/4 was to follow Zwingli by effectively severing the sacramental connection between divine and human action. To this way of thinking, the meal is to be regarded as a human response to a grace already given. Of itself, Communion reveals and gives nothing of Christ in the present moment; rather, it attests to the faith of those who take part. “Participation” is effectively reduced to a demonstration that one belongs to the community of those who have been saved by Christ’s atoning death.

While this way of framing things certainly shakes the church free from liturgical narcissism, such dualistic clarity comes at a high cost. How does Communion not become just another brick in the tower-building enterprise of “religion”? Moreover, how can Communion convey something of the delight of God’s own being and action, unless the form and content of the meal are very tightly conjoined, and not separated, as in Zwingli and the later Barth?

According to Barth’s fourth rudiment, the beauty of God is inseparable from the cross and essential for both the practice and the content of theology. We cannot perceive God rightly without keeping Jesus’ death continually before our eyes—as Barth himself sought to do by placing a copy of Grünewald’s famous Isenheim altarpiece prominently over his writing desk. Among its other uses, then, the rudiment is intended to function as a hedge against aestheticism (a love for beauty without regard for its ethical implications) and aestheticization (beauty used as a mask for the exercise of corrupt power).

The argument I wish to make has two main strands. First, I claim that Barth’s rudiment invites the church to re-envision participation in the meal as a distinctly cruciform practice; that is, as a way of worshipping that trains the church to live more faithfully according to “the way of the cross.” When this takes place—as when the practice of receiving the body and blood of Jesus in Communion is closely linked to other core
practices of the Christian faith, such as self-offering and prayer—aestheticism and aestheticization will be avoided and, indeed, exposed as distortions of the gospel.

The second point is this: as far as Communion is concerned, the way of the cross is not to be construed as a morbid, merely historical interest in Jesus’ death. Without neglecting the past, the way of the cross looks to what God calls the church to be and to do in the present and the future. It adopts, in the words of James Torrance, “a prospective vision.” That is, its aim is to become newly aware of the ways in which Jesus’ singular death opens the path to life through our own vicarious dying and rising with him (Baptism and Communion are, in this sense, inextricably linked). To “taste and see” the beauty of God in Communion is thus to discover that the meal serves to deepen our union with Christ, giving us a genuine foretaste of life in the kingdom of God.

4.5.1 Beauty with Truth and Goodness: the Role of the Spiritual Disciplines

Let us begin by reviewing briefly one of Barth’s most basic claims: to speak of beauty is to describe the way in which God, being glorious, reaches out to illuminate our darkened understandings, such that we may attain, and delight in attaining, a truer perception of God. Truth, and not only beauty, is involved. The same could be said for goodness. Barth’s emphasis on joy in CD II/1 implies that those who perceive God’s beauty will be transformed by that perception; one of the properties or effects of God’s glory, Barth insists, is to bring about human glorification. This happens especially as God’s being is revealed to us in Jesus Christ, who is One and yet another, divine and yet also human, in such a way that we recognize him as “not only the source of all truth and all goodness, but also the source of all beauty.”


106 Barth will elaborate this dimension of revelation more fully in relation to Jesus’ prophetic office (§69, “The Glory of the Mediator”). See CD IV/3.1, 38 – 164.

107 CD II/1, 664.
Why emphasize the inter-connectedness of divine beauty, truth and goodness? The answer is that aestheticism in its religious form is beauty of liturgy without beauty of holiness. It is, in essence, the empty ceremony, an un lamented absence of truth and goodness. It would be possible to design a Communion service featuring well-crafted words, artful gestures, and inspiring music, not to mention bread and wine of excellent quality. But what spiritual value would such a service have, if sundered from any expectation that taking part were linked in some way to a life of joyful obedience to Christ? Aestheticization, meanwhile, could be defined in this context as beauty masking the truth in the interests of corrupt power. It would be—it has been—possible to use the laity’s desire to take part in Communion as a way of increasing clerical prestige. Something like this happens whenever the eucharistic elements are presented as quasi-magical objects, rather than as an occasion for God to be present and active amongst God’s people. However, we must also recognize that the deeper issue is not aesthetics, per se. Were the church to strip all beauty from the liturgy, or to deny that there is in Communion a form of divine power, it would not thereby have moved any closer to the desired telos of the meal, which is presumably to bring about that which the meal symbolizes—namely, Communion with God.

How does the cross, a symbol of torture and shame, help us to perceive God’s beauty? Barth’s answer is that God is nowhere more glorious than in the “inconceivable humiliation” of becoming human, and the “no less inconceivable exaltation” of humanity being raised to life with God. As the nadir of God’s condescension, the cross paradoxically displays God’s majesty to the fullest degree. Quite apart from its objective significance (that of reconciling the world to God), the cross thus calls for a dramatic, subjective reversal. Precisely because it is so radically at odds with the world’s systems of valuation, the cross compels us to re-evaluate what it is that we are to love, and how it is that we are to live. It alters our understanding of God’s ways with the world, and points the way to new patterns of thought and action. In Pauline terms, whatever gains I once had—honors, achievements, ambitions, possessions—must now be counted as loss for the sake of knowing Christ.

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108 CD II/1, 663.
As I attempted to show in chapter two, Barth creatively reinterprets this ‘Lutheran’ line of thinking in his theology of beauty by transposing his own *theologia gloriae* into a *theologia crucis*. He contends that “God’s beauty embraces death as well as life, fear as well as joy, what we might call the ugly as well as what we might call the beautiful. It reveals itself and wills to be known on the road from the one to the other….″109 Such is the benevolent force of God’s beauty, in other words, that every pre-conceived notion of beauty must be tried, tested and ultimately converted in the light of God’s self-revelation at the cross.

This leads us back to the main question we are seeking to answer: how might the practice of Communion be celebrated in a distinctly “cruciform” way? My proposal is that participation in Communion ought to be linked to the practice of the classic spiritual disciplines. The reasoning behind this has an exegetical, a liturgical, and a theological basis.

First, from a biblical vantage point, eucharistic eating and drinking is already and inseparably related to the disciplines of the Christian life. We can see this demonstrated in a figural way in Luke’s description of the resurrection meal that follows the journey of two disciples to the village of Emmaus (Lk 24:13 – 35). In this text, the disciples’ doubt and disappointment gradually turn to joy through their uncanny experience of companionship with the risen Christ. This companionship takes the basic form of Word and Sacrament: only after *telling the story* of Jesus’ death and *studying the scriptures* on the road, do they come to the table at which their mysterious guest assumes the role of host. Note also that the disciples’ epiphany at the table (“their eyes were opened and they recognized him”, v. 31) is preceded by a generous gesture of *hospitality* (welcoming the stranger as night approaches), and succeeded by an act of exuberant *witness* (the disciples’ irrepressible desire to spread the good news of Jesus’ resurrection). We might summarize the ecclesial lesson of the text as follows: following the resurrection, Jesus is not absent from the lives of his followers, for he meets them wherever they happen to be, in whatever state they happen to be in. The story suggests that the church’s recognition of Jesus’ presence happens most dramatically and definitively at Communion, and yet the intelligibility of Jesus’ action at the table depends, to some degree, upon a constellation of core

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109 *CD* II/1, 665.
practices that embody the way of life he wills for his followers. Had Cleopas and the other disciple not consented to be taught on the road, had they not insisted upon welcoming the stranger, and had they not afterwards rushed out into the night to announce the good news, the meeting with Jesus at the meal either would not have happened, or would have been incomplete. There is an essentially centrifugal movement to this text: the companionship with Jesus that culminates in Communion leads to mission.

Alternately, we might recall how, for Paul, the goal of knowing Christ by sharing in his sufferings (Phil 3:10) is not something other than his personal and pastoral relationship with the Philippian church; it is the substance of that relationship, worked out in terms of disciplines such as self-offering and intercessory prayer. “Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me” (2:17-18). Given Paul’s imprisonment in Rome, there can be no shared celebration of the Lord’s Supper, obviously, but his letter brims over with references to the communion he and the Philippians continue to enjoy in Christ, through the Spirit (e.g., 1:29-30; 2:1; 3:14-15; 4:3; 4:9; 4:15; 4:19). As Paul sees things, it is the simple and remarkable fact of their communion that requires the church to pursue new habits of perception and action: “if there is… any participation in the Spirit… complete my joy…” (2:1). The Philippians are now to cultivate the mind of Christ (2:5), relinquishing their affection for earthly things, for as Paul says, “many… walk as enemies of the cross of Christ” (3:18). These disciplines—perhaps especially the practices of rejoicing in every circumstance and making every request known to God—will transform their former ways of thinking and enable them to live with a joyful, patient trust in the “peace of God, which passes all understanding” (4:7). Paul challenges the church to see that there simply cannot be communion with God apart from the cross: “it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake” (1:29). In my view, we may extend the logic of this claim to participation in the meal.

Second, in terms of a liturgical rationale, one of the most obvious but least commented upon aspects of Communion is that it happens, typically, in the context of the Sunday worship service. From this we may infer that the meal is not to be understood as an isolated action, but one that draws its meaning and
coherence from the larger framework of the service. This is perhaps most clearly seen in traditions whose worship still reflects the basic *ordo* of the patristic church: gathering as the people of God; hearing the Word of God; responding to God via Communion; and then being sent forth in God’s name. On closer inspection we find that every stage of this “fourfold action” is filled out by a series of sub-actions: prayer, praise, lament, confession, and so forth. If habitually practiced over time as part of a stable order of worship, such actions become the congregation’s default roster of spiritual disciplines. As with scripture (though in a different way), what it means to participate in Communion is already to a great degree determined by its proximity and relation to them. So long as these disciplines are practiced regularly with the aim of forming disciples to follow in the way of the cross, Communion, too, will tend towards to that end. So long as Communion is practiced with the aim of displaying God’s crucial beauty, it may be recognized and welcomed as an essential means of spiritual formation. Under such conditions, we may reasonably hope and expect that the *beauty* made evident in the meal to be matched by corresponding expressions of *goodness* and *truth*.

Third, on a theological level, it will be helpful to ask how participation in the church’s meal is distinct from, but related to, the other forms or layers of communion that we find in and with God. In an important passage from the doctrine of reconciliation, Barth notes how, “in the Lord’s Supper we have the repeated and conscious unification of [God’s] people, manifested in the sign of common eating and drinking, in new seeking and reception of the free grace which it constantly needs and is constantly given in its work of witness.” To partake on a regular basis is to be given the grace that is needed if the church is to be unified and faithful to its calling.

As in some of the earlier texts from the *Church Dogmatics* we have surveyed, Communion seems almost incidental to Barth’s larger discussion, which has to do with the nature of the church’s ministry. Yet Barth

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110 *CD* IV/3.2, 901. Barth brings out the formative character of the meal by making three ideas—repetition, conscious intention, and visibility through the common signs of eating and drinking—all adjectivally related to the ‘becoming one’ that happens in the meal (“…das je und je wiederholende bewusste und im Zeichen des gemeinsamen Essens und Trinkens sichtbare Einswerden.…” *KD* IV/3, 1033).
then proceeds in a short space to sketch out a fourfold relation between sacramental activity and spiritual participation:

In baptism and the Lord’s Supper an invisible action of God—the Communion (die Gemeinschaft) of the Father and the Son in the Holy Ghost, the Communion of God and man in Jesus Christ, the Communion of Jesus Christ the Head with His body and its members, and finally the Communion of God with the world created by Him and reconciled to Him—is the prototype, the meaning and the power of the visible and significatory action of the community and therefore of the unification of men therein attested. But on this basis and as likenesses of this original, baptism and the Lord’s Supper are not empty signs. On the contrary, they are full of meaning and power. 

However stilted the English translation, Barth’s main point is sufficiently clear: the church’s act of partaking of bread and wine in the name and at the command of Jesus gives visible expression to a more profound and richly-layered fellowship between God and humanity. While God’s action is always undoubtedly primary, the signs are “full of meaning and power.” Barth’s language implies that the meal is more than a recollection of the past. When it worships in this way, the church does more than simply catch a glimpse of the communion of the Trinity, or of God’s communion with the church and with the world in Jesus Christ (although this, too, takes place). Barth’s statement suggests that, by gathering to eat and drink around the table, the church is truly made part of Christ. While the practice of Communion is not, of course, the only means to communion with God, it has been given by God for that purpose.

We began this section by identifying “crucial beauty” in both its objective and subjective dimensions and then suggesting that this beauty is related to the spiritually formative potential of Communion. To demonstrate this point I showed how the church’s participation in the meal and its perception of Jesus Christ are linked exegetically, liturgically, and theologically. Taking part in the meal enables the church to recognize Jesus Christ in its midst and to delight in his presence. Most vitally, I have endeavoured to draw out the specifically “cruciform” nature of the church’s participation by highlighting the relation between Communion and other core disciplines of the Christian life—a list that includes scripture study, hospitality,

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111 CD IV/3.2, 901. Here I have maintained the standard translation, but substituted “Communion” for “fellowship,” the better to throw light on Barth’s claim that the signs of bread and wine are to be distinguished but not divided from the overlapping layers of Communion by which the Trinity, the church, and the world are all related in their various ways. If this switch seems dubious, we should recall that the same key term (die Gemeinschaft) is used by Luther to translate koinonia in I Cor 10:16, and so already has definite eucharistic connotations.
witness, self-offering, praise, confession, and prayer. That the meaning of the meal depends upon these other disciplines should help us to view participation in the meal not as an end in itself, but as a means to embrace the way of the cross at a deeper, more committed level. What remains is to ask how the “crucial beauty” of Communion leads to our closer union with Jesus Christ.

4.5.2 From Remembrance to Ascension: John Calvin’s Eucharistic Theology

The critical problem with a ‘neo-Zwinglian’ understanding of the meal, I have suggested, is that duty supercedes delight; while it is well for the church to follow Christ’s command to “do this in remembrance of me,” it becomes difficult to see why the church must do so, apart from the bare fact of Christ’s command.112 Because the theological accent falls on the believer’s response, rather than on God’s gracious action through the Son, by means of the Spirit, it is at best an open question whether Jesus is present and active in the meal. There is a danger here of remembrance (anamnesis) becoming a private, mental event, rather than a public and embodied practice of recollection. Those who wish to take part are invited to call Jesus’ death on the cross to mind, but for this task the liturgy and the symbols of bread and wine are offered as decorative, not formative, elements. The chief actor in Communion is understood to be the individual believer, not Jesus Christ or the pastor or the gathered church.

By way of contrast, Calvin’s account of Communion as an act of divine condescension and a means to grace represents what might be called “the road less traveled” in the Reformed tradition. For Calvin, as for all the Reformers, Communion is not a quasi-magical happening. It does not float free from the Word and its call to obedient discipleship. Rather, Communion confirms and deepens it. Unlike Zwingli, Calvin insists

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112 Ironically, Zwingli targets the notable absence of joy in the Roman Catholic mass as evidence of its radical need to be reformed: “since faith is the sweetest and pleasantest thing known to the soul, while this bodily and sensible manuciation oppresses or saddens the heart, [we discover] that it has proceeded from the notion of reckless men rather than from the word of God…” (Commentary, 217). In retrospect, he seems to have placed his finger on a vital issue—how faithful participation in Communion ought to bring joy to the church—without knowing how to restore the missing gladness.
that God acts in the meal. In his mercy, the Father speaks to us in a way that we can understand.\textsuperscript{113} If we trust in the promise of the Word and the ongoing work of the Spirit, Calvin says, we should believe that the meal is not merely commemorative, but spiritually formative. In his \textit{Short Treatise}, Calvin puts the point this way: “inasmuch as the virtue of the Holy Spirit is conjoined with the sacraments when we duly receive them, we have reason to hope that will prove a good means and aid to make us grow and advance in holiness of life, and specially in charity.”\textsuperscript{114} Thus, faith that is operative in Communion is more than “mere knowledge” or “mere imagining”; the meal is not only “a mark of outward profession.”\textsuperscript{115} It becomes an occasion for spiritual growth through our participation in the vicarious humanity of Christ.\textsuperscript{116} But why does the doctrine of the \textit{ascension} matter for the practice of \textit{Communion}?

Calvin answers that Communion involves a profound sharing between the believer and Christ that is not less real for being liturgically enacted. As Lee Wandel explains, Calvin does not think of the meal as something “external”—a ceremony to be performed regularly—nor even ‘worship’ in the sense that other evangelicals, such as Zwingli and Luther, used: a mode of honoring God.” He instead views Communion as an event of mutual participation: “Christ is made completely one with us and we with him.”\textsuperscript{117} Julie Canlis presses this point by unpacking Calvin’s pastoral logic: “the fact that Christ has done things \textit{for us} in no way empowers the Christian life.” By stressing the ascension and the ongoing activity of the entire Trinity, Calvin hoped to show how “the Christian life is not response \textit{to} God but inclusion \textit{in} God.”\textsuperscript{118}

\begin{itemize}
\item [\textsuperscript{113}] “Now what is said of the word applies as well to the sacrament of the Supper, by means of which the Lord leads us to Communion with Jesus Christ. For seeing we are so weak that we cannot receive him with true heartfelt trust, when he is presented to us by simple doctrine and preaching, the Father of mercy, disdaining not to condescend in this matter to our infirmity, has been pleased to add to his word a visible sign, by which he might represent the substance of his promises, to confirm and fortify us by delivering us from all doubt and uncertainty.” John Calvin, “Short Treatise on the Holy Supper of Our Lord Jesus Christ” in \textit{John Calvin. Selections from His Writings}, edited by John Dillenberger (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1971), §5, 510.
\item [\textsuperscript{114}] “Short Treatise,” §19, 517.
\item [\textsuperscript{115}] Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, IV.xvii.5, 1365-6.
\item [\textsuperscript{116}] Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, IV.xvii.7-9, 1367-69.
\item [\textsuperscript{117}] Wandel, \textit{op. cit.}, 171.
\item [\textsuperscript{118}] Julie Canlis, \textit{Calvin’s Ladder} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 126-7, italics in original.
\end{itemize}
We may express Calvin’s (and Canlis’s) point this way: to practice Communion in a way that recalls Jesus’ death but not his resurrection and ascension, is comparable to cutting short the gospel narrative. Just as the story of redemption is not over at Calvary, but continues on through Easter to Pentecost and beyond, so the church’s journey of coming to know Christ is not limited to being joined with him symbolically through Baptism, but extends to Communion, i.e., to corporate participation in the life of the risen Christ, and thence, by the Spirit, to mission, witness and service. Only when the church really and truly partakes of Jesus’ body and blood at the table (albeit by faith), does worship go from being “some valiant subjective response”—humanity contriving as best it can to please God through religious performance—to a way of joyous and grateful participation, given by God in Christ. Although the ministry in question is performed by Christ, the church’s role in administering Communion is nevertheless necessary, for the sacrament provides a consistent occasion for believers to remember Jesus’ death in a way that prompts them to avail themselves of his benefits, in the present day.

Theologically, then, Calvin aims to describe Communion in ways that link remembrance to ascension. That is, he wants to show how the necessary, backward-looking dimension of the Supper—remembering Jesus’ atoning death on the cross—is in fact inseparable from an even-more-necessary, forward-looking dimension—that of welcoming Jesus’ saving life through the Holy Spirit. The Supper, he says, “directs and leads us to the cross of Jesus Christ and to his resurrection, to certify [to] us that whatever iniquity there may be in us, the Lord nevertheless recognizes and accepts us as righteous—whatever materials of death may be in us, he nevertheless gives us life—whatever misery may be in us, he nevertheless fills us with all


\[120\] For a reading of the book of Hebrews that reflects this eucharistic sensibility, see Arthur A. Just, Jr., “Entering Holiness: Christology and Eucharist in Hebrews”, *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, Volume 69:1 (January 2005), 75 – 95. James Swetnam (cited on 84) makes a vital point: “the glorified body of Christ which [the church members] come into contact with as the eucharistic body is the concrete means given to them by Christ the new high priest of the Holy of Holies, i.e. God’s presence.”
On Calvin’s account, the participation symbolized and enacted in the meal facilitates the “wonderful exchange,” whereby Jesus’ followers are united with him by faith.}

### 4.5.3 Crucial Beauty in Barth and Calvin: a Practical Synthesis

How might we hold the most serviceable parts of Barth’s and Calvin’s theology together, such that Communion can be embraced and practiced as a means of encountering the beauty of God? It must be said that Calvin’s emphasis on the “wonderful exchange” is more readily identifiable as a form of crucial beauty. It is ‘crucial’ in that it corresponds to the loss or death of the old self, the “flesh” (in Paul’s terminology)—whatever it is in us that needs redeeming. It is ‘crucial’ also in the secondary sense of being desperately needed; apart from Christ’s gift, we are, as Paul says, “separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph 2:12). Yet the exchange is also ‘beautiful’ on account of the new life and health and well-being that all follow from the cross, as Christ trades his perfect sufficiency and virtue for every human deficiency and sin.

Although he renders it differently, Barth shares with Calvin a conviction that the Communion meal is, or ought to be, intimately tied to the believer’s union with Christ. In the passages we have cited from Barth’s doctrine of reconciliation, it seems clear that the beauty of Communion—that which would draw us to participate—is not bound up with the sacramental signs, per se, but with the prototypical beauty of God’s own being and action, which the signs serve to represent. Joseph Mangina speaks of “a wondering, ever-renewed meditation on the figure of the Crucified” as the closest thing in Barth to a spirituality of participation. The role of Communion is to deepen that wonder by bringing the church repeatedly and faithfully to the foot of the cross. The signs are necessary and vital, although Barth is reluctant to praise

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122 While the *Short Treatise* provides a wonderfully concise exposition of this claim, Calvin explores the believer’s union with Christ at greater length in the *Institutes* IV.xvii.2 - 11.

them in a way that might draw our attention away from the source and reason for that power. As in the beauty passage of CD II/1, his abiding interest is in “the basis of what makes this power and dignity enlightening, persuasive and convincing”—namely, the radiant form of the triune God. This, Barth had said, is “the secret of [God’s] beauty.” Nor should we forget that the wonderful exchange is, for Barth, the place in the gospel, so to speak, where we most clearly see the cross-shaped character of God’s beauty:

[God] so enters into communion with [humanity], and into so complete a communion, that He Himself, God, takes his place, to suffer for him in it what man had to suffer, to make good for him the evil he had done, so that he in turn, man, may take God’s place, that he, the sinner, may be holy and righteous. This change and interchange of position and of predicates is the perfect communion between God and man as it has been realised in the incarnation, in the person of Jesus Christ, in the death of the Son of God on the cross and in His resurrection from the dead…. This is how His self-declaration is realised, and He reveals His glory.

How might the church discern whether its practice of Communion reflects the cruciform shape of God’s own beauty? By means of self-examination, asking whether it is walking in “the way of the cross.” Consider the character of those who partake. The fruit of their participation in Communion over time should be an increase in virtue—joy, in particular, but also love, manifested in a longing to please God and to see God’s will be done. We must consider also the ethical import: has the story of cross and resurrection at the heart of the meal transformed not only the church’s perception of God, but its overall way of life? Barth’s theology of beauty suggests that the “crucial beauty” of Jesus perceived in Communion is not a mode of distinterested contemplation, but an occasion for thanksgiving and praise, leading to faithful action.

Optimally, a church that has seen and tasted the crucial beauty of Communion will not be self-satisfied, but equipped and emboldened by the Holy Spirit for mission. We catch an echo of this missional turn in Barth’s comments on Jn 6:51 (“the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world”). He writes, “[w]hat Jesus is ‘for us’ or ‘for you’ in the narrower circle of the disciples and the community He is obviously, through the ministry of this narrower circle, ‘for all’ or ‘for the world’ in the

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124 CD II/1, 661.

125 CD II/1, 663. As above (note 111) I have retained the standard translation but substituted “communion” in place of “fellowship” (both are possible renderings of Barth’s term, die Gemeinschaft), in order to bring out the resonance between the meal and the set of relationships in God which it both represents and actuates.
wider or widest sense.” As Barth reads it, the verse amounts to a declaration of how God takes the side of humanity in the person and work of Jesus Christ. This in turn implies that the church’s practice of Communion must be closely aligned with its calling to be for the world, as God is for the world.

Communion links believers through the local church to Jesus, who is living and active by his Holy Spirit; it necessarily prompts the church to reach out to the world in generous witness and service.

One congregation might practice this discipline by planting a garden open to the community, then inviting local residents to join in raising and consuming their own fresh produce. For another congregation, the specifically missional dimension of the meal might take the form of reconciling hospitality—some intentional effort to heal the divisions (whether racial, political, economic, or otherwise) that harm the wider community’s sense of well-being. Obviously, this can only be worked out on a local level, but Jesus’ instructions for hosting a banquet might profitably be read with Communion in mind: “When you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just” (Lk 14:12-14).

Let us now summarize the claims we have made for Communion under the rubric of Barth’s fourth rudiment, “beauty as crucial.” The first, main point is that Communion is to be welcomed as a way to enter more fully upon “the way of the cross.” I have suggested that, in practical terms, this means linking participation in the meal to the practice of a range of spiritual disciplines. Only when the meal is integrated within the structures of the normal Christian life, will the church be trained over time to recognize and embrace the truly “cruciform” nature of its communion with God. Second, I argue that distortions in eucharistic theology and practice—aestheticism and aestheticization, in particular—are best avoided by accents the continuing presence and activity of Christ in an act of worship, Communion, that might otherwise be wrongly construed as a purely human undertaking. John Calvin assists us at this point, insofar as his teaching on the Lord’s Supper amplifies the ongoing and life-giving ministry of the risen Christ. Recognizing the Son not only retrospectively, as crucified for our sake, but prospectively, as now reigning in

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126 CD III/2, 213.
power at the right hand of the Father, for us and for the entire church, should help us to appreciate why the meal must be *celebrated* and not merely *observed*, with an abundance of joy and a hopefulness born of Christ’s promise to raise us to new life. Calvin does not of course deny the essentially physical or created nature of Communion, but he insists upon its validity as a means of deepening our spiritual union with Christ.

One measure of this deepening union is the sense of awe, wonder, and profound gratitude that paradoxically and yet fittingly derive from the “crucial beauty” of Christ’s triumph on the cross. The well-known words of Isaac Watts, sung in conjunction with Communion, seem aptly to capture the aesthetic reversal that Jesus’ death and life make possible.

See, from His head, His hands, His feet
Sorrow and love flow mingled down
Did e’er such love and sorrow meet
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?
Were the whole realm of nature mine
That were a present far too small
Love so amazing, so divine
Demands my soul, my life, my all.127

4.6 CONCLUSION

We began this chapter by admitting that, for all the merits of Barth’s theology of beauty, important questions remain. Granted that God is beautiful and indeed the source of all beauty, how do human beings come to perceive or participate in this beauty? By what means does our subjective apprehension conform or “catch up” (so to speak) to the objective reality of God’s winsome glory? It is with such questions in mind that we have sought to extend and apply Barth’s theology of beauty to the life of the church, using Communion as a test case. I have argued that perceiving the beauty of God entails a kind of spiritual formation, and that Communion itself is a vital and underutilized resource for undertaking this formation.

While Barth’s thinking about sacraments is in some ways inconsistent, his theology nevertheless offers rich resources for thinking about the potential of Communion to bring Christians into a greater enjoyment of God’s beauty. Using Barth’s four rudiments heuristically has enabled us draw upon these resources without necessarily agreeing with Barth at every point. The result is a way of thinking about the church’s symbolic meal that is inflected by Barth’s seminal teaching on beauty.

With respect to the first rudiment—beauty as revelatory—we learn from Barth that the notion of what is ‘spiritual’ must not be understood in a way that excludes or downgrades material creation. This affirmation opens the way to a “eucharistic aesthetics,” i.e., to a retrieval of the desirability and delightfulness of Communion, over against any theology of dis-incarnation. Barth’s second rudiment (beauty as biblical) would suggest that this retrieval depends upon a more faithful reading of scripture. For Barth, Word and Sacrament are complementary and constituent features of Christian worship; recovering the basic form of the liturgy is therefore necessary and fitting, even if it is always God’s action that must be emphasized, and not the church’s response. Also, Barth’s habit of reading the Bible in a holistic way, drawing from both Old and New Testaments, helps us to see Communion as part of a long-established pattern of divine sign-giving, rather than as a singular, sacred ritual.

Within the ambit of Barth’s third rudiment, the insights beauty offers must be weighed against the dangers it potentially poses to theology. How does this apply to Communion? One concern that crops up consistently in Barth’s writing about sacraments is that of a church turned in upon itself. Indeed, Barth’s late rejection of sacraments may be read as an emphatic reminder that Christ’s atoning work does not stand in need of some supplemental mediation, but is perfect and sufficient in every way. Barth is undoubtedly correct on this point—Communion does not continue the incarnation, so much as marvel at its uniqueness—but a purely horizontal account of Communion runs into the problem of self-evidence: if Christ is not in some sense really and truly present in Communion, why bother? Here is a case, as T.F. Torrance notes, where form and content may be distinguished from one another, but ought not to be divided.
Finally, in thinking about Barth’s fourth rudiment (“beauty as crucial”), I have tried to spell out more clearly how this dimension of Barth’s theology of beauty leads us to view Communion as a vital resource for spiritual formation. Participation in the meal rightly takes on a cruciform shape, I suggest, when the practice is not isolated from the Christian life, but integrated thoroughly by means of a range of spiritual disciplines. To speak of the way of the cross is to recall Jesus’ statement that “whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it” (Lk 17:33), and to work that ‘losing’ out in the context of one’s own life. Communion is the gift that enables us to realize that giving our lives away for the sake of the gospel is not only necessary, but desirable. Mindful of Barth’s late change of mind, I then argue that Calvin makes a superior conversation partner for Barth than Zwingli.

What Calvin offers—and Zwingli lacks—is a lively account of how the union with Christ that is displayed in the meal, is actually accomplished by the working of the Holy Spirit. Participating in Communion means learning to trust not only in what Christ has done in the past, but in what he is doing in the present, and in his promises for the future. This eschatological dimension is not entirely absent in Barth—it shows up, for instance, in his description of this present life as Advent—but Calvin’s steady accent on the ascension clarifies how the ordinary act of taking part in Communion may serve to facilitate the “wonderful exchange” by which we trade the sundry and various “material of death” in our lives for Christ’s perfect and life-giving sufficiency. This, too, is a way of construing eucharistic participation as essentially cruciform.

Practically speaking—that is, in terms of the overall shape of the church’s common life—a community that understands the meal in a comprehensively disciplined and temporal way will discern the inner and intrinsic connection between Communion and mission, between sacramental participation and obedience to Christ in every sphere of life. It will presumably be better equipped to celebrate Communion in a genuinely joyous spirit, and perhaps less inclined to close in upon itself. The invitation found in a recent service book already leans in this direction:

Friends, this is the joyful feast of the people of God!
They will come from east and west,
and from north and south,
and sit at table in the kingdom of God.\textsuperscript{128}

If it seems overly hopeful or bold to think of Communion in this way, we should recall that the name \textit{Eucharist} (i.e., “thanksgiving”) discloses a truth concerning its meaning. Symbolically but truly, the meal is to be a feast of gratitude that follows upon God’s gift of grace. Barth says it this way:

\begin{quote}
\textit{charis} calls for \textit{eucharistia}. But \textit{eucharistia} is itself the substance of the creature’s participation in the divine \textit{charis}. And if God requires and makes possible that He should be served by the creature, this service itself means that the creature is taken up into the sphere of divine lordship.\textsuperscript{129}
\end{quote}

The idea of being “taken up” into the sphere of God’s splendor brings us back at last to Barth’s programmatic statement that God acts as the One who “gives pleasure, creates desire and rewards with enjoyment. And He does it because… He is the One who is pleasant, desirable, full of enjoyment…”\textsuperscript{130}

For the church’s meal to facilitate our union with Christ, it makes sense to practice it in a way that corresponds, however dimly, to the irrepressible delight, desire, and joy that are the hallmark of the beauty of God.

\begin{footnotes}
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{128} \textit{Book of Common Worship} (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 68.
\item \textsuperscript{129} \textit{CD II/1}, 670. Some of the richness of Barth’s wordplay disappears in translation. In addition to the relation between grace (\textit{charis}) and thanksgiving (\textit{eucharistia}) enacted in the practice of eucharist, there is also the relation between “this service” (\textit{dieses Dienst}) broadly conceived as the life of gratitude required and made possible by grace, and more narrowly conceived as worship (\textit{der Gottesdienst}) centered on eucharistic participation.
\item \textsuperscript{130} \textit{CD II/1}, 651.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotes}
5. Conclusion: Karl Barth and the Beauty of God

In a world without beauty, writes Hans von Balthasar, “the good also loses its attractiveness, the self-evidence of why it must be carried out.”¹ In the context of Christian theology, beauty’s absence could be measured in many different ways—in the loss of a sense of awe in Christian worship, perhaps, or in the modern church’s preoccupation with techniques and methods, numbers and programs, at the expense of contemplative ways of thinking and charitable ways of living. The loss of beauty arguably has been more acute among Protestant Christians. Historically, their attitudes towards beauty have often been ambivalent, and their salutary emphasis on personal piety has sometimes been skewed by an otherworldliness that sunders spiritual truth from material existence. One result has been the tendency to construe salvation in a highly individualistic way; another has been the failure to treat God’s creation with reverent care. Meanwhile, the widespread sense of disenchantment and cultural fragmentation that characterize the modern West are proof that ‘the great theory of beauty’ no longer persuades. In the absence of any transcendent horizon, beauty has been aestheticized, i.e., cynically used in the service of various political and media powers. Against this disorderly background, it is a welcome surprise to find a forthright apology for beauty in the theology of Karl Barth.

How might we describe Barth’s account of beauty? What are its defining features? A close reading of the Church Dogmatics II/1 reveals that Barth is not interested in working out a philosophical definition or abstract theory of beauty. He is instead intent on describing the uniquely winsome qualities of the triune God. To speak about God’s beauty is to reckon seriously with the idea that God acts, in Barth’s words, “as the One who gives pleasure, creates desire and rewards with enjoyment. And He does it because… first and last He alone is that which is pleasant, desirable and full of enjoyment.”² As a heuristic for understanding the scope of Barth’s thinking about beauty, I have proposed four basic ‘rudiments,’ which may be summarized as follows:

1. Beauty as revelatory. As Barth describes it, the beauty of God is not an impersonal or abstract power, but the attractive and persuasive aspect of God’s perfection of glory;

   ¹ Balthasar,, Seeing the Form, 19.
   ² CD II/1, 651.
(2) Beauty as biblical. While Barth is conversant with traditional ways of reflecting theologically on beauty, his concern is not to follow a given thinker or school, but to allow the witness of scripture to determine the content of his theology of beauty;

(3) Beauty as perilous. Barth’s enthusiasm for beauty is tempered by a strong sense of caution. He punctuates his discussion of beauty with reasons why beauty has been, and still remains, a potentially dangerous theme within theology; and

(4) Beauty as crucial. If the deepest meaning of beauty is determined by the being and action of God, and if God reveals himself most clearly in the life and death of Jesus Christ, then human ideas and standards of beauty must necessarily be re-conceived in light of the cross.

I have described this theology of beauty as ‘rudimentary’ because it is suggestive, rather than systematic. Yet if the musical metaphor is apt, Barth’s rudiments may conceivably be ‘played’ in a wider range of contexts, in conjunction with various doctrinal loci. Indeed, Barth himself was inclined to regard beauty as a theme deserving of further theological development.

It is an open question how, or to what degree, the theme of beauty determines the form and content of Barth’s Church Dogmatics. I have argued that Barth most fully elaborates the rudiments of beauty in connection with joy. This virtue should be viewed as the subjective affection that most nearly corresponds to God’s objective beauty. It functions, therefore, as an oblique form of proof; in effect, those who come to know “the joy of the Lord” are perceiving and participating in the beauty of God. Following the lead of Anselm of Canterbury, Barth notes how the work of theology, properly understood, is an exercise in spiritual and intellectual joy. Theology, he says, is “a peculiarly beautiful science.” Thus, to miss the inner connection between beauty and joy would be tantamount to overlooking that in God’s nature which makes God eminently desirable and delightful. More broadly, Barth’s abiding fascination with joy shows us that God’s beauty is not remote and inaccessible, but ever-present; not an elusive abstraction, but a radiant, personal quality of God’s being and

\[CD\ II/1, 656.\]
action. We learn that God does not keep beauty all to himself: as and because God is glorious, God’s divine life flows out irresistibly, filling God’s creatures with joy.

At a practical and ecclesial level it is reasonable to ask about the process by which believers learn to recognize and respond to God’s beauty. Where or how, exactly, does this happen? I have presented Communion as an underutilized resource for the sort of spiritual and aesthetic formation that Barth’s account of beauty seems to require. The rudiments point the way towards a richer and more dynamic understanding of this ritual. They press the church to re-discover dimensions of the meal that have been obscured by the liturgical and cultural status quo. These include the notion of Communion as a rite in which action of God is held to be primary; in which the note of joy rings out clearly as the church looks not only to the past, but to the present and the future; in which the material qualities of the meal helpfully render the Word of God concrete; and in which the potential peril of empty religious observance is acknowledged, but avoided by linking sacramental participation to the practice of other spiritual disciplines. In all of these ways, Barth’s theology of beauty invites the church to view the meal as integrally related to its vocation to holiness, and thus as a means by which believers may learn to “taste and see” the beauty of God.

A number of conclusions may be drawn from this investigation. I have demonstrated, first of all, that Barth’s rudimentary theology of beauty is not restricted in its application to the doctrine of God; in the case of joy and (to a lesser extent) Communion, beauty informs his broader theological project. For this reason we may justly describe Barth as a theologian of beauty.

More broadly, Barth’s approach to beauty may be taken as a model of theological praxis. True to the Reformed spirit, Barth welcomes the wisdom of the church’s past—this is clearest in his appropriation of Augustine and Anselm of Canterbury—whilst also seeking to critique and correct some of the errors and unfruitful developments he finds in the tradition. Barth brackets the Puritan preoccupation with sin and its concomitant joylessness in his attempt to retrieve and bear witness to the “joy-streaming-out element” of God’s being. On the question of the viability of natural theology; or the tendency of theological language to lose sight of revelation and slip into abstraction; or the issue of whether beauty is to be
regarded as a primary category for theology, Barth takes up positions that could be described as outside of the mainstream. Nevertheless, the pattern of Barth’s reasoning is usually clear and the force of his arguments compelling. In this sense, we might say that Barth’s Protestantism is carried out in a genuinely catholic manner. For these reasons, Barth’s rudimentary theology of beauty offers a promising approach to those who recognize the vital necessity of beauty for theology and the Christian life, yet remain cognizant of its perils and committed to the aim of allowing God’s self-revelation to determine the form and content of their thinking in this area.

Finally, it is clear that Barth’s particular way of thinking about beauty has potentially wider ramifications than he himself perceived, particularly in relation to areas of theology or Christian practice where the language of beauty is already native to scripture and tradition. As an example of a doctrine that would benefit from a more consistent and far-reaching application of the rudiments, consider sanctification. Barth has been criticized for failing to explain how the singular holiness of Jesus Christ translates to the manifold holiness of those who are made in his image and called to live in the light of his presence.4 Similarly, many readers of the Church Dogmatics have wished that Barth had provided a more robust account of the ordinary means by which the Spirit brings the church into union with Christ. As I suggested in chapter four, Calvin’s eucharistic theology is helpful in this regard; the Reformer invites us to view Communion through the lens of Christ’s ascension, and thus to welcome the meal as a means by which the Spirit draws us more deeply into the life of God. In Barth’s defense, it is not as if the theme of beauty is absent from his treatment of such matters; indeed, Barth’s paragraph on “The Glory of the Mediator” (§69) might be read as a sustained meditation on the aesthetics of reconciliation (“we are dealing with the whole of the history in which God gives to man salvation but also causes man to give Him glory”).5 But even here, as for instance in Barth’s treatment of “secular parables,” it can be difficult to see how the “true words” God allows to be spoken through art, culture, or world events have the desired effect of bringing human beings into closer communion with God.

4 See, for example, David Willis, Notes on the Holiness of God (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2002), 34.
5 CD IV/3.1, 7.
How many signs [God] may well have set up in both the outer and inner darkness which Christianity has overlooked in an unjustifiable excess of skepticism, to the detriment of itself and its cause! [...] The more seriously and joyfully we believe in [God], the more we shall see such signs in the worldly sphere, and the more we shall be able to receive true words from it.⁶

The difficulty with this statement is that verbs like ‘seeing’ and ‘receiving’ are basically passive. They fall some way short of the dynamism implied by the biblical notion of becoming “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pt 1:4). It is not clear how the communication of a sign increases participation in Christ.

Were Barth’s account of sanctification more thoroughly informed by his rudiments, we would expect to find a greater stress upon the ways in which God actively brings the beauty of holiness into being. Speaking of beauty as ‘revelatory’ in this context might mean recalling how God’s Triune form—the Father and the Son in the unity of the Holy Spirit—is radiant with joy, attractive in a way that wins and persuades, and thus uniquely beautiful.⁷ When we meet this God (whether in prayer, corporate worship, or through some other disciplined hearing of the Word), the calling to become holy will become sweetly attractive. With the help of the Spirit, obedience will be motivated by delight, rather than duty. Additionally, a greater accent upon the ‘biblical’ dimension of beauty might well lead us to recall how the love of God transforms its objects, rendering them lovable:

The Father, in eternal love,  
His heart upon Zion did set;  
Her name he enrolled above;  
Nor will he fair Zion forget….”⁸

For Barth, the chief peril to be avoided in the sphere of sanctification was the Roman Catholic cult of the saints. Does not a devotion to mere creatures (however admirable they may have been) inevitably compromise the absolute allegiance we owe to our Creator? There is a countervailing risk in this thinking, however, for it leads us to cast holiness (and therefore beauty?) in dualistic terms: one accepts either God or humanity, heaven or earth, with nothing in-between. Even granting the primacy of the infinite qualitative distinction between God and humanity, such a view renders any theological account of ‘participation’ deeply problematic.

⁶ CD IV/3.1, 122.  
⁷ CD II/1, 660-1.  
It is here, however, that Barth’s rudimentary theology of beauty points to a surprising conclusion. If beauty is grounded in the love and freedom of God’s being and action, and not in the analogy of being that obtains between God and creation, then we are free to re-imagine the relation between God and the world as essentially non-competitive. In Barth’s words, “God alone possesses divine glory, but alongside His glory there exists a glory which belongs to the world and to [humanity].” This glory is neither from ourselves nor for ourselves—it serves to magnify God’s glory—and yet Barth insists that it is truly ours. To know and experience this glory in its full weight must remain an eschatological promise, for it relies upon the perfecting work of the Spirit of the God. Even now, though, an encounter with the beauty of God brings the first deep draught of heaven’s joy. Here by the Spirit’s gift is a foretaste of lasting delight, and a dawning desire for the kingdom to come in its fullness. But this encounter also emboldens the church to follow in the steps of its crucified Lord, learning obedience through suffering, and allowing its flawed desires and false perceptions of beauty to be re-formed by the risen Christ.

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9 Barth, *Gifford*, 36.
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