

A SIGN OF MYSTERY: BARTH'S THEOLOGY OF THE VIRGIN BIRTH

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KARL BARTH'S THEOLOGY OF THE VIRGIN BIRTH

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A Dissertation
Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

McMaster University

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (2010)
(Religious Studies)

McMaster University

TITLE: A SIGN OF MYSTERY: KARL BARTH'S THEOLOGY OF THE
VIRGIN BIRTH

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NUMBER OF PAGES: vi, 304

ABSTRACT

In this study, I examine Karl Barth's doctrine of the virgin birth of Christ in relation to his discussions in the *Church Dogmatics* of Christology, pneumatology and interpretation of Scripture. I argue that the virgin birth of Jesus Christ is understood by Barth as a fitting sign to express the form of the dialectic of God's "No" to sin and "Yes" to humanity in his free act of revelation and reconciliation. As such, the doctrine of the virgin birth functions for Barth as a paradigm through which to understand the fashion of God's work upon human beings and the suitable posture of a human being before God. I demonstrate this conviction by providing an overview of select interpreters of the doctrine of the virgin birth in the western Christian tradition in order to set Barth's contribution in its theological context. I then provide an exposition of the methodological and exegetical features of Barth's development of the doctrine of the virgin birth from his first professorship up to the introductory volume of the *CD*. Next, I examine how Barth's doctrine of the virgin birth fits with his broader Christology and pneumatology as represented in the *CD*. Finally, I provide an exposition of Barth's treatment of the figure of Mary as a capstone to the themes previously outlined. The thesis concludes with a series of probing questions about the implications of Barth's doctrine of the virgin birth for his broader theology.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank the staff and faculty at Department of Religious Studies at McMaster University for their masterful work of maintaining a rigorous graduate program in Canada that brings together students with diverse backgrounds and interests. In particular, I owe a great debt of thanks to my supervisor, Dr. Peter Widdicombe, for his oversight of my research and for the invaluable guidance he offered during my studies. I also wish to thank the other members of my supervisory committee, Dr. Stephen Westerholm and Dr. P. Travis Kroeker, for their insightful comments on my thesis. Finally, I wish to thank my wife, Jolene, and our two children, Nathanael and Charis, for their love, encouragement and patience throughout the course of my studies.

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Introduction

In this study, I will examine Karl Barth's doctrine of the virgin birth of Christ in relation to his discussions in the *Church Dogmatics* of Christology, pneumatology and the interpretation of Scripture.¹ I will show how and why Barth affirmed the doctrine of the virgin birth in distinction from many of his contemporaries in Protestant theology, but also that his particular treatment of the doctrine set him apart from that of the classical western tradition. I will argue that Karl Barth viewed the virgin birth as a fitting sign that expressed the dialectic of God's grace and judgment upon human beings and served as a pattern by which to understand Christian existence.

Christian teaching of the virgin birth of Jesus of Nazareth extends at least to the writing of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, and likely further to the traditions from which they drew. The prominence of the doctrine among the early Fathers of the church, its subsequent inclusion in the Nicene and Apostles' Creed, and its close association with the celebration of Christmas have reinforced its importance in the liturgy and piety of Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox branches of the Christian tradition. This is not to say that the doctrine of the virgin birth has been immune from changes as it has been articulated throughout history at the hands of diverse theologians, biblical scholars and clergy. For example, the doctrine has been variously used by Christians to demonstrate through the fulfillment of prophecy that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah of Israel, to establish how it was possible for Jesus to be both human and divine, and to protect Jesus

¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 2nd ed., trans. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (4 vols in 13 Parts London: T & T Clark, 2004). Hereafter, the volume and part of the work will be cited, for example, as follows: *CD* I/1. German: Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* (13 vols, Zürich, 1932-70). Hereafter referred to as *KD*. Throughout this study I will often use the phrases "virgin birth" and "virginal conception" as interchangeable. There is a distinction, however, between the two phrases, particularly in Catholic thought, in which the virgin birth refers to Mary's virginity that was maintained through the delivery of Jesus, and the virginal conception refers to Mary's virginity at the Annunciation.

from the taint of original sin in order to allow him to be a pure and acceptable sacrifice.² Furthermore, the doctrine of the virgin birth of Christ has been a focal point of significant theological controversy, first, with the Jewish and “Ebionite” refusal to accept the doctrine’s rooting in the Hebrew Scriptures, and second, with the Gnostic rejection of the true humanity of Christ. In the modern era, the doctrine of the virgin birth of Christ came under serious scrutiny on the basis of historical-critical methodologies applied to the New Testament.³ Modern understandings of biology and sexuality have also been viewed as undercutting the virgin birth as a reasonable theological belief conducive to a robust understanding of the humanity of Jesus.⁴ In more recent years, certain feminist scholars have expressed serious misgivings about the doctrine of the virgin birth because of its apparent endorsement of female passivity and oppression.⁵ Conservative Protestant

² For a comprehensive survey of the doctrine of the virgin birth in the patristic era, see Hans von Campenhausen, *The Virgin Birth in the Theology of the Ancient Church*, trans. Frank Clarke (Chatham: SCM, 1964).

³ The objections on the basis of the critical study of the Bible to the historicity of the infancy narratives in general, and the virginal conception in particular, are too numerous to mention here in any detail. A fairly even-handed presentation of the evidence from a scholar sympathetic to the creedal affirmation of the virginal conception can be found in Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1977). Brown concludes his treatment of the historicity of the virginal conception as follows: “the scientifically controllable biblical evidence leaves the question of the historicity of the virginal conception unresolved” (527). For summaries of critical scholarship and its relation to the virgin birth, see Andrew T. Lincoln, “‘Born of the Virgin Mary’: Creedal Affirmation and Critical Reading,” in *Christology and Scripture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Andrew T. Lincoln and Angus Paddison, 84-103 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2007); Henry Wansbrough, “The Infancy Stories of the Gospels since Raymond E. Brown,” in *New Perspectives on the Nativity*, ed. Jeremy Corley, (London: T & T Clark, 2009), 4-22; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “The Virginal Conception of Jesus in the New Testament,” in *To Advance the Gospel: New Testament Studies*, 41-78 (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

⁴ The problems of human biology and sexuality that were believed to be implicit in the ancient creedal affirmation of the virgin birth proved too much for Arthur Peacocke and Denis Minns who, in the end, reject the virgin birth. See Arthur Peacocke, “DNA of our DNA,” in *The Birth of Jesus*, ed. G.J. Brooke (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 59-67; Denis Minns, “Traditional Doctrine and the Antique World-View: Two Case Studies, the Virgin Birth and Original Sin,” in *The Task of Theology*, ed., Victor Pfitzner and Hilary Regan (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 139-62.

⁵ Feminist interpreters typically attempt to deal with the elements that allegedly suppress women by either reinterpreting the virgin birth and, especially, the image of Mary, or by jettisoning biblical Christological themes altogether. See, respectively, Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women’s Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 74-84; Daphne Hampson, *Theology and Feminism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990). Perhaps the most impressive exegetical treatment

responses to the criticisms of the doctrine of the virgin birth were primarily directed against historical-critical readings of the infancy narratives. By and large, they bypassed the theological critique of the virgin birth in relation to Christology and anthropology by attempting to buttress a view of Scripture that was impenetrable to such criticisms.⁶

Karl Barth was no stranger to the controversy surrounding the doctrine of the virgin birth in the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries. His own father, Fritz Barth, a professor of New Testament and church history, explicitly denied the doctrine, and his decision to do so is said to have cost him at least two significant promotions.⁷ Even given the unhappy consequences of Fritz Barth's denial of the virgin birth, such a position was well established in the mainstream of European biblical and theological scholarship. When Karl Barth not only affirmed the doctrine of the virgin birth, but did so with his characteristic enthusiasm, the response was one of astonishment. He immediately fell under the suspicion of espousing a form of "crypto-Catholicism."⁸ Had Barth left behind all of the critical tools of modern Protestant theological scholarship and begun a journey

of the virgin birth and issues surrounding it from a feminist perspective is seen in Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2006).

⁶ J. Gresham Machen is likely the most famous example of such a conservative response. He writes: "[I]f the Bible is regarded as being wrong in what it says about the birth of Christ, then obviously the authority of the Bible, in any high sense, is gone." J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1932), 383; cf. James Orr, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1907).

⁷ See Fritz Barth, *Die Hauptprobleme des Lebens Jesu: Eine geschichtliche Untersuchung*, Funfte Auslage (Gütersloh: Bertelsman, 1918), 256-73; cf. Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 10. This is not to say that Barth's affirmation of the virgin birth can be adequately explained by appealing to Barth's relationship to his father. As we shall see, Barth's thought on this matter is far too complex and integrated into his own specific theological agenda to be explained away as some manner of "deferred obedience" to his father, as in Wilfried Härle, "Der Aufruf der 93 Intellektuellen und Karl Barths Bruch mit der liberalen Theologie," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 72 (1975): 222-4; cf. Eberhard Jüngel, *Karl Barth, a Theological Legacy*, trans. Garrett E. Paul (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986), 24.

⁸ Barth, *CD I/1*, xiii. Reisenhuber writes: "With the concession, no, with the energetic defense of the virgin birth Barth seems to enter in close proximity with Catholic Marian dogma, such that the particular Protestant interpretation of this statement could be forgotten about." Klaus Reisenhuber, *Maria im theologischen Verständnis von Karl Barth und Karl Rahner*, Quaestiones Disputatae, Vol. 60, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (Freiburg: Herder, 1973), 16.

to Rome? Even into the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Barth's acceptance of the doctrine of the virgin birth is often considered to be something of an embarrassment, even to those who have been deeply formed by Barth's work.⁹ On the other hand, Barth's affirmation of the doctrine of the virgin birth has been received by other theologians as a vindication of traditional Christian doctrine in the face of modernity.¹⁰ In 1938, Herman Sasse wrote,

A more characteristic example of a teacher's personal authority cannot be found anywhere in the history of modern theology than in the changed attitude of the younger generation of theologians toward the Virgin Birth. Ever since Barth returned to a belief in the *natus ex Maria Virgine*...this dogma suddenly lost its terror for the younger generation of theologians and was once again accepted.¹¹

However, in spite of the interest in Barth's resounding affirmation of the virgin birth and his influence on virtually all subsequent theologians who defend or reject the doctrine, there has been very little secondary literature directly devoted to analyzing Barth's articulation and use of the doctrine. This phenomenon is related to the significant lacuna in the secondary literature describing the function of the doctrine of the virgin birth in Protestant theology generally.¹² Of the little literature primarily devoted to

⁹ Wolf Krötke, "Die Christologie Karl Barths als Beispiel für den Vollzeug seiner Exegese" in *Karl Barths Schriftauslegung*, ed. Michael Trowitzsch (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1996): 1-21; Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia, PN: Westminster John Knox, 1977), 141-50; Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 78-87.

¹⁰ Examples of theologians who have been heavily influenced by Barth's acceptance of the virgin birth include the following: Robert W. Jenson, "For Us...He Was Made Man," in *Nicene Christianity: The Future For a New Ecumenism*, ed. Christopher R. Seitz (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001), 75-85; Donald Bloesch, *Jesus Christ: Savior and Lord* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 80-106; Charles E. B. Cranfield, "Some Reflections on the Subject of the Virgin Birth," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 41 (1998): 177-89; Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 314-25; Thomas Torrance, "The Doctrine of the Virgin Birth," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 12 (1994): 8-15.

¹¹ Hermann Sasse, *Here We Stand*, trans. T. G. Tappert (New York: Harper, 1938), 154.

¹² Boslooper's work provides an overview of several important Protestant theologians and biblical scholars, but his interest is in the historical-critical issues related to the infancy narratives. See Thomas Boslooper, *The Virgin Birth* (Philadelphia, PN: 1962). Brown's work has a similar focus on historical questions. See Raymond Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist, 1973).

Barth's doctrine of the virgin birth, there have been no comprehensive studies of Barth's interpretation of the doctrine. Mueller's 1954 article and Bromiley's 1979 section in his introductory text provide basic summaries of Barth's exposition of the doctrine in *CD I/2*, but they refrain from critical analysis.¹³ Only Strümke both expounds Barth's doctrine of the virgin birth and provides critical comment as he constructs his own "ethics" of the virgin birth.¹⁴ Even works on Barth's broader Christology often neglect significant treatment of his discussion of the virgin birth.¹⁵ Where Barth's doctrine of the virgin birth does receive some attention is in works that focus on his critique of Roman Catholic Mariology.¹⁶ Though these works have significant relevance for the question of the virgin birth, none of them provide a comprehensive assessment of Barth's doctrine of the virgin birth as a subject of theological reflection in its own right.

It is my contention that the doctrine of the virgin birth and spiritual conception of Jesus stood near the center of Karl Barth's theology because it expressed several of the most important contours of his theological vision. Barth discovers in the creedal form of

¹³ William A. Mueller, "Karl Barth's View of the Virgin Birth," *Review and Expositor* 51.4 (1954): 508-23; Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *An Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 26-7. About such studies, Williams writes: "[N]o understanding of Barth (or any other writer, for that matter) can begin to be adequate if it simply relies upon his own description, however sincere, of his method and intention." Rowan Williams, "Barth on the Triune God," in *Karl Barth: Studies of his Theological Method*, ed. S.W. Sykes (Clarendon press: Oxford, 1979): 158.

¹⁴ Volker Strümke, "Die Jungfrauengeburt als Geheimnis des Glaubens—ethische Anmerkungen," *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 49.4 (2007): 423-44.

¹⁵ Waldrop makes mention of the virgin birth as an illustration of Barth's supposed disinterest in historical scholarship, Thompson fails to mention it at all and Jones treats it as inconsequential to questions of Christ's humanity. See Charles T. Waldrop, *Karl Barth's Christology: Its Basic Alexandrian Character* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1984), 197; John Thompson, *Christ in Perspective: Christological Perspectives in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978); Paul Dafydd Jones, *The Humanity of Christ: Christology in Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics* (London: Continuum, 2008).

¹⁶ L. Gordon Tait, "Karl Barth and the Virgin Mary," in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 4 (1967): 406-25; Riesenhuber, *Maria*; Andrew Louth, *Mary and the Mystery of the Incarnation: An Essay on the Mother of God in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Fairacres: SLG Press, 1977); Paul S. Fiddes, "Mary in the theology of Karl Barth," in *Mary in Doctrine and Devotion: papers of the Liverpool Congress, 1989, of the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, ed. Alberic Stacpoole (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1990): 111-27; and Tim Perry, "What is Little Mary Here For?" *Pro Ecclesia* XIX.1 (Winter 2010): 46-68.

the doctrine of the virgin birth themes as important as Christ's human nature, the sovereignty of God, his judgment upon sin, the enlivening work of the Holy Spirit, and the appropriate human action corresponding to God's grace. In short, the virgin birth of Jesus Christ is understood by Barth as a fitting sign to express the form of the dialectic of God's "No" to sin and "Yes" to humanity in his free act of revelation and reconciliation. As such, the doctrine of the virgin birth functions for Barth as a paradigm through which to understand the fashion of God's work upon human beings and the suitable posture of a human being before God. The category of the sign (*Zeichen*) is crucial to understanding Barth's doctrine of the virgin birth and we shall often return to it in our study. It was Barth's discovery of the sign character of the virgin birth that he believed allowed him to avoid the main charges against the doctrine made in the modern era. It also furnishes Barth with the unique criteria by which he judges the doctrine's "fittingness" with the main themes of his theology. Unfortunately, Barth provides no general theology of signs in his theology. Instead, in his doctrine of the virgin birth, Barth regularly describes signs in contrast to those things which are constitutive. If the virgin birth is understood as constitutive, then Barth means that it bears ontological significance for the person and work of Christ—it accomplishes a theological function that changes either the identity of Jesus Christ or alters the significance of his work in some way. If the virgin birth is understood as a sign, then Barth means that it bears epistemological significance for the person and work of Christ—it illustrates, explains or sets forth the truth about the identity and work of Jesus Christ.

This study will unfold in the following way. In the first chapter, I shall provide an overview of select central interpreters of the doctrine of the virgin birth in the western

Christian tradition in order to set Barth's contribution in its theological context. In the second chapter, I will provide an exposition of the methodological and exegetical features of Barth's development of the doctrine of the virgin birth from his first professorship up to the introductory volume of the *CD*. In chapter three, I will examine Barth's doctrine of the virgin birth in relation to his doctrine of the humanity of Christ, original sin, and Christ's sinlessness in the *CD*. In chapter four, I will explore the conception of Jesus by the Spirit in relation to Barth's pneumatology and examine his use of the spiritual conception as a means by which to understand Christian rebirth. In the fifth chapter, I will provide an exposition of Barth's treatment of the figure of Mary with special attention to how Barth's doctrine of the virgin birth shapes his understanding of the relationship between divine grace and human agency. Finally, the thesis will conclude with a series of critical questions probing the implications of Barth's doctrine of the virgin birth for broader themes in his theology, such as his theological hermeneutics, the doctrine of the humanity of Christ and pneumatology.

The methodology that I have chosen for this study aims to provide a close reading of Barth's various expositions of and references to the doctrine of the virgin birth. Barth makes use of the doctrine of the virgin birth in two main forms. He provides extensive expositions of the doctrine, particularly in *CD I/2*, "The Miracle of Christmas." He also makes brief references to the doctrine in strategic discussions of other materials. I have attempted to do justice to both forms of usage. Particularly in those chapters in which I exposit Barth's use of the virgin birth in relationship to his broader discussions of Christology and pneumatology, I begin with Barth's explicit exposition of the virgin birth and move from there to the use that Barth has made of the doctrine based on the

indications he provided in the lengthier discussions. In all cases, I have tried to be attentive to the broader context in which Barth discusses the virgin birth and to the diverse themes he develops in these discussions.¹⁷ This approach reveals that the doctrine of the virgin birth is often close to the surface in Barth's writings, even when it is not explicated at great length. Furthermore, I have attempted to interpret Barth within the broad stream of western Christian theology. This has involved queries into the history of the interpretation of the doctrine of the virgin birth that have been necessarily selective. Nevertheless, by including figures extending as far back as Irenaeus, I have attempted to set Barth within that great tradition within which he located himself. Barth is best interpreted, not merely as a critic of the liberal tradition, or even as a reformulator of the Reformed tradition, but as a distinctly Reformed voice within the broader Christian tradition.¹⁸

¹⁷ Adam Neder writes: "Carefully following Barth's argument within a given section—rather than constructing an interpretive thesis and then supporting it with proof texts culled from various places throughout the *Church Dogmatics*—yields a richer and more accurate interpretation. It is much easier to flatly misunderstand or subtly misinterpret Barth's theology if one ignores those aspects of it which do not support the interpretation being advanced." Adam Neder, *Participation in Christ: An Entry into Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), vii.

¹⁸ See Jones, *Humanity of Christ*, 5-6. While it would be fruitful to interpret Barth alongside modern and classical Orthodox theologians, Barth himself only minimally interacts with them. Therefore, I have opted to forgo significant interaction with the churches of the East.

Chapter 1: The Doctrine of the Virgin Birth according to Select Figures in the Western Church

1.1 Introduction

In this chapter I shall survey the interpretation of the virgin birth of Jesus in select figures from the patristic to the modern periods. The purpose of this chapter is to provide theological context within which to interpret Karl Barth's treatment of the doctrine. The figures have been selected on the basis of their stature within the western tradition and their helpfulness in illuminating Barth's distinctive contribution to this tradition.¹ This survey will draw out several of the ways in which the virgin birth was defended and rejected on the basis of its perceived "fit" with the broad themes of Christology, pneumatology and anthropology. We shall also be introduced to the various theological functions given to the doctrine by the interpreters surveyed here and to the criticism of these functions in the modern era.

This chapter shall unfold as follows. In our study of Irenaeus, we shall see how he interprets the virgin birth of Christ in relationship to the origin of Adam in a way that serves to condition Christ for the reception of the Spirit and so to signal the beginning of a new generation of sons for God. The parallel between Adam and Christ leads Irenaeus to posit a corresponding parallel between Eve and Mary, thus establishing Mary as a pivotal figure in salvation history. Augustine's distinctive doctrine of original sin shapes his interpretation of the virgin birth in quite a different way. By removing the act of sexual intercourse, and therefore all sinful desire, from the earthly origin of Jesus, the

¹ The following works provide more comprehensive overviews of broader swaths of the theological landscape of the virgin birth: Boslooper, *The Virgin Birth*; von Campenhausen, *The Virgin Birth in the Theology of the Ancient Church*; Douglas Edwards, *The Virgin Birth in History and Faith* (London: Faber & Faber, 1943); Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600), Volume 1, The Christian Tradition: A History of Development* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 278-331.

virgin birth allows the divine Son to assume human flesh apart from the stain of sin. As such, the sinless Jesus is able to offer atonement for the sin of humanity and bring about the regeneration of human beings patterned after his own spiritual generation. Within this scheme, the virgin birth and, particularly, the figure of Mary serve as a lens by which Augustine can interpret marriage, virginity and, ultimately, the nature and ministry of the church. Aquinas accepts the broad contours of the Augustinian position on the virgin birth, but interprets the doctrine within the framework of Aristotelian thought. Aquinas goes to great lengths to show how it is biologically and morally possible for Christ to be fully human and yet to avoid the contamination of original sin. Each of the figures in the pre-modern era explicitly interpreted the virgin birth according to its “fit” with the broader contours of their understanding of God’s action in the world. They viewed their task as describing the logic of God at work in the virgin birth and aimed to show its congruity with the identity and work of Christ, as well as that of the Spirit. The Reformation figures continue to work within the broad Augustinian tradition of interpreting the virgin birth and its relationship to original sin, though the emphasis on the doctrine’s fittingness becomes muted. Luther emphasizes the way in which the identity of the Messiah was progressively unveiled in salvation history through attention to the Old Testament prophecies of the virgin birth. The virgin birth also has for him a role in shaping his particular understanding of Christ’s flesh and expresses his view of faith. Calvin’s work suggests a significant change within the Augustinian tradition because he is more cautious of using the virgin birth as a mechanism to free Christ from original sin and interprets the virgin birth in purely noetic categories. While Luther continued to accept many of the doctrines and practices associated with Roman Catholic

Mariology, Calvin was especially guarded in allotting to her any distinctive honour. In the modern era, Schleiermacher marshalled what came to be the standard Protestant critique of the virgin birth. In addition to drawing attention to the doctrine's slim biblical support, as determined by historical-critical methodologies, Schleiermacher argued that the tradition of connecting the virgin birth to original sin places one firmly on the track of Catholic Mariology and an unchristian view of marriage and sexuality. Friedrich Strauss took up Schleiermacher's critique, but also provided what was to become the most popular explanation for the origin of the doctrine of the virgin birth. In his view, the virgin birth was best interpreted as a myth constructed by the early Christians to show by every possible means that Jesus was the Messiah who fulfilled every aspect of the Old Testament. Our last figure, Emil Brunner, takes up the criticisms offered by Schleiermacher and the explanation of the virgin birth provided by Strauss and articulates the view popular in his day that the idea of the virgin birth was a primitive and faulty explanation for how Jesus came to be called the Son of God.

1.2 Irenaeus of Lyons (d. 202 CE)

The virgin birth plays a crucial role in Irenaeus' view of salvation. Most obviously, the virgin birth is the means by which the Son of God took on true human flesh. The humanity of Christ's mother, Mary, is the point of contact between the divine Son of God and the generations of human beings under the curse of sin. Furthermore, the virgin birth is the only means by which the humanity of Christ could, in truth, be that of the *original* human being, Adam.² By taking on Adamic flesh, the Son would be able to live a fully human life from infancy to adulthood in which he obeyed where Adam

² Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, volume 1, ed. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 5.1.2. Hereafter referenced as *AH*. Cf. 3.XIX.3.

disobeyed, thus sanctifying human life and reversing the results of Adam's sin.³ In order for Christ to recapitulate Adam in himself, he not only had to have the human nature of Adam, but he had to have it in the same way as Adam had it. This is why both Adam and Jesus are "conceived" or "originate" in an analogous manner: their human nature was the direct result of God's formative work.⁴ Irenaeus explains:

And as the protoplast himself, Adam, had his substance from untilled and as yet virgin soil ("for God had not yet sent rain, and man had not tilled the ground"), and was formed by the hand of God, that is, by the Word of God, for "all things were made by Him," and the Lord took dust from the earth and formed man; so did He who is the Word, recapitulating Adam in Himself, rightly receive a birth, enabling Him to gather up Adam [into Himself], from Mary, who was as yet a virgin.⁵

This passage is crucial, for it explains how it was that Jesus of Nazareth could act as recapitulator. Adam was created out of the dust of the earth and formed directly by the hands of God. Eve was brought forth through Adam. All subsequent descendants of Adam are born of two parents. A virgin birth is the necessary manner for the Son of God to enter the world because it sets his flesh in continuity with Adam's descendants, but also allows his flesh to be related to God in the same way as the original Adam.⁶ Irenaeus writes:

If, then, the first Adam had a man for his father, and was born of human seed, it were reasonable to say that the second Adam was begotten of Joseph. But if the former was taken from the dust, and God was his Maker, it was incumbent that the latter also, making a recapitulation in Himself, should be formed as man by God, to have an analogy with the former as respects His origin. Why, then, did not God again take dust, but wrought so that the formation should be made of Mary? It was that there might not be another formation called into being, nor any other which should [require to] be saved, but that *the very same formation* should

³ Irenaeus, *AH* 2.XXII.4; 4.XXXIII.2; 5.XIV.1-3. See also the fascinating account offered by Irenaeus of the temptation of Christ that is interpreted against the temptation of Adam in *AH* 5.XXI.2-3.

⁴ Irenaeus, *AH* 3.XVIII.7.

⁵ Irenaeus, *AH* 3.XXI.10.

⁶ See Gustaf Wingren, *Man and the Incarnation: A Study in the Biblical Theology of Irenaeus*, trans. Ross Mackenzie (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), 83-6 95-7; M.C. Steenberg, *Irenaeus on Creation: The Cosmic Christ and the Saga of Redemption* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 47-49; 115-7.

be summed up [in Christ as had existed in Adam], the analogy having been preserved.⁷

What is crucial to note here is that the virgin birth is not, for Irenaeus, about Christ being divine; rather, the virgin birth is entirely about the humanity of Christ in relation to the first human being.⁸ Taking up the first Adam's humanity is the foundational step in the work of recapitulation of the second Adam and this is dependent on a parallel between the modes of conception of the two Adams.⁹ Furthermore, Irenaeus also extends the Adam-Christ typology to the relationship between Mary and Eve, allotting to Mary a unique contribution to the salvation wrought by Christ.¹⁰ Just as death has come through the disobedience of the betrothed virgin, Eve, so also has life come through the obedience of the betrothed virgin, Mary.¹¹

For Irenaeus, a central aspect of the rectification of Adam's disobedience is Christ accustoming humanity for the reception of the divine Spirit. While this process takes place throughout Christ's human life, of particular importance is the Spirit's work in Christ's conception, baptism and resurrection.¹² According to Irenaeus, in Christ's conception by the Spirit, his human nature is created, brought into union with the divine Word and so adopted as "Son."¹³ By virtue of the incarnational union brought about by means of the Spirit, the human nature of Christ is now suitable for the anointing of the

⁷ Irenaeus, *AH* 3.XXI.10. Emphasis added. Cf. *AH* 3.XVIII.7; 3.XXI.9.

⁸ Wingren, *Man and the Incarnation*, 97; cf. Steenberg, *Irenaeus on Creation*, 108-11.

⁹ Benjamin Dunning, "Virgin Earth, Virgin Birth: Creation, Sexual Difference, and Recapitulation in Irenaeus of Lyons," *The Journal of Religion* 89.1 (2009): 68-72.

¹⁰ Irenaeus, *AH* 4.XXXIII.11; cf. Wingren, *Man and the Incarnation*, 47.

¹¹ Irenaeus, *AH* 3.XXII.4; cf. M.C. Steenberg, "The Role of Mary as Co-Recapitulator," *Vigilae Christianae* 58 (2004): 117-37; Dunning, "Virgin Earth," 57-88.

¹² See Daniel A. Smith, "Irenaeus and the Baptism of Jesus," *Theological Studies* 58 (1997): 618-42.

¹³ Irenaeus, *AH* 3.XIX.1; cf. Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, Ancient Christian Writers No. 16, trans. Joseph P. Smith (New York: Paulist Press, 1952), 51, 53, 57; Wingren, *Man and Incarnation*, 98.

Spirit. At his baptism, Christ's Spirit-conceived human nature was endowed with the attributes necessary to fulfill the Messianic role.¹⁴ The Holy Spirit also raised Christ from the dead with his human nature transformed and glorified.¹⁵ After his ascension to the Father in this transformed flesh, Christ poured out the Spirit on all humanity at Pentecost and so enabled the adoption of sons and the resurrection of all flesh.¹⁶ In this understanding of the progressive giving of the Spirit to humanity and the progressive accustoming of humanity for the Spirit, the virgin birth and the corresponding conception by the Spirit play a crucial role. They ground the entire work of accustoming human nature for communion with God by the Spirit.

It is illuminating to view Irenaeus' doctrine of the adoption of humanity by the work of the Spirit from the perspective of his broader biblical theology. Irenaeus sets the adoption of human beings as sons of God by the generation of the Spirit in contrast to the generation that stems from Adam and leads to death. In this view of salvation history the virgin birth plays a pivotal role. First, there is the birth of Adam who was created by God from the dust of the earth. Corresponding to the birth of Adam is the virginal birth of Christ, the second Adam. These two births are in analogy, as we have seen. In addition, corresponding to the births of the two Adams are two separate generations.¹⁷ The generation that comes from the first Adam is the generation of death through sin. The generation that comes from the birth of the second Adam is the generation of adoption by the Spirit.¹⁸ In this scheme the virgin birth of Christ is constitutive of the event within

¹⁴ Irenaeus, *AH* 3.IX.3; cf. 3.XVII.1. *Proof*, 40-41.

¹⁵ Irenaeus, *AH* 3.XVI.3.

¹⁶ Irenaeus, *AH* 3.XVII.1; cf. 3.XVII.2; 5.XII.1-4.

¹⁷ Irenaeus, *AH* 4.XXXIII.4, cf. 5.I.3; 3.XIV.1; 4.XXXIII.11; 5.I.3; John Behr, *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 68-9.

¹⁸ Irenaeus, *AH* 3.XIX.1; cf. 3.XVI.3. Related is also the fascinating reading that Irenaeus gives the Lot narrative in which he uses the story to show how the church is only able to bear sons of God

history that disrupts the natural generation of death from Adam and opens the way for the generation of the Spirit which is adoption.¹⁹ In the midst of a creation burdened by death, the virgin birth of Christ is the origin of that which will become the new creation by the Spirit. The significance of this new creation extends even to all those generations that preceded Christ, thus reversing the effects of Adam's original disobedience.²⁰

Finally, the virgin birth served Irenaeus as a fitting "sign" and "token" of the salvation wrought by God in Christ.²¹ The appropriateness of the sign of the virgin birth has several aspects. Irenaeus adumbrates each of these aspects by appealing to the virgin birth's "fittingness" and "necessity" to the object to which it is related. First, the virgin birth is a fitting sign that attests to the most unexpected work of God in salvation. Irenaeus discovers the unexpected nature of the virgin birth when he reflects on how Ahaz refused to ask for a sign and yet the sign of the virgin was given to him by the Lord himself (Isaiah 7:10-14). Such an "unlooked for sign" is suited to the unexpected salvation wrought by God.²² Second, the virgin birth attests to human impotence in their salvation and communicates the necessity of divine initiative.²³ Third, the virgin birth is a fitting token of both the divine and human generations of Christ.²⁴ On the one hand, it is fitting that Christ be "made of woman" (Galatians 4:4) because if Christ did not receive the substance of flesh from a human being, then his suffering and death did not extend to

through their Father. In this section, the Spirit is called "the life-giving seed." When read alongside of the conception of the Spirit, the relation that exists between the birth of Christ and the birthing of sons of God by the Spirit through the church becomes clear. See AH 4.XXXI.2.

¹⁹ Irenaeus, *Proof*, 38; AH 5.I.3.

²⁰ Irenaeus, AH 3.XXII.3.

²¹ Von Balthasar argues that for Irenaeus the virgin birth is "a sign by which Christ the recapitulator can be recognized." Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, Volume II, Studies in Theological Style: Clerical Styles*, trans. John Riches (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1984), 54.

²² Irenaeus, AH 3.XXI.6; 3.XIX.3.

²³ Irenaeus, AH 3.XX.3; 3.XXI.5, 7; 4.XXXIII.4.

²⁴ Irenaeus, AH 3.IIX.1; 3.XXI.4.

humanity's actual condition²⁵ On the other hand, Irenaeus saw the virgin birth as the fitting generation of the human nature of the one who is uniquely generated from the Father.²⁶ The virgin birth itself is not that which constitutes the incarnate Word as the Son of God or the Word's eternal generation of the Father. Instead, the manner of Christ's entering the world through a virgin is the suitable attestation of the relationship of the Father to the Son in eternity.

The doctrine of the virgin birth functions strategically in Irenaeus' overall exposition of the unfolding biblical drama. It unites the Old Testament prophets with the Gospels, the letters of Paul, and the teaching of the subsequent church by revealing agreement on a substantial teaching which was denied by Irenaeus' opponents.²⁷ The most crucial Old Testament text to which Irenaeus appeals is Isaiah 7:14.²⁸ In order to counter Jewish objections to Christian usage of this text—that the Hebrew term “young maiden” (*‘almah*) should be preferred over the Greek term “virgin” (*parthenos*)—Irenaeus argues from the legends surrounding the formation of the Septuagint (LXX). He reminds his readers that it was the Jews themselves who miraculously translated the LXX by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and this well in advance of any possible Christian influence.²⁹ Therefore, far from being a Christian manipulation of Jewish texts, for Irenaeus, Matthew is entirely legitimate in his application of Isaiah 7:14 to Christ

²⁵ Irenaeus, *AH* 3.XXII.1; 3.XVI.6; cf. 3.XVIII.7.

²⁶ Irenaeus, *AH* 3.XIX.2 ; cf. 4.XXXIII.11; *Proof*, 53.

²⁷ According to Irenaeus, the Valentinians famously argued that Christ only appeared to be human and reputedly used the virgin birth to show that “Christ passed through Mary just as water flows through a tube” without taking anything from her (*AH* 1.VII.2). Cerinthus denied the virgin birth and argued, instead, that the spirit of Christ adopted the man Jesus at his baptism and left him before his suffering (*AH* 1.XXVI.1). The Ebionites, in their denial of the divinity of Christ, refused to acknowledge prophecies for the virgin birth in the Hebrew Scriptures (*AH* 3.XVI.1). Marcion refused to acknowledge the virgin birth of Christ (*AH* 4.IV.2).

²⁸ Irenaeus believed that this text so clearly attests the virgin birth that he thought that it helped to convince Joseph of Mary's fidelity. See *AH* 4.XXIII.1.

²⁹ Irenaeus, *AH* 3.XXI.1-2, 4.

(Matthew 1:23). In addition to Isaiah 7:14, several other passages in the Old Testament attest to the advent of Christ in the form of the virgin birth. Indeed, nearly any text of the Old Testament Scriptures that lends itself to speak of an ambiguity of human descent is seen by Irenaeus as fulfilled in the virgin birth.³⁰ When viewed from the perspective of the shape of the whole, otherwise disparate texts come to fit together.³¹

1.3 St. Augustine (354-430 CE)

According to the *Confessions*, Augustine struggled to understand the meaning of Christ's virgin birth for much of his early career.³² When he came to defend the doctrine of the virgin birth, however, he did so using the category of "fittingness," which we saw was already active with Irenaeus. Augustine argues that Christ's virgin birth was not forced upon God, but rather manifests his will.³³ It is the theologian's task to draw out, as clearly as possible, the rationality—the fittingness—of God's free decision to accomplish salvation as he did. Augustine attempts to display the theological fittingness of the virgin birth as follows. First, it was suitable for his solidarity with humanity that Christ was born at all. In addition to his taking rest and food, the birth of Jesus is "evidence to men of the reality of that human nature which He assumed but did not destroy."³⁴ Had Christ simply appeared to the world as an adult, it would have been difficult, argues Augustine,

³⁰ Some of these prophecies include Isaiah 53:8 ("Who shall declare His generation?") and Jeremiah 17:19 ("He is a man, and who shall recognize Him?") (AH 3.XIX.2). Irenaeus also views Psalm 85:11 ("Truth springs from the earth") to be a prophecy of both the virgin birth and the resurrection of Christ (AH 3.IX.2).

³¹ Irenaeus, AH 3.XXI.5. Cf. *Proof*, 36; 57; AH 3.XXI.7; 3.XXI.9; 5.XXVI.1; 5.XXI.1.

³² As a young disciple of Mani, Augustine could not understand how the divine Son of God could be born of woman and not become polluted by her flesh. Somewhat later in his life, Augustine came to think of the virgin birth as a qualification for Jesus' great authority and a means by which Christ taught others to despise temporal things and seek the immortal. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: OUP, 1991), V.x.20, VII.xix.25.

³³ Augustine, *Answer to Faustus, a Manichean*, I/20, The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, trans. Roland Teske (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2007), XXVI.7; XXXVII.2.

³⁴ Augustine, "To Volusianus," in *Letters (100-155)*, II/2, The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, trans. Roland Teske (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2002), 9.

to believe in his true humanity. Second, the virgin birth shows how the Son of God took upon himself the lowliest stage of human life, but did so without veiling entirely the majesty of the one whose life it was. The miraculous element in the lowly birth of Jesus directs the believer from Christ's flesh to his divine person. For those who are not ready to contemplate the eternal begetting of the Son, they may begin with the miracle of Christ's earthly origin.³⁵ Third, the virgin birth is described by Augustine as evidence of how Christ stands in both continuity and discontinuity with the prophets who anticipated him. Many of the miracles that Christ performed were already accomplished by the prophets. However, there were some miracles in Christ's life that manifest his uniqueness. Christ's unique birth shows how Christ stands alongside the prophets and also surpasses them.³⁶ Fourth, Augustine draws on the Eve-Mary typology we encountered with Irenaeus.³⁷ Christ's maleness is a testimony to the salvation of men, who fell through Adam. And yet, because Christ was born of a woman alone, Christ also included a testimony of the salvation of women, who fell through Eve.³⁸ Neither males nor females need to despair that their sex is somehow tainted before God.³⁹

The most central means by which Augustine drew out the significance of the virgin birth was through the connection he drew between it and original sin.⁴⁰ To

³⁵ Augustine, "Sermon 369," in *Sermons on Various Subjects (341-400)*, III/10, The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, trans. Edmund Hill (New Rochelle, NY: New City Press, 1994), 3; cf. Augustine, "To Volusianus," 9.

³⁶ Augustine, "To Volusianus," 13.

³⁷ Augustine, *Sermons on the New Testament (51-94)*, III/5, The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1991), 3.

³⁸ Augustine, *Answer to Faustus*, IXXX.2

³⁹ Augustine, "Sermon 51," 3; cf. Augustine, *Answer to Faustus*, IXXX.4; Augustine, "Sermon 190" in *Sermons on the Liturgical Seasons (184-229)*, III/6, The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, trans. Edmund Hill (New Rochelle, NY: New City Press, 1993), 2.

⁴⁰ Pelikan, *Catholic Tradition*, 289-90; cf. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008), 407. It is important to note that Augustine's doctrine of original sin developed through his life. For our purposes, we will confine our treatment of the topic to Augustine's later writings.

understand this, we need to begin in Eden. In the paradise of the garden, the first human couple enjoyed a fellowship of perfectly ordered love with God and with one another.⁴¹ However, through the wiles of the serpent, Adam and Eve exchanged the love of God for love of themselves.⁴² For Augustine, the Fall meant inevitable misery and death for the first couple and all of their descendants. When the first couple ate the forbidden fruit, human nature became corrupted at its very core and human beings were tossed to and fro by the shifting winds of their desires.⁴³ The corruption of human nature is manifest in the division of the human being against himself in which what one wills cannot be accomplished. This internal division is the punishment for sin.⁴⁴ The body no longer obeys the will. The punishment of disobedience is exemplified in a particularly fitting manner at the end and the beginning of all post-lapsarian human life.⁴⁵ Against all willing to the contrary, human beings die. Furthermore, the very organs created for the extension of the human species through reproduction no longer function as they once did. After the Fall, they no longer obey the mind and will. Instead, the reproductive organs are moved solely by the passions, outside of the control of the will. Lust alone is now the master in control of the human body's ability to reproduce.⁴⁶ All post-lapsarian human begetting is

⁴¹ Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought, trans. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), XIV.10

⁴² Augustine, *City of God*, XIV.11, 13.

⁴³ Augustine, *City of God*, XIV.12, 1.

⁴⁴ Augustine, *City of God*, XIV.15.

⁴⁵ "[S]exuality and the grave stood one at each end of the life of every human being. Like two iron clamps, they delineated inexorably mankind's loss of the primal harmony of body and soul." Brown, *Body and Society*, 416; cf. Augustine, *City of God*, XIV.20; Augustine, *Marriage and Desire*, in *Answer to the Pelagians II*, I/24, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, trans. Roland Teske. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1998), I.7.

⁴⁶ Augustine, *Marriage and Desire*, I.27. The corruption of human nature is so great that, in addition to disobeying the mind, the body sometimes even refuses to follow the burning of lust (as in the case of impotence). See Augustine, *City of God*, XIV.16. Augustine connects the post-lapsarian rogue body to the shame of nakedness that was awakened immediately after the sin of Adam and Eve recounted in Genesis 3:7. The shame of being naked is a result of the disobedience of reproductive organs to the will. See Augustine, *City of God*, XIV.17, 19.

now, at least in part, at the mercy of concupiscence. Therefore, all children begotten through sexual intercourse by fallen parents are conditioned at their very origin with carnal lust and so inherit a corrupted nature.⁴⁷ As such, they are condemned to death.⁴⁸

For Augustine, the plight that accompanies the natural birth must be met by a re-birth.⁴⁹ The possibility of a second birth, through which the punishment attendant with the first birth might be reversed, is accomplished by God in the sending of his Son to mediate on behalf of the human race. The grace of the incarnate Son of God, through the Holy Spirit, enables those born as alienated human beings to become adopted sons of God.⁵⁰ Rebirth by the Spirit occurs, according to Augustine, in the waters of baptism, the sacrament of regeneration. The form of the Son's entrance into the world as the incarnate mediator plays a pivotal role in the way the Son makes the baptismal second birth a possibility.⁵¹

The flesh assumed by the Son is of the same nature as all other Adamic human flesh, but with one important exception. Christ, in order to be suitable for the work of atonement, must not be corrupted by sin. But how can this be if all post-lapsarian human begetting involves the lust of the flesh and the transmission of original sin to the offspring? Clearly an exception must have occurred. It is here that the miraculous conception of Jesus comes into play. Augustine explains:

⁴⁷ The precise relationship between concupiscence, the corrupt human nature, and the transmission of original sin is unclear in Augustine's writings. On the one hand, it appears that Augustine thinks that concupiscence itself, present at all human begetting, is the mechanism by which original sin is transferred. On other occasions, Augustine seems to view the concupiscence of the flesh as an integral manifestation of the corrupted human nature that is passed through human begetting. For an overview of Augustine's development of the doctrine of original sin, see Paul Rigby, "Original Sin," in *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 607-14.

⁴⁸ Augustine, *Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love*, trans. J.B. Shaw (Washington, D.C.: Regenery Publishing, 1961), XXVI.

⁴⁹ Augustine, *Enchiridion*, XLVI.

⁵⁰ Augustine, *Enchiridion*, XXXIII.

⁵¹ Augustine, *The Trinity*, I/5, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1991), XIII.23.

There was no desire of the flesh involved, which the rest of men who contract original sin are begotten and conceived by; it was utterly absent when holy virginity conceived by believing not by embracing, so that what was there born of the stock of the first man would only derive from him a racial not a criminal origin.⁵²

Jesus is the great exception to the rule of original sin. In fact, the sinless Jesus is the one who proves the rule that everyone born through normal sexual means involving lust will be born with the corruption of original sin.⁵³ By appealing to Christ's birth from Mary, Augustine believes that he can maintain the full human nature of Christ in all of its constituent integrity. However, Augustine maintains that due to Christ's conception being *virginal*, there is an interruption and exception to the normal passing along of original sin. Augustine also explains that the virgin birth in no way casts doubt on the mortality of the nature conceived. The nature that Christ took from Mary was mortal because Mary was born in sin, but Christ's nature was free from original sin because Mary conceived him apart from lust.⁵⁴ Therefore, the form of Christ's conception qualifies him for his work as mediator in relation to the integrity of his human nature and its suitability as an offering of atonement.

The manner of Christ's earthly origin has theological significance beyond its ability to make Christ an exception to the contagion of original sin. Augustine finds in the spiritual conception of Christ's human nature the basis for an analogy by which to

⁵² Augustine, *Trinity*, XIII.23. "Begotten and conceived, then, without any indulgence of carnal lust, and therefore bringing with Him no original sin, and by the grace of God joined and united in a wonderful and unspeakable way in one person with the Word, the Only-begotten of the Father, a son by nature, not by grace, and therefore having no sin of His own; nevertheless, on account of the likeness of sinful flesh in which He came, He was called sin, that He might be sacrificed to wash away sin." Augustine, *Enchiridion*, XLI; cf. XXXIV, CVIII.

⁵³ "The principle is preserved: no one born from man and woman, that is, through that union of bodies, is found to be free from sin; the one who is free from sin is also free from this manner of conception." Augustine, *Marriage and Desire*, I.40; cf. I.13.

⁵⁴ Augustine, "Literal Meaning of Genesis" in *On Genesis*, I/13, The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 2002), X.32.

understand the regeneration of Christians by the Spirit in baptism.⁵⁵ The analogy centres on the grace of the Spirit and Augustine unfolds it as follows. First, just as the agent of the conception of the human nature of Jesus is the third person of the Trinity, so also is the agent of the grace by which we are regenerated in baptism the Holy Spirit.

Appropriately, then, the Holy Spirit is known as the gift of God.⁵⁶ Second, just as the human nature of Christ was generated by the Holy Spirit to be without sin, so is forgiveness of sin found in regeneration by the Holy Spirit at baptism.⁵⁷ Third, just as it was the pure grace of the Spirit that assumed to the divine Word a human nature in which there was no prior merit, so there is no prior merit necessary to enter the waters of baptism.⁵⁸ Fourth, even the manner by which Christ is conceived by the Spirit is duplicated in the re-birth of Christians by the Spirit. In both cases, that which is generated—the human nature of Christ or Christian converts—do not become “sons” of the Holy Spirit. In both cases, the only father is God the Father.⁵⁹

Augustine’s writings on marriage and virginity reveal a further use of the virgin birth. In these writings we see Augustine develop the notion of the virgin birth as a turning point in the meaning of marriage and the begetting of children and, ultimately, as an image of the church. For Augustine, the theological significance and dignity of both marriage and virginity must be assessed in their relation to the Messiah. Under the old covenant, marriage was necessary for the increase and furtherance of the elect nation from which would come the promised messiah.⁶⁰ As such, marriage and child-bearing

⁵⁵ Augustine, *Enchiridion*, XL, XLIX, LXIV; Augustine, *Marriage and Desire*, I.27; Augustine, “Sermon 191,” 3.

⁵⁶ Augustine, *Enchiridion*, XXXVII; cf. Augustine, *The Trinity*, V.13; XV.31

⁵⁷ Augustine, *Enchiridion*, XLVIII; XLII, XLIII.

⁵⁸ Augustine, *Enchiridion*, XXXVI.

⁵⁹ Augustine, *Enchiridion*, XXXVIII-XXXIX.

⁶⁰ Augustine, *Excellence of Marriage*, 9, cf. 17-18, 22, 35.

carried a sacred purpose oriented to the coming of Christ. In this scheme, efficiency in producing children was of the utmost importance. In a polygamous marriage one Israelite man could bring into existence children for Israel more efficiently than if he was married to just one woman. As such, Augustine believes that the marriages of the patriarchs, even though they involved them in sexual practices to which Christians can no longer subscribe, were virtuous because they were undertaken out of a holy duty to God and for sacred purposes, rather than out of lustful desire.⁶¹ Once the Messiah had been born, however, the vocation of marriage was significantly altered. The begetting of earthly children no longer had to function as the means by which God's people were to be increased.⁶² As we saw in the previous section, normal human birth does not entail entrance into the kingdom of God. Such entrance only occurs through re-birth by the Spirit in baptism. The most sacred work that belongs to the people of God is now to bring converts to the regenerating waters of baptism. The demand for more children of God has not changed. However, the manner in which the children of God are born has been altered, from natural to spiritual begetting.⁶³ In the age of the Messiah, a virgin, freed from the cares of a family, can spiritually bear children "more abundantly and fruitfully than would be possible from her womb, however fertile."⁶⁴ For Augustine, it would be a sign of the nearly complete arrival of the Kingdom if all Christians were able to live as virgins dedicated to the birthing-work of their mother, the church.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Augustine, *Excellence of Marriage*, 22; cf. 3, 6, 11, 15.

⁶² Augustine, *Holy Virginity*, in *Marriage and Virginity*, I/9, The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, trans. Ray Kearney (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1999), 16.

⁶³ "Children have had to be provided for our mother Jerusalem, now spiritually and at that time physically, but always from the same source, love. The deeds of the fathers were different only because the times were different." Augustine, *Excellence of Marriage*, 18.

⁶⁴ Augustine, *Holy Virginity*, 9; cf. Augustine, *Excellence of Marriage*, 14.

⁶⁵ For Augustine, the only ones who should marry in the present era are those unable to be continent. See Augustine, *Excellence of Marriage*, 10. In fact, it was just this ideal that was realized in the

Augustine develops a typology between Mary and the church in order to further elucidate how marriage and virginity serve as a pattern for the people of God. By doing so, he makes the form of Christ's birth paradigmatic for understanding the work of the church and to elucidate his description of the birth of children of God by the Spirit in baptism. As a pure virgin who nevertheless bears fruit, Mary is the ideal Christian and the paradigm for the ministry of church.⁶⁶ Both virgins are betrothed to one husband, Mary to Joseph and the church to Christ (2 Corinthians 11:2).⁶⁷ By the betrothed Virgin Mary and by the betrothed virginal church, children of God are miraculously begotten of the Holy Spirit. Of Mary, the Holy Spirit conceives the Son of God in the flesh while preserving the virginity of the mother. Of the church, the Holy Spirit conceives of members of Christ's body while maintaining the virginal purity of the mother. The virginity of Mary lies in the integrity of her body; the virginity of the church lies in the integrity of its faith, hope and love.⁶⁸ The Spirit is the preserver of both. Augustine argues that those who have devoted themselves to a life of virginity hold a special place in the church because they attest to the church's spiritual virginity.⁶⁹ Furthermore, just as Mary cooperated with the Spirit in the physical conception of Christ, so also does the church cooperate with the

holy family, in which Mary and Joseph's marriage anticipated the structures of the Christian sacrament of marriage, maintained fidelity and chastity and bore an offspring who was no less than the Messiah. See Augustine, *Marriage and Desire*, 13. On the legitimacy of the marriage between Mary and Joseph and the legitimacy of Joseph's fatherhood of Jesus, see Augustine, "Sermon 51," 21, 26, 30; cf. Augustine, *Answer to Faustus*, III.1-4.

⁶⁶ Augustine, *Enchiridion*, XXXIV. This theme is particularly pronounced in Augustine's Christmas sermons. See Augustine, "Sermon 191," 4; cf. "Sermon 192," 2; "Sermon 195," 2.

⁶⁷ Augustine implements extensively the image of the church as the betrothed bride of Christ. See Augustine, *Faustus*, XV.3-11.

⁶⁸ Augustine, "Sermon 88," 4.

⁶⁹ Augustine, *Virginity*, 4-5.

Spirit in the spiritual re-birth of Christians.⁷⁰ In this schema, the virgin birth of Christ by the power of the Spirit through Mary functions as the paradigm for the church's ministry.

1.4 St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 CE)

Thomas's contribution to the development of the doctrine of the virgin birth was in the nuance and systemization he brought to the Augustinian trajectory of interpretation. Through his reading of Aristotle, Thomas added a new twist to the doctrine of original sin and this had implications for his understanding of the form of Christ's birth. As a mystery of the faith to be confessed by the church, Thomas argued that the virginal conception and birth of Christ (he treats them separately) cannot be proved solely by the use of unaided human reason. As such, the virgin birth requires a particular manner of theological exposition. Instead of attempting to argue for the veracity of the New Testament account of the birth of Jesus from universal philosophical principles accessible to human reason, the proper manner for reflection on the birth of Jesus is to work out its "fittingness" (*conveniens*) in relation to the givens of Christian faith.⁷¹ The use of aesthetic language dominates Thomas's treatment of the details of Christ's life generally, and his treatment of Christ's virginal conception and Mariology in particular. For Thomas, the central facts of Christian faith have been established and what remains for the theologian to accomplish is the patient drawing out of the lines of

⁷⁰ Augustine, *Virginity*, 6-7.

⁷¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1941), I, 32, 1, ad 2. Hereafter, referenced as *ST*. Thomas describes this mode of inquiry as follows: "[I]n the mystery of the Incarnation we do not seek that which is most miraculous, as in those miracles that are wrought for the confirmation of faith, but *what is most becoming to Divine wisdom, and most expedient to the salvation of man*, since this is what we seek in all matters of faith." Aquinas, *ST*, III, 31, 1, ad 2. Emphasis added. For a concise statement on the motif of "fittingness" in the work of Aquinas, see Joseph P. Wawrykow, *The Westminster Handbook to Thomas Aquinas* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 57-60.

interconnection between the various articles of faith and the boundaries that limit undue speculation.⁷²

Thomas believes that the significance of the form of Christ's conception and birth is manifold. These reasons for the virginal conception presuppose that God's actions in history in the life of Christ are appropriate to God's eternal triune existence. First, Thomas argues that it was fitting that Christ be conceived by a virgin because it would be unfitting for him to have a father other than God. Second, the virginal conception, in which there is no "corruption of the mother" (i.e., there was no sexual intercourse and, thus, no damage to her body) is fitting of the Word of God who is eternally conceived by the Father without resulting in any "internal corruption" in the being of God himself. Third, Christ's virginal conception is a fitting "exemplar" of the incarnation's divinely ordained "end": the rebirth of humans as sons of God by the power of God. Finally, and a reason to which we will return more extensively below, a conception apart from fleshly concupiscence was fitting to the dignity of Christ's humanity in which there was no sin and by which he took away the sin of the world.⁷³

In addition to the fittingness of the virginal *conception* of Jesus, Thomas also adheres to the doctrine of the virgin *birth* of Jesus, namely, that Mary's hymen remained intact during the delivery of the infant Jesus. On this front, Thomas cites the authority of the Council of Ephesus (431 CE). He then provides his own reasons for why it should be so. For Thomas, the most important reason is that the virgin birth is taught by Scripture: Isaiah 7:14 prophesies not only that a virgin shall conceive, but also that a virgin "shall bear a son." Thomas then lists three reasons for why the virgin birth is fitting to the

⁷² Aquinas, *ST*, III, 1, 1, 3c.

⁷³ Aquinas, *ST*, III, 28, 1c.

incarnation of the Son of God. First, a virgin birth is fitting for the human birth of the one who is the Word of God. Even as human words proceed from the mind without damaging the mind from which they came, so should the Word of God not damage the one from whom he is born in the flesh. Second, a virgin birth is fitting for the one who came to take away corruption and so should not corrupt his mother's virginity. Third, it was fitting that he who commanded the honour of one's father and mother should not deprive his mother of the honour of virginity.⁷⁴ By drawing out these lines of reasoning Thomas tries to show that the form of Christ's conception and birth are appropriate to who Christ is as the Word and Son of God.

Thomas reveals his awareness that the uniqueness of Christ's birth may be taken by some to suggest a level of compromise in Christ's human existence. On the contrary, Thomas argues that the miraculous birth of Christ is revelatory of both his divine and human natures.⁷⁵ For Thomas, the conception of Christ was supernatural, but in such a way as to mesh with the natural workings of human reproduction. Being so, the conception and birth of Christ attest to both natures of the person of Christ without abolishing either of them. This concern to distinguish the miraculous and the natural elements of Christ's origin explains, in part, why Thomas works through the entire event of Christ's conception and birth by mapping the biblical description of the nativity onto the science of human reproduction explained in Aristotle's *On the Generation of Animals*. For Thomas, the conception of Christ was entirely natural when considered from the perspective of the contribution of the mother, but when considered from the

⁷⁴ Aquinas, *ST*, III, 28, 2c.

⁷⁵ Aquinas, *ST*, III, 28, 2 ad 2.

perspective of the father, it was miraculous.⁷⁶ For example, he notes how the usual bodily occurrences (menstruation, etc.) in fertile women occurred also in Mary prior to the conception of Jesus and that Jesus developed in the womb of Mary as did any other human being. And yet there were other elements of Christ's birth that were miraculous. Thomas argued that Mary experienced no pain at the birth of Christ; pain in childbearing occurs due to the infant corrupting the birth canal. Miraculously, Christ's birth left Mary's virginity intact. Thus, rather than pain, Mary experienced joy during the birth of her son.⁷⁷

The doctrine of the virgin birth of Christ could lend itself to certain misunderstandings which Thomas aimed to avoid. First, it might be thought that Mary was not truly the mother of Jesus because she did not conceive him in the usual way. However, as we saw above, Thomas is clear that Mary contributed to the conception of Jesus as any other woman would contribute to their son.⁷⁸ The only difference is that Jesus did not have a human father. Yet, Thomas's interlocutor might respond, if Jesus had no human father, but the Holy Spirit supplied that which a man would typically provide, does that make the Holy Spirit the father of Jesus? No, according to Aquinas, for such would be deeply unfitting to the sole fatherhood of God.⁷⁹ Though Jesus is said to have been conceived of the Holy Spirit, attributing fatherhood to him is inappropriate because this term is only fitting when the offspring is of the same nature as he who has begotten it. After all, a man does not call a house he has made his son. The more perfect the likeness that exists between begetter and begotten, the more perfect the sonship. Thus,

⁷⁶ Aquinas, *ST*, III, 33, 4c.

⁷⁷ Aquinas, *ST*, III, 35, 6c.

⁷⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Aquinas's Shorter Summa: St. Thomas Aquinas's Own Concise Version of the Summa Theologica*, trans. Cyril Vollert (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 2002), 222.

⁷⁹ Aquinas, *ST*, III, 32, 3c.

it is only appropriate to speak of God the Father as the father of Jesus Christ, for he begets the person of the Son eternally and perfectly. The divine Holy Spirit and the human nature of Jesus Christ are too different in essence to describe their relationship in terms of paternity.⁸⁰ It is only by way of an imperfect likeness on the basis of the *imago dei* and grace, both of which were exemplified in Jesus of Nazareth, that human beings can be considered sons. The conception of Jesus was attributed to the Holy Spirit for three reasons. First, the work of Christ's conception, in which God's love is shown to the world, fits who the Holy Spirit is as the love of the Father and the Son.⁸¹ Second, the conception of the human nature of Jesus is attributed to the Holy Spirit because the human nature assumed by Christ bore with it no prior merit and the Holy Spirit is viewed in Scripture as the grace of God. Third, Jesus of Nazareth was to be the "holy one of God"; therefore, it is fitting that Christ be conceived by that agent by whom all human beings are sanctified.⁸²

In his exposition of the fittingness of the virgin birth, Thomas follows Augustine in developing the doctrine as the means by which to explain Christ's freedom from original sin. As he did so, however, he relied heavily on Aristotle's biology and moral theory. For Aristotle, as for Thomas, the woman provides the passive, unformed matter necessary for human procreation. The man, through his semen, provides the "activating form" necessary to transform the woman's unformed matter into a living human being. While both elements are necessary, the man's contribution bears with it the generative

⁸⁰ Aquinas, *Aquinas's Shorter Summa*, 223.

⁸¹ See Aquinas, *ST*, I, 37, 1.

⁸² Aquinas, *ST*, III, 32, 1c.; *ST* II, 81, 4, ad 3.

and formative power that determines the moral condition of the resultant nature.⁸³ In this construction, Adam functions both as the biological father of his offspring and, in virtue of his originating position, as the “will” of the entire human race that is his “body.” Just as the body is included in the guilt attributed to the will, so the human race is included in the guilt of Adam’s sin. By virtue of Adam’s relation to all other human beings as the generative principle of human nature, all human beings are guilty because they, as a species and nature, “willed” it in him.⁸⁴ The act of sexual intercourse and the biology of human reproduction function as the material basis for the transmission of the sinful nature from parents to children, but the formal origin of sin that marks the origin of each individual human being is attributed to Adam alone, the guilt for which is thus attached to his descendants. This makes the man’s role in reproduction of particular theological importance. If only Eve had sinned, humankind would not have received original sin. For the woman only provides the passive matter for her child, not its “active principle.”⁸⁵

Thomas’s particular view of the transmission of original sin feeds directly into his treatment of the doctrine of the virgin birth of Christ. Thomas appeals to the form of Christ’s human generation to solve the problem of how Christ can be the bearer of a truly human nature, but also bear that nature without also incurring the guilt of Adam. Thomas explains his basic approach this way:

⁸³ Aquinas, *ST*, II, 81, 1 ad 2, 4. Aristotle describes the male activity in human reproduction in analogy to a carpenter’s relationship to his building. The carpenter does not provide the material from which the house is made. Rather, he provides the movement by which the material takes form and shape. In human reproduction, the male provides the activating movement by which the matter, provided by the female, takes form; see Aristotle, *On the Generation of Animals*, in *Aristotle’s De Partibus Animalium I and De Generatione Animalium I*, trans. D. M. Balme (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), I.21-2.

⁸⁴ Aquinas, *Aquinas’s Shorter Summa*, 196. For a helpful exposition of Aquinas on the transmission of original sin and its culpability, see Rudi A. Te Velde, “Evil, Sin and Death: Thomas Aquinas on Original Sin,” in *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Rik van Nieuwenhove and Joseph Wawrykow (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 143-66.

⁸⁵ Aquinas, *ST*, II, 81, 5c.

[O]riginal sin is transmitted from the first parent to his posterity, inasmuch as they are moved by him through generation, even as the members are moved by the soul to actual sin. Now there is no movement to generation except by the active power of generation: so that those alone contract original sin, who are descended from Adam through the active power of generation originally derived from Adam, i.e., who are descended from him through seminal power; for the seminal power is nothing else than the active power of generation. But if anyone were to be formed by God out of human flesh, it is evident that the active power would not be derived from Adam. Consequently he would not contract original sin: even as a hand would have no part in a human sin, if it were moved, not by the man's will, but some external mover.⁸⁶

Like a hand moved by the agency of another, Christ's human nature was formed without incurring the guilt of Adam. The mechanism of the transmission of original sin is, as we saw above, connected to the sexual act from which procreation results. Following Augustine, Thomas sees concupiscence as a pre-condition for procreation after the Fall. All human beings, at the very point of their origin, are conditioned by this concupiscence. Thomas describes the relationship of concupiscence to original sin as the relationship of cause to species: each species is as it is because of the distinctiveness of its cause.⁸⁷ Original sin is the disorder by which human beings sin because they have been begotten by the disordered desire exemplified in sexual intercourse. Mary, the mother of Jesus, however, conceived her son by the Holy Spirit in faith: no concupiscence was involved.⁸⁸ In the case of Christ, the Holy Spirit chastely enlivened the mother's passive reproductive matter. Christ is thus related to Adam through Mary biologically, but free from Adam's "generative power," which, mediated by an act of inordinate lust performed by a male, would have conditioned Christ's human nature as fallen and guilty.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Aquinas, *ST*, II, 81, 4c; cf. Aquinas, *Aquinas's Shorter Summa*, 218.

⁸⁷ Aquinas, *ST*, II, 82, 4.

⁸⁸ Aquinas, *ST*, III, 31, 5, ad 3.

⁸⁹ Aquinas, *ST*, III, 31, 6, ad 1.

Attention to Thomas's Mariology helps to draw out how the form of Christ's origin was suitably ordered and designed by God. Next to Christ, Mary is afforded the greatest dignity among human beings. Yet Thomas develops the special dignity of Mary precisely as a derivative of Christ's dignity. For Thomas, Christology determines Mariology.⁹⁰ Mary's uniqueness lay in the fact that she was the one chosen to give birth to the incarnate Son of God; as such, she is to be honoured as "Mother of God."⁹¹ This places Mary in the closest possible proximity to the source of grace, the Word of God himself. Only the human nature of Christ is given a dignity that surpasses that of Mary.⁹² For Thomas, the closer one is to the cause of grace, the greater the amount of grace one will be given.⁹³ For both the human nature of Christ and for Mary, grace is not something inherent in their nature; rather, grace has been given them. In the case of both, the mechanism by which the Word was brought close to each of them was the conception by the Spirit.⁹⁴ In this regard, Thomas makes much of Gabriel's greeting in the annunciation: "Hail Mary, full of Grace, the Lord is with thee."⁹⁵ In the annunciation we learn, according to Thomas, that Mary was elected by God to represent creation in giving consent to union with God. Mary acts as the bride who concedes to the marital union with

⁹⁰ "[I]t was fitting that [Mary] should be adorned with the highest degree of purity, that she might be made conformable to such a Son." Aquinas, *Aquinas's Shorter Summa*, 224.

⁹¹ Aquinas, *ST*, III, 35, 4c.

⁹² Aquinas, *ST*, III, 7, 9-10.

⁹³ Aquinas, *ST*, III, 7, 11 ad 1; III, 27, 1c; III, 27, 5c.

⁹⁴ Aquinas, *ST*, III, 2, 12 ad 3; cf. Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 308-312.

⁹⁵ Thomas Aquinas, "Exposition of the Angelic Salutation," in *Thomas Aquinas: Selected Writings*, trans. Ralph McInery (Toronto, ON: Penguin Books, 1998), 825.

the Creator.⁹⁶ As mother and bride, she is brought into the closest possible relation with the incarnate Son and is appropriately graced in the carrying out of her ministry.⁹⁷

Just as Mary's special dignity is derived from the dignity of Christ, Thomas is careful to delineate strictly the limits of her dignity in relation to Christ. This is nicely displayed in Thomas's treatment of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception—the teaching that Mary was conceived through normal sexual means but was sanctified from original sin at the moment of her conception. Thomas refused to attribute to Mary an Immaculate Conception. His reason for doing so is entirely Christological. For Thomas, the Immaculate Conception implies that there was no lapse of time between the fertilization of the embryo and its enlivenment with a rational soul: for only a rational soul can be counted guilty for sin.⁹⁸ However, this honour is due only to Christ. He alone was conceived and enlivened at the same time.⁹⁹ To suggest that Mary was also miraculously enlivened at her conception and never stained by original sin would be also to suggest that Mary had no need for the redemption of Christ.¹⁰⁰ Yet Thomas still also had to have Mary cleansed of original sin. After all, for Thomas, Mary was the pure Mother of God and ascended into heaven—things quite impossible for her had she been afflicted with original sin.¹⁰¹ Rather than an Immaculate Conception, Thomas opted

⁹⁶ “[I]n order to show that there was a certain spiritual wedlock between the Son of God and human nature. Wherefore in the Annunciation the Virgin's consent was besought in lieu of that of the entire human nature.” Aquinas, *ST*, III, 30, 29, 1c.

⁹⁷ An example of the graces that Mary received was her perpetual virginity, for which Thomas argues on the basis of its fittingness. First, Christ should be the “only-begotten” of the Father, as well as of his earthly mother. Second, the Holy Spirit's abode in the virginal womb should not be desecrated by intercourse with a man. Third, it would reflect poorly on Mary's gratitude if she were to give up her virginity that had been miraculously maintained for her. Fourth, it would reflect poorly on Joseph to violate Mary's virginity after having heard from an angel that she had conceived by the Holy Spirit. See Aquinas, *ST*, III, 28, 3c.

⁹⁸ Aquinas, *ST*, III, 27.2c; cf. III, 34, 1c.

⁹⁹ Aquinas, *ST*, III, 33, 1c-3c.

¹⁰⁰ Aquinas, *ST*, III, 27, 2c and ad 2.

¹⁰¹ Aquinas, *ST*, III, 27, 3-5.

instead to argue that Mary was sanctified in the womb after the normal course of foetal development and endowed with a rational soul.¹⁰² Both John the Baptist (Luke 1:15) and Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:5) were thought to have also been so sanctified, and if Mary's dignity is to surpass theirs by virtue of being Christ's mother, then she also must have been freed from original sin.¹⁰³ Entirely absent from Thomas's treatment of Mary's purity is the pressure to free her from original sin in order to also preserve Christ from original sin. Thomas is emphatic that the sanctification of Mary in the womb was not required to hinder the transmission of original sin to Christ, but is fitting simply as an honour due the Mother of God.¹⁰⁴ By attributing to Mary sanctification in the womb, Thomas is able to free Mary from original sin without also relieving her of the necessity of redemption by Christ.

1.5 Martin Luther (1483-1546 CE)

Luther's doctrine of the virgin birth is likewise deeply indebted to Augustine, though he brings to it significant nuance.¹⁰⁵ For Martin Luther, the virgin birth of Christ was an event attested throughout Scripture. However, the clarity of the texts that attest to Christ's miraculous birth grew progressively greater as revelation unfolded. Luther believes that the progressive unveiling of the manner of Christ's birth was a divine strategy in the cosmic battle between God and the Devil. The conflict appears already in the Garden of Eden where Satan craftily enticed Eve to sin and, through her, brought

¹⁰² Aquinas, *ST*, III, 27, 1, ad 2-3.

¹⁰³ Aquinas, *ST*, III, 27, 1c; cf. III, 27, 6.

¹⁰⁴ Aquinas, *ST*, II, 81, 5, ad 3.

¹⁰⁵ By relegating his treatment of the Magisterial reformers to a mere footnote to the classical period, Boslooper fails to perceive the distinctive changes that took place in how they understood the birth of Christ. See Boslooper, *Virgin Birth*, 50.

Adam to ruin.¹⁰⁶ Luther describes how Satan is cursed through the serpent by God and condemned without the hope for redemption. By contrast, God does provide such a hope for Adam and Eve. The words of Genesis 3:15 are crucial for Luther: “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise you on the head and you shall bruise him on the heel.”¹⁰⁷ This passage is taken by Luther to frame the entire history of redemption as the first promise of the coming Christ and, as we shall see, is directly connected with the virgin birth.¹⁰⁸

Throughout sacred history there is a conflict of cosmic proportions between the “seed” of woman and the “seed” of the serpent—between the descendant of Eve and the progeny of Satan.¹⁰⁹ As such, procreation takes on a sacred, even martial, character, for from the woman will come the one promised to bring about the downfall of Satan.¹¹⁰ But who exactly is the promised seed and precisely how will he bring about the redemption of the human race? The ambiguity of Genesis 3:15 is important for Luther because its very opacity allows certain advantages not otherwise afforded. The open-endedness of the prophecy served both to preserve humanity and to increase humanity’s faith until the time was right for the promised child to be born. Even Eve, according to Luther, mistakenly thought that her firstborn son would be the deliverer, hence her description of Cain as “the Lord” in Genesis 4:1.¹¹¹ Only subsequent revelation would make the identity of the promised seed clearer, as well as the precise manner by which he would enter the world.

¹⁰⁶ Martin Luther, *American Edition of Luther’s Works*, vol. 1, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and H.T. Lehmann (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Muhlenberg, Concordia, 1955-), 63-4. Hereafter, the volume of the work will be cited, for example, as follows: *LW* 1.

¹⁰⁷ Luther, *LW* 1, 192.

¹⁰⁸ Luther, *LW* 45, 201.

¹⁰⁹ Luther, *LW* 1, 190.

¹¹⁰ Luther, *LW* 1, 191, 237.

¹¹¹ Luther translated Genesis 4:1 as follows: “I have gotten a man [who is] the Lord.” See Luther, *LW* 1, 193-4, cf. 220.

The lack of specificity of the promise incited Satan to attack the entire human race in order to extinguish the species through which would come the one destined to cause his downfall. With Satan's attacks so dispersed, the promised line was able to develop as the chosen people continued their sacred work of childbearing, always hoping that their deliverer would soon arrive.¹¹² The identity of the promised woman's seed is only progressively narrowed as God's revelation unfolds, such as in the selection of Abraham's descendants who bore the promise and eventually the tribe of Judah.¹¹³ During the time of the prophets and kings of Israel, the identity of the promised seed is said to be marked with a miracle: a virgin shall conceive and bear a child, clearly set out in Isaiah 7:14. According to Luther, failure to understand the plain sense of this text could only be the result of extreme callousness.¹¹⁴ At the time of Herod, the angel finally announced the fulfillment of this sign to Mary (Luke 1:34-5).¹¹⁵ Once the identity of the

¹¹² Luther, *LW* 1, 195-6.

¹¹³ Martin Luther, *Vom Schem Hamphoras*, in *The Jew in Christian Theology*, Gerhard Falk, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1992), 87-8, 164. Luther lists several prophecies of the coming Messiah, but the ones we are concerned with here are those specifically related to "seed" of Genesis 3:15. See Luther, *LW* 45, 213-229.

¹¹⁴ According to Luther, the Jews have become so callous that they do everything in their power to obscure this otherwise crystal clear attestation of Jesus of Nazareth. In his polemic against them we see Luther working with the Hebrew texts themselves, rather than appealing to the LXX and its surrounding legends in the manner of Irenaeus. His defence of the term "virgin" illustrates well the mindset that comes to characterize Protestant exegesis of the virgin birth. Now the plain sense of Scripture dominates the exegesis of Scripture. Luther concedes that the Hebrew term used in Isaiah 7:14 ('*almah*') has a range of meaning broader than simply "virgin" (*Jungfrau*). All things being equal, it was more likely that '*almah*' should be rendered as "young maiden" (*Madg*). However, Luther argues that even if the Hebrew term meant young maiden (*Madg*), the virginity of this young maiden was not ruled out and was even required by the text. The fact that the promise of Immanuel to Ahaz was intended to be a sign requires that the circumstances of this child's birth be extraordinary. If not, then the birth of the promised child would fail to be much of a sign. For Luther, the prophecy given to Isaiah, on the basis of good linguistic analysis, clearly means that a virgin will give birth and this is precisely what Matthew has done (Matthew 1:18). Mary is a young maiden (*Madg*) who is also a virgin (*Jungfrau*) and her pregnancy functions as a sign of the salvation of God. According to Luther, Isaiah and Matthew understood the same meaning and purpose in their respective use of '*almah*' and *parthenos*. See Luther, *LW* 45, 207-13; *Vom Schem Hamphoras*, 150-1, 160.

¹¹⁵ Luther, *LW* 1, 194.

seed had been made known, Satan unleashes one of his most awful attacks through Herod in order to destroy the promised one (Matthew 2:1-23).

When the identity of the promised seed had finally been unveiled, all of the previous prophecies come to be seen in their fullest sense. It becomes clear that the promised seed was to be born of a virgin all along.¹¹⁶ The only way for a deliverer to come from the “seed” of a woman is if that deliverer could be born without the curse of sin.¹¹⁷ Apart from such a birth, the lust that marks all human begetting would also have contaminated the seed that was destined to have victory over the cause of human misery.¹¹⁸

This seed of the woman therefore, because he is to crush the devil’s power, that is, sin and death, must not be an ordinary man, since all men have been brought under the devil through sin and death. So he must certainly be without sin. Now human nature does not produce such seed or fruit, as has been said, for with their sin they are all under the devil. How, then, can this be? The seed must be the natural child of a woman; otherwise, it could not be or be called the seed of the woman. On the other hand, as has been pointed out, human nature and birth does not produce such a seed. Therefore, the solution must ultimately be that this seed is a true natural son of the woman; derived from the woman, however, not in the normal way but through a special act of God, in order that the Scripture might stand, that he is the seed only of a woman and not of a man.¹¹⁹

Even the wordings of the prophecies themselves contain clues for the virgin birth.

Genesis 3:15, for instance, states that the seed will be from a woman; no mention is made of a man.¹²⁰ Once it is clear that Jesus is the Messiah, all questions about his descent have been effectively resolved and Scripture becomes clear.

The doctrine of the virgin birth also contributes to Luther’s distinctive understanding of the humanity of Christ. In his hostile arguments with the Swiss

¹¹⁶ Luther, *LW* 1, 194, cf. 217-8.

¹¹⁷ Luther, *LW* 45, 202.

¹¹⁸ Luther, *LW* 45, 202.

¹¹⁹ Luther, *LW* 45, 202

¹²⁰ Luther, *LW* 1, 194; cf. *LW* 45, 203-4, 206.

theologians over the “real presence” of Christ in the Eucharist, Luther deployed the doctrine of the virgin birth in order to bolster his particular view of the ubiquity of Christ’s flesh.¹²¹ The Swiss theologians argued that participation in the Eucharist represented physically the *spiritual* eating of the body and blood of Christ—partaking by faith in Christ’s death and resurrection. The words of institution—“This is my body”—were to be read as a metaphor for what was occurring spiritually within the participant. The Swiss theologians partially based their views on John 6, particularly verse 63: “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing.” What spiritual benefit is there, ask the Swiss theologians, in the flesh of Christ being present in the bread of the Eucharist? Luther refused to accept what he believed was the implication of the Swiss position, that the corporality of Christ’s flesh was of no value. Instead, he appealed to the Apostle Paul and aimed to show how the term “flesh” often denotes not the physical but the *sinful* nature. Thus, Jesus’ words were not a condemnation of corporality, and certainly not a denigration of his own body.¹²² On the contrary, Luther believed that Jesus’ body was itself spiritually profitable. Here Luther appeals directly to Christ’s unique origin: the spiritual manner of Christ’s conception is the reason why Christ’s flesh is spiritual flesh.¹²³ Luther writes:

Here you see clearly that Christ’s body is born of the Spirit and is holy, therefore he must certainly be not flesh but spirit, according to the saying of Christ, “That which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” Of no other man, however, do the Scriptures speak in this manner....Now if Christ’s flesh is distinguished from all flesh and is solely and pre-eminently a spiritual flesh, born not of the flesh but of the Spirit, then it is also a spiritual food.¹²⁴

¹²¹ The debate between Luther and the Swiss Reformed theologians is summarized in Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 169-77.

¹²² Luther, *LW* 37, 96.

¹²³ “Rather, it is called ‘spiritual’ because it comes from the Spirit, and needs to be and must be partaken of by us in a spiritual way.” Luther, *LW* 37, 89.

¹²⁴ Luther, *LW* 37, 99.

As spiritual, Christ's flesh is effective for accomplishing salvation. That his flesh is Spirit-conceived does not take away from its corporality.¹²⁵ Rather, the Spirit establishes the efficacy of the corporeal flesh for salvation.

At its core, Luther's criticism of the "fanatics" was that they determined to tell God how he should be present, in such a way that they could comprehend it with their human cognitive faculties. This transgressed the nature of faith, as Luther conceived it. Luther contended in response to the Swiss that it is God's prerogative to be present as he likes, whether in the womb of Mary or in the Eucharist. The presence of the Word is always a miracle beyond human reason.¹²⁶ As such, one must despise their human reason and trust the Scriptures which express the sovereign will of God. For Luther, the virgin birth functioned as an absurdity at the beginning of Christ's life just as the cross functioned similarly at the end of Christ's life: both demand the exercise of faith.¹²⁷ As such, it is a mystery that humbles human reasoning.¹²⁸ Furthermore, just as Luther refused to engage in debates about whether or not it is *necessary* that Christ be present in the Eucharist, so he refuses to speculate about the necessity of the virgin birth.¹²⁹ To do so would presume that human reason had some purchase on the freedom of God. Instead, God has said what is so in the Scriptures and it falls to his people to exercise faith, no

¹²⁵ Luther's position on Christ's spiritual flesh should be distinguished from that which came to characterize certain Anabaptist theologians, such as Caspar Schwenkfeld and Menno Simons, a position which Luther regarded as Manichean and which we shall examine closer below with John Calvin. See Luther, *LW* 22, 22-6.

¹²⁶ Luther, *LW* 37, 77.

¹²⁷ Luther, *LW* 36, 338; cf. Luther, *LW* 1, 125; 122-8.

¹²⁸ Luther, *LW* 36, 341.

¹²⁹ Luther, *LW* 36, 344-5.

matter how absurd the article may appear. By making such outlandish promises and keeping them, as he did in the case with the virgin birth, God elicits faith.¹³⁰

Finally, it is worthwhile for our purposes to devote some space to Luther's view of Mary. In Luther's 1521 exposition of Mary's *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55) he sets Mary up as an exemplar of proper Christian life.¹³¹ For Luther, God's work of conceiving Christ in Mary exemplified grace. Rather than a possession of virtue, Mary's "humility" is simply her "low estate," her poor and despised position in life. Mary's lowliness functions as a representation of the lowliness of all of creation. Just as God had created the world out of nothing, so he makes something exalted and blessed out of that which is without repute and despised.¹³² Only Christ's crucifixion would seem to express the lowliness of creation before God more adequately.¹³³ Luther likens Mary to a mere beggar taken by the hand of a great prince.¹³⁴ She is like the wood out of which the cross was constructed.¹³⁵ Mary is simply appointed for the necessary work in virtue of her being a virgin of the tribe of Judah and believing the angelic announcement. Her dignity is simply that of a "guest chamber" in which the greatest possible guest made his abode

¹³⁰ Luther, *LW* 21, 353-4.

¹³¹ Luther, *LW* 21, 298, 323. On the whole, Luther devotes much of his writing on Mary to freeing her from what he believed to be the excesses that had arisen around her. He feared that Mary had become an idol in the minds of many and that her exaltation distracted people from the grace of Christ. From these comments, it might be assumed that Luther scorned all forms of Marian piety. This would be far from the truth. Rather, Luther himself affirmed and prescribed prayers to Mary. See Luther, *LW* 21, 321, 326-7, 329, 355. He also upheld such doctrines as Mary's perpetual virginity, sinlessness, as well as the title "Queen of Heaven," if such teachings were understood strictly in relation to Christ. See Luther, *Vom Schem Hamphoras*, 216; *LW* 45, 205; *LW* 21, 327-8. For an overview of Mary in Luther's writings, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 153-64; Beth Kreitzer, "Luther Regarding the Virgin Mary," in *The Pastoral Luther: Essays on Martin Luther's Practical Theology*, ed., Timothy J. Wengert (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 233-50.

¹³² Luther, *LW* 21, 299, 301.

¹³³ Luther, *LW* 21, 301.

¹³⁴ Luther, *LW* 21, 314; cf. 312-3.

¹³⁵ Luther, *LW* 21, 327.

for a time.¹³⁶ Mary symbolizes the dead stem and root of David (Isaiah 11:1-2), but from which God brings the promised rod and flower. At its most unlikely point—both biologically and socially—the dead stump of David was enlivened by God to give birth to the Messiah.¹³⁷ In all these cases, there is nothing intrinsic to Mary that merited the dignity of becoming the mother of the Messiah. Mary's virginity manifests her "lack" in the eyes of human reason and, as such, witnesses to the sovereign and free grace of God.¹³⁸

Mary's example lies in the recognition of her lowliness and the fact that God has regarded her. Her words in the *Magnificat* are shown by Luther to exemplify the only acceptable form of human praise to God for his grace, one in which all merit is attributed to God alone. "Not *she* is praised thereby, but God's *grace* toward her. In fact, she is despised, and she despises herself in that she says her low estate was regarded by God."¹³⁹ Honouring Mary means following her example of praising God for his grace which is bestowed on those who far from deserve it.¹⁴⁰ Even Mary's ability to exalt the Lord is given her by the Spirit who draws Mary's particular experiences into worship.¹⁴¹ Indeed, for Luther, the more we ascribe merit to Mary, the more we lessen the grace of God. She is only greeted as full of grace because the Lord is with her (Luke 1:28).¹⁴² Just as Mary's virginity is a symbol of human need before God, so does following Mary's example means acknowledging that all human beings are lowly and despised in God's

¹³⁶ Luther, *LW* 21, 308.

¹³⁷ Luther, *LW* 21, 301-2.

¹³⁸ Luther, *LW* 21, 353-4.

¹³⁹ Luther, *LW* 21, 321.

¹⁴⁰ Luther, *LW* 21, 322.

¹⁴¹ Luther, *LW* 21, 307; cf. 302.

¹⁴² Luther, *LW* 21, 322.

sight and that they ought to hope only for his gracious regard. For Luther, treating Mary as meritorious deprives her of her example for the church.

1.6 John Calvin (1509-1564 CE)

Calvin provided only a short exposition of the doctrine of the virgin birth as an aspect of his discussion of Christ's humanity in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* of 1559. Calvin develops his understanding of Christ's humanity by relating his position to two major errors: the Manichean notion of a "heavenly flesh," in which Christ did not have human flesh of the stock of Adam, and the Marcionite belief that Christ's body was real only in appearance.¹⁴³ Beneath the surface of Calvin's exposition of these positions can be detected a thinly-veiled polemic against some of Calvin's Anabaptist contemporaries, Menno Simons (1496-1561) among them, whose view of Christ's flesh brought upon him the charge of heresy.¹⁴⁴ Simons argued that the humanity of Christ was not taken from Mary, but was created directly by God himself.¹⁴⁵ This conviction was a result of Simons' understanding of the virgin birth and what he understood to be the science of human reproduction inherent in the Bible. Simons believed that in human procreation, it is the male alone who possesses "seed," which he understood to be the only reproductive material necessary for procreation.¹⁴⁶ It is this seed that carries with it

¹⁴³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, The Library of Christian Classics, vol. XX and XXI, ed. John T. McNeill and trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PN: The Westminster Press, 1960), 474-5.

¹⁴⁴ The discussion in the *Institutes* is closely related to Calvin's refutation of the view of the Anabaptists Melchior Hofman and Menno Simons. See John Calvin, "Brief Instruction for Arming All the Good Faithful Against the Errors of the Common Sect of the Anabaptists," in *Treatise Against the Anabaptists and Against the Libertines*, trans. Benjamin Wirt Farley (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1982), 106-18. For an overview of Calvin's relationship to the Anabaptists, particularly on the matter of the incarnation, see Willem Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals*, trans. William Heynen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 202-8, 301-3.

¹⁴⁵ Menno Simons, "On the Incarnation of Our Lord," in *The Complete Works of Menno Simons*, trans. Leonard Veduin, ed. John Christian Wenger (Scottsdale PA: Herald Press, 1973), 796-8, 811-12.

¹⁴⁶ Simons, "On the Incarnation," 793. Balke mistakenly argues that it is Menno's Aristotelian biology which is the reason for Menno's belief about the virgin birth; see Balke, *Calvin and the*

corrupt human nature and original sin. By Christ being born of a virgin, Simons understood Mary to have received from God the Father a spotless seed of human nature in her womb and, contributing nothing to the composition of the human nature itself, she only had to nurture this seed in her womb and give birth to it.¹⁴⁷ By virtue of his birth from the Virgin Mary, Jesus could legally partake of the Davidic lineage through his mother while being truly the Son of God.¹⁴⁸

For Calvin, Simons' view severed the connection between Christ's human nature and Adam, whose physically-begotten descendants he came to redeem.¹⁴⁹ To prove Christ's genuine humanity, Calvin places much weight on Christ's ascription to himself of the title "Son of Man" and the application of Psalm 8 to Christ by the writers of the New Testament.¹⁵⁰ A "son of man" is, according to Calvin, the equivalent of saying "a true man" in Hebrew idiom.¹⁵¹ If Jesus is truly the Son of Man, then he must have a biological connection with the rest of humanity. Calvin believes Scripture unambiguously presents Christ as the "seed" of Abraham and in the line of David according to his human nature.¹⁵² The infancy narratives express this fact through the genealogies, which display that Jesus is of the seed of Abraham and David both legally and biologically because Mary and Joseph share a close family lineage.¹⁵³ According to Calvin, it is only possible for his opponents to use the virgin birth to deny Christ's natural descent from Adam,

Anabaptists, 206. However, as we saw in our treatment of Aquinas, Aristotle actually attributes to the woman the physical matter for procreation; the male provides the "active form." Furthermore, Menno himself refuses to engage in scientific biological discussions and roots his understanding of reproduction in Scripture's own description of human procreation, particularly the birth of Isaac from Sarah, whose womb God opened to receive the seed of promise from Abraham.

¹⁴⁷ Simons, "On the Incarnation," 794.

¹⁴⁸ Simons, "On the Incarnation," 794, 800.

¹⁴⁹ Calvin, "Brief Instruction," 112.

¹⁵⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 477.

¹⁵¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 477.

¹⁵² Calvin cites Galatians 3:16; Romans 1:3; Romans 9:5; Acts 2:30. See Calvin, *Institutes*, 478; cf. "Brief Instruction," 109-10.

¹⁵³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 479; cf. *Harmony*, 82-4.

Abraham and David if they “overturn the principles of nature” and maintain that women are “without seed.”¹⁵⁴ On the contrary, Calvin maintained that the Holy Spirit formed Jesus’ human nature “from the substance of His mother, so that He is truly of the seed of Abraham and fruit of David’s loins, as the same Spirit had earlier proclaimed of him.”¹⁵⁵

To this point Calvin has only focused his attention on establishing that the virgin birth does not discount Christ’s biological relation to humanity. However, it was also his concern to maintain Christ’s freedom from original sin. For Calvin’s Anabaptist opponents, the way in which the Augustinian tradition had described the transmission of sin and the conception of Christ to include the taking of flesh from Mary entailed one of two possibilities: either Mary herself was cleansed from sin or Christ himself had contracted original sin.¹⁵⁶ Calvin denies both implications and he is able to do so because of his distinctive doctrine of original sin’s transmission. Like his opponents, Calvin describes the transmission of original sin in terms of natural heredity and the inheritance of a corrupted nature.¹⁵⁷ However, Calvin is careful to nuance his understanding so that it does not depend purely on biological inheritance. Calvin denies the doctrine of traducianism, the notion that Adam had within himself a part of the soul or substance of all of his offspring.¹⁵⁸ The contagion of sin was not attached to the flesh or soul as a physical virus to be passed on biologically. Instead, and this is quite crucial, it is by God’s sovereign ordinance alone that the human nature of Adam and his descendants is corrupted. Calvin wants to locate original sin at the very beginning of every human life

¹⁵⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 479-80.

¹⁵⁵ Calvin, “Brief Instruction,” 116.

¹⁵⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 480.

¹⁵⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 250-1; 246.

¹⁵⁸ Calvin’s distinctiveness in this regard is noted in Francois Wendel, *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans., Philip Maret (Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1987), 194-6.

and explain the origin of this corruption of nature to be in Adam, yet he does not want to go so far as to suggest that the transmission of sin inheres in either the act of procreation itself or in some element of human nature. Instead, it is explicitly as the punishment for sin that God has ordained that human nature is corrupted from the beginning of each new human life.¹⁵⁹ In such a construction, any biological or sexual mechanism whereby original sin may be transmitted is entirely de-emphasized, the focus being placed entirely on the will of God.

Calvin's idea on the transmission of original sin plays out in his approach to the apparent conflict between Christ's human nature and freedom from the contagion of original sin. Calvin refuses to use the virgin birth as a biological solution to a spiritual problem. He writes: "For we make Christ free from all stain not just because he was begotten of his mother without copulation with man, but because he was sanctified by the Spirit that the generation might be pure and undefiled as would have been true before Adam's fall."¹⁶⁰ Though Christ took his flesh from Mary, the Holy Spirit worked to guarantee that no corruption of nature would be imputed to Jesus through his human generation. "For the Holy Spirit intervened in order to sanctify Him from the beginning and, in sanctifying Him, to preserve Him so that He might not be stained by any human pollution of any kind."¹⁶¹ In this way, Calvin thought he could maintain Christ's true humanity as the "son of man" by rooting it in a biological connection with Adamic humanity without also attributing its corruption to Christ.

¹⁵⁹ Calvin writes: "Therefore we declare that man is corrupted through natural vitiation, but a vitiation that did not flow from nature. We deny that it has flowed from nature in order to indicate that it is an adventitious quality which comes upon man rather than a substantial property which has been implanted from the beginning. Yet we call it 'natural' in order that no man may think that anyone obtains it through bad conduct, since it holds all men fast by hereditary right." Calvin, *Institutes*, 254.

¹⁶⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 481.

¹⁶¹ Calvin, "Brief Instruction," 116.

In this description of the sinlessness of Christ, the virgin birth itself does not make any explicit contribution. Rather, the weight is placed entirely on the sanctifying work of the Spirit in suspending the divinely-ordained transmission of original sin. This is not to suggest that the manner of Christ's conception has no theological function for Calvin. Its function, however, is now a purely epistemological one. Calvin does not need the virgin birth to guarantee Christ's freedom from original sin, but he does explain that the virgin birth communicates to Christians the holiness of their Saviour. In his exegesis of Luke 1:35, Calvin writes:

Though Christ was formed of the seed of Abraham, yet he contracted no defilement from a sinful nature; for the Spirit of God kept him pure from the very commencement: and this was done not merely that he might abound in personal holiness, but chiefly that he might sanctify his own people. The manner of conception, therefore, assures us that we have a Mediator separate from sinners (Hebrews 7:26).¹⁶²

In this passage Calvin appeals to the work of the Spirit as the sole reason for Christ's sinlessness; the virginal conception of Jesus is intended for the assurance of Christians.

The noetic function of the virgin birth is clearly seen in Calvin's treatment of Isaiah 7:14, where the virgin birth is the fulfillment of the promise given in the days of King Ahaz to be an encouragement for the people of Jerusalem. Calvin expresses his awareness that a sign promised in Ahaz's time that is only to be fulfilled centuries later causes difficulty in the original context of Isaiah 7. How could such a sign provide any encouragement for Ahaz? In order to solve this difficulty, Calvin attempts to view the prophecy within the broader covenant history of Israel. The sign of Immanuel, though not fulfilled until the distant future, still had existential purchase on Ahaz's present situation because Israel had to be preserved in order that it might still bring forth the Messiah

¹⁶² John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vol. 1, trans. William Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845), 43-4.

whom God promised would come and whose advent would be marked by a virgin birth.¹⁶³ The deliverance of Jerusalem which was promised to Ahaz took place in his time for the sake of that final redemption of Jerusalem to occur when the one born of a virgin is made manifest. Regardless of the linguistic questions about the term “virgin” in Isaiah 7:14, Calvin argued that the fact that the pregnancy of this young woman would be a sign meant that there had to be something extraordinary about it.¹⁶⁴ A child born through regular human procreation would simply not have this same effect.¹⁶⁵ Rather than a mechanism by which to free Christ from original sin, the virgin birth functions as a sign by which the redeemer might be recognized.

1.7 Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834 CE)

With Schleiermacher we have perhaps the most famous critic of the doctrine of the virgin birth as it was expounded by classical theology. Schleiermacher criticizes the doctrine particularly because he cannot derive from it a constructive dogmatic purpose. For Schleiermacher, the redemptive significance of Jesus of Nazareth lies in the perfect

¹⁶³ Calvin, *Harmony*, 102; cf. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Prophet Isaiah*, vol. 1, trans. William Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1850), 245-7

¹⁶⁴ Calvin, *Harmony*, 104.

¹⁶⁵ The subsequent Reformed tradition followed either Calvin or the classical Augustinian position on this point. For example, *The First Confession of Basel* (1534), *The First Helvetic Confession* (1536), *The French Confession* (1559), *The Belgic Confession* (1561), *The Second Helvetic Confession* (1566), *The Larger Westminster Catechism* (1647) each explicitly or implicitly make the connection between the transmission of original sin, the virgin birth, and Christ's sinlessness. On the other hand, there were also Reformed symbolic writings that either simply affirm the virgin birth/conception by the Spirit and do not make the connection between to Christ's sinlessness or place the emphasis decidedly on the work of the Spirit, rather than Mary's virginity, as the cause of Christ's sinlessness (e.g., *The Tetrapolitan Confession* [1530], the confession of faith used in the English congregation at Geneva [1536], *Calvin's Catechism* [1541], *The Scots Confession* [1560], *The Heidelberg Catechism* [1563], *Craig's Catechism* [1581]), see Arthur C. Cochrane, ed. *Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966); Thomas F. Torrance ed., *The School of Faith: The Catechisms of the Reformed Church* (London: James Clarke & Co., 1959). Finally, among representative Reformed theologians in the 17th century, it was largely assumed that the virgin birth/conception by the Spirit were the means by which Christ was enabled to be sinless. See Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. G.T. Thomson (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1950), 421-7.

and complete ascendancy of the God-consciousness in him.¹⁶⁶ That is to say, God is present in Jesus in the same way as he is present in all other human beings, except to a far greater degree.¹⁶⁷ The divinity of Christ, understood in this way, is also a statement of his sinlessness. It is because all of Jesus' experiences and actions were determined supremely by his God-consciousness, without conflict or interruption from his sensual nature, that he could be said to be free from sin.¹⁶⁸ Christ's sinlessness is so important for Schleiermacher's theology because it displays the God-consciousness within him and held the ability to impart the consciousness of God to others.¹⁶⁹ When the early disciples perceived the perfection of Christ, their own consciousness of God was awakened and developed. In turn, the proclamation of the sinless Christ by the first disciples had a similar effect on others, thus perpetuating the redemptive work of Christ through history.¹⁷⁰

Implicit within Schleiermacher's view of Christ's work of redemption is his distinctive view of sin. Schleiermacher defines sin as that which "has arrested the free development of the God-consciousness."¹⁷¹ Sin is tied to one's relation to the external world. The free development of the God-consciousness, which Schleiermacher calls the spirit, is hampered when the human person allows the consciousness of sensations

¹⁶⁶ Schleiermacher writes: "The Redeemer, then, is like all men in virtue of the identity of human nature, but distinguished from them all by the constant potency of His God-consciousness, which was a veritable existence of God in Him." Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 385; cf. Terrence N. Tice, *Schleiermacher* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 37.

¹⁶⁷ Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, 397.

¹⁶⁸ Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, 383; cf. 413-6; Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Life of Jesus*, trans. S. MacLean Gilmour (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 144-55.

¹⁶⁹ Keith Clements, *Friedrich Schleiermacher: Pioneer of Modern Theology* (London: Collins Liturgical Publications, 1987), 57; cf. Colin Brown, *Jesus in European Protestant Thought: 1778-1860* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985), 119.

¹⁷⁰ Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, 364; cf. Walter E. Wyman, Jr., "Sin and Redemption," in *The Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher*, ed. Jacqueline Mariña (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 129-49.

¹⁷¹ Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, 271.

derived from the world, called the flesh, to preoccupy and determine one's thoughts and actions.¹⁷² Thus, sin is best described as “*Godlessness*, or, better, *God-forgetfulness*.”¹⁷³ In infancy, the ascendancy of the flesh over the spirit is a natural aspect of human development. However, rather than the flesh giving way to the God-consciousness as the human being matures, the flesh continues to resist and suppresses the spirit. It is this universal inability to develop the God-consciousness naturally that Schleiermacher refers to as original sin.¹⁷⁴ Original sin is “transmitted” from generation to generation, but not by means of natural heredity. Schleiermacher is explicit that there was no change in human nature introduced after the sin of our first parents.¹⁷⁵ Notions of the transmission of original sin and original guilt based on Adam's biological role or representative status depend on an obsolete view of the origin of souls, according to Schleiermacher.¹⁷⁶ Rather, original sin is passed from one generation to the other through the sinful actions performed by the previous generation.¹⁷⁷ These sinful actions bear a specific character that influences the younger generation in a corresponding way. Each subsequent generation contributes to the growth of sin as they add their own particular sinful actions. As such, original sin is understood by Schleiermacher as a corporate phenomenon of the entire human race.¹⁷⁸

If this is the way that it stands with human existence, one must ask how the sinless Redeemer could be realized in a historical individual who developed out of the corporate life of the sinful human race. At this point, Schleiermacher must posit a

¹⁷² Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, 273

¹⁷³ Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, 54. Emphasis in original.

¹⁷⁴ Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, 283.

¹⁷⁵ Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, 298.

¹⁷⁶ Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, 300-1.

¹⁷⁷ Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, 288.

¹⁷⁸ Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, 304.

“miraculous fact”: the man Jesus could function as the Redeemer only because divine activity insured that the God-consciousness would not be hindered within him even though he has full share in corporate humanity.¹⁷⁹ Schleiermacher explains that this occurred at the conception of Jesus and is shrouded in the mysteries of the beginnings of his life.¹⁸⁰ From his birth onwards, this man developed in the same way as others. However, the God-consciousness in him was never hampered in this development by the ascendancy of his sensual nature.¹⁸¹ The miraculous birth of Jesus is directly connected to his freedom from original sin. For Schleiermacher, God miraculously superintended the conception and birth of Christ in such a way that he was, according to each stage of human development, made immune to the corrupting influence of the society around him, thus allowing the free reign of his God-consciousness.

While Schleiermacher accepts that a miracle must have occurred at the origin of Christ’s life, he rejects the idea that this miracle took the form of a virgin birth. Schleiermacher can find no connection between a virgin birth and the existence of God in Christ or the idea of Christ’s sinlessness. Schleiermacher writes:

For the being of God in a life cannot be explained by its origin from a virgin without sexual intercourse; and equally the absence of any parental share in the new life cannot free that life from participation in the corporate life of sinfulness so long as the maternal share remains altogether what it is by nature.¹⁸²

Furthermore, according to Schleiermacher, among Christ’s original followers “no great value was attached to the circumstance [of Christ’s birth], nor was there any quite fixed and generally recognized tradition on the subject, and even the ancient creeds themselves

¹⁷⁹ Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, 380-1.

¹⁸⁰ Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, 388, 405.

¹⁸¹ Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, 383.

¹⁸² Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, 405; cf. Schleiermacher, *Life of Jesus*, 58-9; Donald G. Dawe, “The Virgin Mary in Modern Reformed Theology,” *One in Christ* 16 (1980): 130.

betray virtually no trace of a dogmatic purpose.”¹⁸³ Insofar as the doctrine of the virgin birth fails to hold any function that contributes to the elucidation of the person and work of Christ, it is thus “superfluous” and “has no connexion of any kind with the essential elements of the particular dignity of the Redeemer; and hence, in and by itself, is no constituent part of Christian doctrine.”¹⁸⁴ In fact, he suggests that the notion of the virginal conception of Christ actually hampers true Christian piety and, far from the doctrine being merely optional, should be excised.¹⁸⁵

Since the virgin birth lacks any notable systematic function within Christian piety, its status as an element of Christian faith is relegated to that of other alleged miracles within Christ’s life. The biblical account of these miracles falls under the purview of the doctrine of Scripture and is to be approached from the vantage point of critical exegesis and interpretation.¹⁸⁶ In Schleiermacher’s treatment of the infancy narratives, he notes several difficulties. First of all, there is the problem of their origin. The theory that they came from Jesus himself is highly dubious, as is the difficulty of positing Mary herself as their source. If Mary relayed this material, why did John, to whom Mary is understood to have been the closest, fail to include it in his account? Schleiermacher concludes that the reports of Christ’s birth must have come from someone who did not have direct access to

¹⁸³ Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, 403-4.

¹⁸⁴ Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, 405.

¹⁸⁵ In his *Christmas Eve* dialogue of 1826, a debate ensues among the guests over whether young Sophie exhibits too much of a tendency to religious fanaticism and is in danger of joining a Catholic convent or becoming a Herrnhut sister. Eduard, her father, draws the debate to a close by illustrating Sophie’s good sense through an appeal to her ability to perceive the fairy-tale nature of the idea of the virginal conception of Christ and her awareness of the easy compatibility between having a human father as well as God as one’s Father. No one challenges Eduard on what appears to be a self-evident point among the guests. See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christmas Eve: A Dialogue on the Incarnation*, trans. Terrence N. Tice (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1967), 43.

¹⁸⁶ Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, 406. For a careful account of Schleiermacher’s relationship with the grandfathers of historical-critical exegesis, see Thomas Albert Howard, *Religion and the Rise of Historicism: W.M.L. de Wette, Jacob Burckhardt, and the Theological Origins of the Nineteenth-Century Historical Consciousness* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), 51-70.

the event itself and they must have written their descriptions of Christ's birth at a time when Mary was no longer alive to serve as a source of information.¹⁸⁷ Schleiermacher also finds the differences between the accounts of the virgin birth to be so striking that he cannot believe that they came from a common source, even though he does leave open the door to a basic "historical element."¹⁸⁸ Furthermore, the presence of dramatic embellishment also cast doubt on the historical character of infancy narratives.¹⁸⁹ In addition to two of the four Gospels making no mention of it at all, the third, Luke, presents the conception of Jesus in an ambiguous way. It is not at all clear that the "power of the Most High" that overshadowed Mary also included the exclusion of male involvement.¹⁹⁰ Finally, if Matthew's account is the one in which the virginal conception of Jesus is presented most clearly, then the only purpose Matthew attaches to this miracle in his account is the fulfillment of prophecy. This, for Schleiermacher, is of no vital theological significance.¹⁹¹ Schleiermacher concludes that the information provided in the infancy narratives has "no essential place in the Gospel narrative."¹⁹² By freeing the virginal conception from any theological purpose, Schleiermacher is now free to reject the historicity of the infancy narratives and refrain from including them in his portrait of Jesus' life without also having to worry about sacrificing something essential to Christian

¹⁸⁷ Schleiermacher, *Life of Jesus*, 45-7. Schleiermacher viewed the Gospel of John to be the most coherent and comprehensive presentation of the life of Jesus among the canonical Gospels. He believed that the synoptic Gospels were compilations of material that originally stood independently, but that John was an account of an eyewitness and was written in its entirety by one author. This obviously has implications for how he understands the infancy narratives which are contained only in Matthew and Luke. See Schleiermacher, *Life of Jesus*, 43, 433.

¹⁸⁸ Schleiermacher, *Life of Jesus*, 49-57.

¹⁸⁹ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Critical Essay on the Gospel of St. Luke*, trans. John Taylor (London: Thomas Davison, Whitefriars, 1825), 28; cf. Schleiermacher, *Life of Jesus*, 61.

¹⁹⁰ In his *Critical Essay*, Schleiermacher is able to read the first two chapters of Luke without being troubled to give an account of the virginal conception of Christ as such. For him, Luke presents only an "intimation of the supernatural conception of Christ" (28).

¹⁹¹ Schleiermacher, *Life of Jesus*, 58.

¹⁹² Schleiermacher, *Life of Jesus*, 56.

faith.¹⁹³ Instead, Schleiermacher asserts that Jesus was conceived by Mary and Joseph through the natural course of human procreation. He also sharply rejects theories that would posit that Jesus was illegitimately conceived outside the bounds of marriage. He does this, however, without also providing an explanation of the rise of the virgin birth tradition in the Christian community.

In connection with the virgin birth, Schleiermacher rejects the perpetual virginity of Mary.¹⁹⁴ This idea is based on the notion that the virgin birth functions theologically to remove Christ from the stain of original sin. Such a view only works if Mary had no biological influence on Christ because the Son of God brought his human nature with him from heaven or if Mary herself was supernaturally conceived. This latter view would imply that sinlessness extended back to Eve.¹⁹⁵ This is not to say that Schleiermacher gives Mary no role to play in Christian piety.¹⁹⁶ Quite the contrary. The importance of Mary for Schleiermacher becomes clear in his work, *Christmas Eve: Dialogue on the Incarnation*. In this fictional dialogue between close friends over the meaning of Christmas, elements of Schleiermacher's own view can be detected in each of the main characters. While no character espouses a fully-developed Mariology, the friends together acknowledge that feminine and, particularly, maternal elements stand at the centre of the Christmas celebration.¹⁹⁷ The feelings evoked by the image of a mother with her child at the nativity are directly related to the feelings of piety that all Christians have toward

¹⁹³ Schleiermacher, *Life of Jesus*, 59.

¹⁹⁴ Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, 406.

¹⁹⁵ Schleiermacher, *Life of Jesus*, 58.

¹⁹⁶ While Schleiermacher does not include a "Mariology" in his *Christian Faith*, as Perry correctly notes, she certainly plays a substantial role in *Christmas Eve*. See Tim Perry, *Mary for Evangelicals: Toward an Understanding of the Mother of Our Lord* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 224-5.

¹⁹⁷ Schleiermacher, *Christmas Eve*, 55-6

Christ.¹⁹⁸ A mother feels the “divine” presence in every movement of her beloved child. A mother has this love in spite of all the difficulties she experienced in labour and her feelings of love are so strong and profound that they overtake her memories of suffering.¹⁹⁹ It is this recognition of the divine in Christ through the feelings of piety that accompany the image of Christ with his mother that is the very essence of the Christmas celebration. Mary thus exemplifies the Christian’s relation to Christ and, indeed, her image itself evokes the psychological states proper to piety.²⁰⁰ It is important for Schleiermacher, however, that Mary’s virginity not play any substantial role; rather, Mary’s significance lies in natural maternity itself. The virgin birth and other such doctrines only serve to obscure this point and, in the end, separate Mary from Christians.

1.8 David F. Strauss (1808-1874)

David Strauss considered himself to have been liberated from all supernaturalist commitments and, as such, he presumes to be able to assess more fairly than his predecessor, Schleiermacher, the historical value of the Gospel texts.²⁰¹ It was Strauss who popularized the mythical interpretation of the Gospels and this afforded him a way to account for the emergence and reception of the virgin birth tradition in the Christian community.²⁰² Strauss does not engage in an extended definition of myth. He does,

¹⁹⁸ Schleiermacher, *Christmas Eve*, 33, 36, 48-9.

¹⁹⁹ Schleiermacher, *Christmas Eve*, 63-4, 67, 84-5.

²⁰⁰ The figure of Mary played a comparable role in German romanticism generally. For example, in his *Faust*, Goethe was particularly fascinated by Mary’s exalted status and through her attempted to understand the eternal feminine (*das Ewig-Weibliche*). See Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*, 165-75.

²⁰¹ See David F. Strauss, *The Christ of Faith and the Jesus of History: A Critique of Schleiermacher’s Life of Jesus*, trans. Leander E. Keck (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 160; cf. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, trans. W. Montgomery (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2005), 79.

²⁰² So important was Strauss for the development of life of Jesus research that Albert Schweitzer divides the history of life of Jesus research into two parts, “that before Strauss and that after Strauss.” See Schweitzer, *Quest*, 10. Brown suggests that Strauss may be said to be the pioneer of form criticism and the history-of-religions approach to Gospel interpretation. See Brown, *Jesus*, 187. Boslooper declares Strauss’ to be of pivotal importance for Protestant theologies of the virgin birth. See Boslooper, *Virgin Birth*, 83.

however, approvingly cite how myth was defined by those who first began to apply the term to biblical literature: “It is a representation of an event or an idea in a form which is historical, but, at the same time characterized by the rich pictorial and imaginative mode of thought and expression of the primitive ages.”²⁰³ This description accords well with Strauss’s broader view of religion as “the perception of truth, not in the form of an idea, which is the philosophic perception, but invested with imagery.”²⁰⁴ It is entirely in keeping with religion’s proper nature to implement myth in the expression and communication of these perceptions of truth. Myth is the representation in imagery of the originating idea, which, in the case of the Gospels, is the idea of the Christ. Strauss calls the mythology of the Christ the “evangelical mythus.”

We distinguish by the name *evangelical mythus* a narrative relating directly or indirectly to Jesus, which may be considered not as the expression of a fact, but as the product of an idea of his earliest followers: such a narrative being mythical in proportion as it exhibits this character.²⁰⁵

The evangelical myth is the representation through images of the Messianic idea as it was applied to the life of Jesus.

For Strauss, the myths in the New Testament are derived from the Jewish expectation of the Messiah that had reached its highest form in the years just prior to the time of Jesus.²⁰⁶ The idea of the Messiah provided a vast storehouse of images and themes by which to recognize the promised one. The followers of Jesus regarded him as the Messiah and so felt free to attribute these Messianic themes and expectations to his

²⁰³ Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, 53. Williamson locates Strauss’s *Life of Jesus* within the broader fascination of German culture with myth, particularly the attempt to subvert the Christian myth with a specifically German myth. See George S. Williamson, *The Longing for Myth in Germany: Religion and Aesthetic Culture from Romanticism to Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

²⁰⁴ Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, 80.

²⁰⁵ Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, 86.

²⁰⁶ Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, 83.

life.²⁰⁷ Yet, if the miraculous elements of the Gospels are well-intentioned inventions attached to the life of Jesus, what gave rise to the conviction among Jesus' followers that he was the Messiah in the first place? To this question, Strauss replies that it was the "overwhelming impression which was made upon those around him by the personal character and discourse of Jesus, as long as he was living amongst them, which did not permit them deliberately to scrutinize and compare him with their previous standard."²⁰⁸ It was the way in which Jesus of Nazareth struck people—his personal presence—that somehow meshed with Messianic expectations and thus gave rise to the conviction that Jesus was the Messiah. Jesus was a religious "genius" of the highest calibre.²⁰⁹ Once Jesus' Messianic status was established, the attribution to his life of the entire Messianic complex, including the belief in the resurrection, was just the unfolding of details.

Strauss finds very little, if anything, within the opening chapters of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke to be worthy of the name history. These chapters simply bear too many marks of the mythological to be counted as sound sources for a life of Jesus. For example, Strauss detects a telling trajectory in the degree to which myth has developed in the various treatments of Jesus' conception and infancy: Mark and John fail to mention anything at all of the infancy of Jesus, Matthew and Luke include stories of the miraculous circumstances of Jesus' birth, and later apocryphal gospels (e.g., the *Protevangelium of James*) and patristic authors fund elaborate explanations of the circumstances of Jesus' infancy. This progressive embellishment indicates that the

²⁰⁷ Strauss describes the logic that must have driven the first Christians as follows: "Such and such things must have happened to the Messiah; Jesus was the Messiah; therefore such and such things happened to him." Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, 84.

²⁰⁸ Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, 85.

²⁰⁹ Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, 88; cf. David Strauss, *In Defense of my Life of Jesus Against the Hegelians*, trans. Marilyn Chapin Massey (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1983), 17-8. Jesus seemed, to Strauss, to have exhibited a form of Messianic consciousness. See Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, 92.

mythical imagination is at work.²¹⁰ As well, the two canonical narratives of the annunciation of Jesus' virginal conception also fail to cohere for Strauss. Strauss argues that the annunciation stories are flatly contradictory and mutually exclusive in terms of when and to whom the birth of Jesus was announced. The way that Matthew and Luke present their narratives of the annunciation appear to exclude one another from every vantage point.²¹¹ Of utmost importance to Strauss is the inexplicability of Mary's silence to her betrothed about the supernatural origin of her pregnancy as it is presented in Matthew's Gospel. Strauss makes careful note of how Mary's silence and the tension that it causes between the narratives was reason for earlier writers to spill much exegetical ink in order to preserve Mary and Joseph's character and so to harmonize the two accounts. The only approach that satisfies the texts without doing violence to them is the mythical view. When so viewed, the annunciation stories have the function of supporting the notion of Christ's virginal conception by clearing up any suspicion surrounding its circumstances and by fulfilling the "theocratic decorum" demanded by preceding birth narratives in the Hebrew Scriptures.²¹²

After showing to his satisfaction the presence of myth in the broader scope of the infancy narratives, Strauss turns to the conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit. There are a myriad of problems with the orthodox view of the virgin birth.²¹³ These he divides into two categories: the physico-theological difficulties and the historical-exegetical difficulties. Among the physico-theological difficulties, the most important is that a

²¹⁰ Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, 119-21.

²¹¹ Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, 122-4

²¹² Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, 125.

²¹³ Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, 137-40.

virginal conception is a “most remarkable deviation from all natural laws.”²¹⁴ Such a deviation supposes that God must have had a significant reason to exercise divine omnipotence in such a way, or one risks dividing God’s power from his wisdom. However, the various rationales for the virginal conception, as they have been described within the Christian tradition, all fail. Strauss points to Schleiermacher’s arguments as sufficiently undercutting the notion that the virgin birth was necessary to ensure Jesus’ freedom from original sin. In the opinion of Strauss, the traditional Augustinian view requires either the Valentinian notion that Jesus took nothing from his mother, or, if he did, that she was also somehow cleansed of original sin, both untenable ideas for Strauss. On the latter view, Strauss concludes:

But if God determined on such a purification of the maternal participation, it had been easier to do the same with respect to that of the father, than by his total exclusion, to violate the natural law in so unprecedented a manner; and consequently, a fatherless conception cannot be insisted upon as the necessary means of compassing the impeccability of Jesus.²¹⁵

The historical-exegetical difficulties with the virginal conception are far more numerous. One example will have to suffice here. The most obvious exegetical difficulty with the virginal conception is what he takes to be the irreconcilability of the purpose and function of the genealogies in Matthew and Luke with the notion of a virgin conception.²¹⁶ The common way to reconcile these two elements, that Jesus was thought to be Joseph’s son by adoption, is simply insufficient to include him in the Messianic line.²¹⁷ This tension leads Strauss to the conclusion that the genealogies and the narratives

²¹⁴ Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, 130. The only organism that Strauss is aware of that procreates apart from the sexual union of male and female are the lowest of species. With a touch of humour, Strauss suggests that this would make the application of Psalm 22:7 (“I am a worm and no man”) a prophecy of Jesus in a whole new sense!

²¹⁵ Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, 131.

²¹⁶ Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, 133.

²¹⁷ Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, 133.

of the virginal conception could not be from the same author. Strauss argues that elements within the genealogies themselves that suggest that Jesus' relationship to his earthly father was unique (Matthew 1:16; Luke 3:23) were later adaptations made to the genealogies. The early Christian texts that view Jesus as the natural son of Joseph and Mary were later amended by the idea of the virginal conception as an aspect of the early church's progressive glorification of Christ.²¹⁸

Strauss could find no historical reason to think that Jesus was not simply the natural offspring of Mary and Joseph. Yet he still must account for the final form and content of the infancy narratives. With a touch of irony, Strauss claims to be able to account for the infancy narratives, and particularly the notion of a virginal conception, by simply applying consistently the explanation given by orthodox theologians for the miraculous births of heroes in pagan literature, that is, through the development of myth. It is the *idea* of Jesus as the Messiah that comes to "realize itself" in the series of events presented in the infancy narratives.²¹⁹ In particular, Strauss argues that the idea of Christ's virginal conception was the product of the confluence of several streams of thought. First, the Hebrew Scriptures are replete with stories of great men who are conceived with the aid of God's power. It was only natural that Jesus the Messiah should have to surpass the great men of the Hebrew Bible even in terms of the marvellous circumstances of his birth. Luke, especially, includes literary forms borrowed from the various Hebrew birth stories. Second, there is also Jesus' own reference to himself as the "Son of God," by means of which he expressed the idea of the Messiah. Strauss argues that it is entirely in keeping with the nature of such figurative titles for them eventually to

²¹⁸ Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, 134-7

²¹⁹ Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, 141.

lose their spiritual significance and be taken literally.²²⁰ Third, the notion of the Christ having been begotten of his heavenly Father, derived from Psalm 2:7, received further transformation when it was read alongside the Messianic application of Isaiah 7:14. Once it was so read, the ideas of “Son of God” and “son of a virgin” coalesced “till at last the divine agency was substituted for human paternal participation.”²²¹ These three streams of thought came together, mutually embellishing one another, until finally “the belief prevailed that Jesus, as the Messiah, should be born of a virgin by means of divine agency. It was taken for granted by the first Christians that what was to be according to their expectations actually did occur.”²²²

1.9 Emil Brunner (1889-1966)

The theological and exegetical critiques of the virgin birth provided by Schleiermacher and Strauss were taken to be generally persuasive among most theologians in the subsequent European theological context.²²³ A brief analysis of the

²²⁰ Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, 142.

²²¹ Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, 142. On Strauss’ reading of Isaiah 7:14 and its use in the New Testament, see Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, 129-30.

²²² Strauss, *Life of Jesus*, 140.

²²³ The approach to the doctrine taken by two of the great luminaries in the late 19th century and early 20th century might be viewed as representative, though there were exceptions. In his *magnum opus*, *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation* (1870-74), and in his programmatic essay, “Instruction in the Christian Religion” (1875), Albrecht Ritschl makes almost no mention of the virginal conception of Jesus. It simply has no role to play for him and the infancy narratives are universally ignored in the biblical exposition that Ritschl does provide his readers. See Albrecht Ritschl, *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation*, trans. H. R. MacKintosh and A.B. MacAuley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1900) and Albrecht Ritschl, “Instruction in the Christian Religion,” in *Three Essays*, trans. Philip Hefner (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 219-91. The rationale for this trend is made explicit in Adolf von Harnack’s popular book, *What is Christianity?* While refusing to admit the entire futility of historical investigation into the life of Jesus that Strauss’s work would seem to necessitate, Harnack does concede that the one place in the Gospel accounts where myth can be clearly seen is in the narratives of Christ’s infancy. Underneath the untenable, myth-laden doctrine of the virgin birth is, for Harnack, the simple lesson that Jesus is God’s Son. This truth is better understood through other means. The Gospels, in Harnack’s view, provide a historically useful picture of Christ’s public ministry. This is all that is necessary for Harnack’s understanding of Christianity: a plain picture of Jesus’ teaching, an account of how Jesus’ life was fulfilled in his obedience to death, and the impression that Jesus’ life made on his disciples. Thus, in addition to the historical untrustworthiness of the infancy narratives, Jesus himself appears to have thought that his first 30 years of life were unimportant for his disciples’ understanding of his work.

Christology of Emil Brunner, one of Barth's closest theological interlocutors, will help to prepare us for the distinctiveness of Barth's treatment.²²⁴ Brunner's interpretation of the virgin birth in his *The Mediator* (1927) remained consistent in its main features throughout his career and into his 1949 work, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*. In both the earlier and the later volume, Brunner locates the virgin birth as a sort of appendix to the doctrine of the incarnation. Central to Brunner's constructive Christology, as well as to his critique of the virgin birth, is his notion of "truth as encounter." It was this notion that Brunner believed was to be the criterion for a biblical understanding of Christ's person and work.²²⁵ With his focus on "truth as encounter," Brunner aimed to be faithful to Melancthon's famous dictum: "To know Christ is to know his benefits."²²⁶ Such a perspective demands that the doctrine of the person of Christ is to be described, figuratively speaking, with "verbs" rather than "substantives."²²⁷ It was this approach that he tried to carry through in his Christology and which underlay his interpretation of the virgin birth.²²⁸

Harnack can thereby conclude that the infancy narratives can be entirely abandoned for theological reflection. See Adolf von Harnack, *What is Christianity?* trans. Thomas Bailey Saunders (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1978), 23-24; 30-31 and Adolf von Harnack, *Christianity and History*, trans. Thomas Bailey Saunders (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1907), 63-7.

²²⁴ Furthermore, Brunner's approach to the virgin birth became paradigmatic for a vast number of Protestant theologians in the 20th century. See Thomas A. O'Meara, *Mary in Protestant and Catholic Theology* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966), 224-58. In his exposition of *The Mediator*, John Hart explicitly subordinates the doctrinal portions of the book to the philosophical introduction. However, in a footnote he argues that at this time Barth and Brunner have "no essential Christological differences, other than the Virgin Birth." See John W. Hart, *Karl Barth vs. Emil Brunner: The Formation and Dissolution of a Theological Alliance, 1916-1936*, Issues in Systematic Theology 6 (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2001), 96. One is left to wonder why a difference over the doctrinal value of the virgin birth is not taken into account as a significant difference in Christology, unless one already assumes that the virgin birth is of no dogmatic import.

²²⁵ Emil Brunner, *Truth as Encounter*, trans. T.H.L. Parker (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1963), 155-6.

²²⁶ Brunner, *Truth as Encounter*, 156.

²²⁷ Brunner, *Truth as Encounter*, 156.

²²⁸ In *Truth as Encounter*, Brunner alleges that though he and Barth began with similar conceptions of truth at the early stage of their careers, Barth departed from their common trajectory in 1924 when he affirmed the doctrine of the virgin birth, which is a primitive "substantialist" account of the

According to Brunner, the message of the incarnation “has been burdened with an idea which is apt to obscure the meaning of its central thought: I mean the theory of the Virgin Birth.”²²⁹ The manner by which Brunner intends to go about relieving the modern church of the burden of the doctrine of the virgin birth is to show its ill-fit with the incarnation and then to “pass by this doctrine,” allowing its inappropriateness to bring about its own demise.²³⁰ The main problem that Brunner finds with the virgin birth is that it attempts to explain *how* it is that the incarnation took place, and thereby to make it “to some extent rational.”²³¹ The crucial matter for faith is to be found entirely in the incarnation itself; nothing of significance depends upon the speculative explanation of how the incarnation is said to have taken place.²³² As Brunner later goes on to argue, the precise theological formulations of the early church, such as the doctrine of the two natures, etc., served to obscure the central fact of the mystery of God’s saving and revealing presence in the man Jesus Christ.²³³ They do this by defining too precisely, and with concepts and terms that are historically conditioned, the dynamics of the relation of divine and human being in Jesus of Nazareth. By so schematizing and intellectualizing the encounter with Christ, the doctrines of scholastic orthodoxy and the doctrine of the

encounter of God and Christ (42). Brunner believes that Barth’s adoption of the virgin birth led to three major changes in his theology: 1) close adherence to the 17th century scholastics, 2) the drawing of fine distinctions to satisfy the intellect, 3) his departure from the Blumhardts’ ideas that faith rests on the Word, not upon doctrines, and that faith includes a marked eschatological hope (43). Cf. Edward A. Downey Jr., “Redeemer and Redeemed as Persons in History,” *The Theology of Brunner*, ed. Charles W. Kegley (New York: MacMillan, 1962), 204.

²²⁹ Emil Brunner, *The Mediator: A Study of the Central Doctrine of the Christian Faith*, trans. Olive Wyon (London: Lutterworth Press, 1934), 322.

²³⁰ Brunner, *The Mediator*, 325-6.

²³¹ Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption, Dogmatics Volume 2*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1952), 352. Cf. Brunner, *The Mediator*, 327.

²³² Brunner, *The Mediator*, 326; cf. Brunner, *Creation and Redemption*, 351-2.

²³³ Brunner, *The Mediator*, 343-5; cf. Brunner, *Creation and Redemption*, 357-63.

virgin birth treated the incarnation as objective rather than personal; they distract one from simply taking up the call to decision that Jesus offers.²³⁴

Brunner points out the irony that delineating “how” the incarnation took place through appeal to the virgin birth has failed to add anything of significance to our understanding of the incarnation. He argues that the doctrine of the virgin birth has certainly not guarded against any grave theological errors; the great Christological heresies of the early church nearly all included an affirmation of the doctrine.²³⁵ On the contrary, the virgin birth actually takes away from the miracle of the incarnation and provides even further occasion for misunderstanding. By denying Christ a normal human conception, the virgin birth tends towards Docetism.²³⁶ Furthermore, the idea that Christ’s virgin birth served as the condition of his human nature’s freedom from original sin has collapsed due to its outdated biology of procreation. Connecting the virgin birth to Christ’s sinless humanity serves to obscure the meaning of the incarnation by virtue of its dependency on the doctrine of the two natures, which Brunner also rejects.²³⁷ As well, the doctrine of the virgin birth also serves to propagate a negative view of sexual procreation that stands in stark contrast to the biblical doctrine of creation’s goodness.²³⁸ Finally, the textual and historical support for the virgin birth is, according to Brunner, incredibly dubious. The New Testament itself makes no mention or use of the virgin birth, apart from the alleged event’s presence in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew. As such, it does not belong to the *Kerygma* of the New Testament church.²³⁹ The infancy narratives

²³⁴ Brunner, *The Mediator*, 343; cf. Brunner, *Creation and Redemption*, 363.

²³⁵ Brunner, *The Mediator*, 323, cf. Brunner, *Creation and Redemption*, 354-5.

²³⁶ Brunner, *The Mediator*, 325.

²³⁷ Brunner, *The Mediator*, 325-6.

²³⁸ Brunner, *Creation and Redemption*, 355.

²³⁹ Brunner, *Creation and Redemption*, 354.

themselves have been, according to Brunner, entirely discredited as historical sources and likely had an original form that is quite different than the canonical forms that have come down to modern readers.²⁴⁰ In addition to the legendary features that permeate them, the infancy narratives also stand in contradiction to the much earlier witness of the Apostle Paul who knew Jesus to have been descended from the seed of David.²⁴¹ There is also a clear theological contradiction between the infancy narratives and the doctrine of the incarnation provided by John. For Brunner, the idea of a virgin birth is inferior to the Johannine approach because it actually excludes the pre-temporal existence of a Son of God and his incarnation into history.²⁴² Taken by itself, the exposition of Jesus' birth as articulated by Matthew and Luke, apart from some illegitimate harmonization with John and Paul's idea of the incarnation, is not a view of the origin of Jesus that the church can accept. It is more Arian than orthodox because it locates Jesus' origin in time.²⁴³ If the virgin birth is to be retained, it is only with the honour due to a primitive attempt to express the idea of the divinity of Jesus.²⁴⁴

1.10 Conclusion

Several elements have emerged in this survey that will be important for understanding Barth's doctrine of the virgin birth. It was quite pronounced in the classical tradition that the proper evaluation of the doctrine of the virgin birth and the infancy narratives was to exposit its "fittingness" with the broader themes of the person and work of Christ and the Holy Spirit. This approach slipped into the background during the Reformation, which aimed to chasten what the Reformers took to be undue speculation,

²⁴⁰ Brunner, *The Mediator*, 324.

²⁴¹ Brunner, *Creation and Redemption*, 356-7.

²⁴² Brunner, *Creation and Redemption*, 353.

²⁴³ Brunner, *Creation and Redemption*, 353.

²⁴⁴ Brunner, *Creation and Redemption*, 356.

particularly about Mary. Concern about the fittingness of the virgin birth emerged again in the modern era, though this time the criterion was used to show the doctrine's inappropriateness for expressing the identity of Christ and to conclude that the virgin birth failed to meet the requirements of critical biblical scholarship. In the next chapter, we shall see that Barth took up the heritage of the classical tradition and the challenge of the modern era to assess the virgin birth according to its theological fit.

We have also seen in this chapter how the doctrine of the virgin birth developed within the context of original sin and the sinlessness of Christ. The legacy of Augustine, accepted by Aquinas, Luther and, to a degree, Calvin, was harshly criticized in the modern era. According to the moderns, the connection between the virgin birth and the sinlessness of Christ depended upon an untenable view of original sin, in which sin was passed along through human sexual intercourse and procreation. This was taken by critics of the virgin birth to imply a denigration of human sexuality and marriage. Once the link between original sin, the sinlessness of Christ and the virgin birth was severed, the doctrine of the virgin birth was left without any significant theological purpose. It came to be viewed as a primitive, mythical depiction of Christ's Sonship, which could now be set aside in favour of modern theological views. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, Barth takes up the Augustinian heritage of the virgin birth but revises it in such a way that he believes will escape the criticisms of its modern despisers.

Finally, we have seen that theologians of the classical tradition implemented the conception of Jesus by the Spirit and the figure of Mary as heuristic devices by which to understand the church. Just as the Spirit conceived Jesus in the womb of Mary, so the same Spirit regenerates human beings to become Christians. Furthermore, Mary played

an integral part in the classical tradition as the representative human being who was chosen to be the partner of God in the incarnation of the Word. As such, the figure of Mary received a special dignity and served as a mirror by which to interpret the nature and ministry of the church. These themes were significantly muted, if not done away with altogether, in the period of the Reformation and especially in the modern era. As we shall see, Barth will take them up again in his arguments for the virgin birth.

Chapter Two: The Development of Karl Barth's Doctrine of the Virgin Birth

2.1 Introduction

After surveying the treatment of the virgin birth by select figures in the western tradition, we shall now begin to investigate Karl Barth's exposition of the doctrine. In this chapter we shall be concerned primarily with the development of Barth's understanding of the virgin birth as a sign (*Zeichen*) of the mystery of the incarnation. As a sign, the virgin birth was allotted a purely noetic function in Barth's theology, rather than an ontological one. Rather than an event that constituted or fundamentally altered the relationship between God and human beings as it was established in the incarnate Son, the virgin birth attested to and illustrated the contours of this relationship. Barth believed that this move made it possible for him to avoid the charges against the virgin birth given in the modern era. Furthermore, understanding the relationship between the virgin birth and the mystery of revelation in the incarnation will be crucial for our description in future chapters of Barth's analysis of the contours of the doctrine. This is because the designation of the virgin birth of Christ as a sign was taken by Barth to require a distinctive form of assessment and explication, namely that it be interpreted in its "appropriateness" and "fit" with the mystery of the incarnation. In order to set out the various elements involved in Barth's designation of the virgin birth as a sign, I shall chart the key methodological manoeuvres in Barth's main treatments of the virgin birth during his career. We shall see that early in his dogmatic career, Barth viewed Christ's virgin birth as a condition of his work as reconciler. Through his exegesis of Scripture, however, Barth later came to view the virgin birth as a unique sign that expressed the identity and work of Christ. The sign-character of the virgin birth became crucial for

Barth's continued acceptance and exposition of the doctrine. As a sign, the virgin birth bears epistemological significance for human beings in their understanding of the identity and work of Christ, but it does not fundamentally alter or constitute who Christ is and what he has done.

2.2 Barth's Doctrine of the Virgin Birth at Göttingen and Münster

The *Göttingen Dogmatics* and *Die christliche Dogmatik* are closely related in terms of theological outlook and methodological approach.¹ In regard to Barth's doctrine of the virgin birth, the two volumes overlap significantly as two steps along a common trajectory.² Due to the commonality between them, we shall be able to focus our discussion upon the Göttingen lectures and supplement it with reference to the unique material in *Die christliche Dogmatik*. In the *Göttingen Dogmatics*, *Die christliche Dogmatik*, as well as in the later *CD*, Barth examines the virgin birth at the conclusion of his discussion of the incarnation as an element of prolegomena.³ We shall investigate

¹ While Professor of Reformed Theology at the University of Göttingen, Barth offered a series of lectures in dogmatics, entitled *Unterricht in der christlichen Religion*, which extended from the summer of 1924 through to the summer of 1925. These lectures were not published in Barth's lifetime, but roughly half of them have since been made available in English. See Karl Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian Religion*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromily (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991). Hereafter, *GD*. For the circumstances that influenced the crafting of the Göttingen lectures, see Busch, *Karl Barth*, 126-64. For an introduction and theological overview of Barth's *Göttingen Dogmatics*, see George Hunsinger, "Karl Barth's *The Göttingen Dogmatics*," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 46 (1991): 371-82; Richard A. Müller, "Barth's *Göttingen Dogmatics* (1924-26): A Review and Assessment of Volume One," *Westminster Theological Journal* 56 (1994): 115-32. In the Autumn of 1925, Barth took up the position of Professor of Dogmatics and New Testament Exegesis at the University of Münster, where he completed the lecture cycle he began in Göttingen. He then offered another series of lectures on dogmatic prolegomena, published in 1927 as *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf*. See Karl Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf, Erster Band: Die Lehre vom Worte Gottes, Prolegomena zur christlichen Dogmatik*, 1927, ed. Gerhard Sauter (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1982).

² According to Bruce McCormack, "Barth had the Göttingen material constantly before him as he wrote [*die christliche Dogmatik*]" and "the fundamental dogmatic decisions" that would characterize the *CD* "were already made in 1924/5 in Göttingen." Bruce McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 375; cf. Busch, *Barth*, 164-77.

³ Barth has been criticized for including the virgin birth in his doctrine of revelation because he appears to be placing the emphasis of Christian theology too greatly on epistemological questions. This, as some believe, underplays the significance of evil and spiritual conflict, which are said to be the legitimate

Barth's understanding of the proper form and content of dogmatic prolegomena when we examine the *CD*. Here, however, we shall be satisfied with simply noting that, unlike most modern theologies, Barth felt compelled to include in his prolegomena sketches of doctrinal subjects typically reserved for the main body of dogmatic texts. For Barth, dogmatics cannot be grounded on anything other than its own proper subject, and yet, writing in the modern era, Barth believed that dogmatics required a prolegomenon. As understood in Barth's early lectures, prolegomena is a "crutch" for the modern treatment of dogmatics that must include certain dogmatic exercises in order to show its proper basis.⁴ The doctrines of the Trinity, the incarnation, and with it, the virgin birth, are examples of such exercises.

The reason that Barth treats the doctrine of the Trinity in the prolegomena is because he uses the doctrine of the Trinity to exposit the *content* of revelation; the doctrine of the incarnation forms Barth's discussion of the *possibility* of revelation.⁵ The possibility of revelation is ultimately posited in retrospect of the reality of revelation to which the Scriptures point, namely the God who speaks (*Deus dixit*).⁶ Thus, all reflection on how God *could* reveal himself can only be a "thinking after" (*Nachdenken*) his having revealed himself *in fact*.⁷ According to Barth, the possibility for the revelation of God is that the Word of God becomes a human being and, thus, makes himself comprehensible

problem solved by Christ's work, particularly his death and resurrection. See Gustaf Wingren, *Theology in Conflict: Nygren, Barth, Bultmann*, trans. Eric H. Walstrom (Philadelphia, PA: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), 108-28. It is hard to see how this charge could be sustained with the publication of *CD IV*. As we shall see, in that volume the virgin birth appears again, but this time in the context of the doctrine of reconciliation.

⁴ Barth, *GD*, 133. Barth will later abandon his understanding of dogmatic prolegomena as a "crutch" in modernity and view it, instead, as essential to the dogmatic task.

⁵ Barth, *GD*, 133-4.

⁶ Barth, *GD*, 144.

⁷ Barth, *GD*, 151.

to human knowing.⁸ The precise requirements of the possibility for revelation are described in Chalcedonian terms. God must be *wholly God* in the concealment that allows him to be comprehensible to human beings and the concealment, through which he makes himself comprehensible, must be *fully human*. Furthermore, God and the form of his concealment must be so united that neither can be *changed into* or *mixed* with the other, and this union must be once and for all.⁹

Christology, the dogmatic location in which to examine this revelation, must aim to describe revelation at arm's length; that is to say, it must recognize that the object of its description is God's "indirect communication *par excellence*."¹⁰ The conviction that God is hidden, even in his revelation, is a hallmark of Barth's Christology and is exemplified in his view of the incarnation. Contrary to all of the aspirations of the modern age, in its desire for direct communication with God, Barth believed that it was the ancient formulators of Christological doctrine who best maintained the mystery of God in his revelation, even though they were often accused by moderns of over-intellectualizing the faith.¹¹ This indirectness marks even the Christmas miracle of the birth of Christ because it involves the "irremovable mystery of God."¹² The relationship between the mystery of revelation and the virgin birth is something that will continue to give determinative shape to Barth's framing of the virgin birth throughout his career.

In order to describe the main contours of the incarnation as the "possibility of revelation," Barth works through eight points, the last four being devoted to the doctrine of the virgin birth. The first four points describe how Barth conceives of the main

⁸ Barth, *GD*, 138.

⁹ Barth, *GD*, 138-9.

¹⁰ Barth, *GD*, 151.

¹¹ Barth, *GD*, 153.

¹² Barth, *GD*, 152.

doctrinal structures of the incarnation. Under points one and two, Barth treats the subject and purpose of the incarnation. Barth explains that in the event of the incarnation, the Father is the fount of action, the Son is the medium, and the Spirit is the one by whom the conception takes place.¹³ The purpose of the incarnation is described by Barth as God's answer to the question of the contradiction of human existence. That is to say, the incarnation takes place because of the Fall and for the purpose of redemption.¹⁴ Therefore, contrary to much modern European theology, the incarnation of the Son is not an "eternal relation," but is something *new* that God has done, akin to the act of creation itself.¹⁵

In the third point, Barth describes the nature of the incarnational union. He argues that the kenosis of the Son involved his "assumption" (*aufnehmen*) of human nature. Barth uses this term in order to protect his conviction that the Son in no way ceases to be God in his incarnation, but rather that he adds human nature to his being as Son.¹⁶ In Barth's view, the Reformed tradition held to a more "dynamic" view of the hypostatic union, in which the stress fell on the "person" or the "divine subject," while Lutheran Christology emphasized the union of the divine and human *natures*. That is to say, Reformed theology posits that it was the person of the Logos, not the divine nature as such, that was made flesh.¹⁷ Barth defines the human nature assumed by the Logos as none other than the nature that is common to all human persons, even though it was necessarily free from sin, a point that has special significance for Barth's understanding

¹³ Barth, *GD*, 154.

¹⁴ Barth, *GD*, 155.

¹⁵ Barth, *GD*, 155-6.

¹⁶ Barth, *GD*, 156.

¹⁷ Barth, *GD*, 156.

of the virgin birth.¹⁸ Furthermore, Barth famously asserts that Christ's human nature had no independent existence "alongside or apart from" the person of the Logos.¹⁹ The human nature of Christ is, as the Reformed scholastics described it, *anhypostatos*—having no personhood of its own—and *enhyposstatos*—having personhood only in its union with the Son. The implication of the doctrine of Christ's *anhypostatic/enhyposstatic* human nature is twofold, in Barth's opinion. On the one hand, it guarantees that the person encountered in Jesus of Nazareth is none other than God's Son. For this reason, Mary is rightly called *Theotokos*. On the other hand, the doctrine preserves the indirectness and mystery of revelation because the human nature of Christ is never revelation in itself.²⁰ As we shall see, this doctrine carries with it important implications for Barth's interpretation of the virgin birth. Barth's fourth point is to note that the relation between the human and divine natures in Christ is irreversible.²¹ This is to say that the Logos is not exhausted by the human nature of Christ. The implication is that while human attributes can be properly predicated of the divine Son, divine attributes are not properly predicated of the human nature of Christ.²²

¹⁸ Barth, *GD*, 156-7.

¹⁹ Barth, *GD*, 157. Barth's adoption of the *anhypostasis/enhyposstasis* terminology has regularly come under fire for its apparent denigration of Christ's human nature at the expense of the divine. The reception history of this formula is also suspect, in that it does not necessarily bear the patristic pedigree that Barth or the Reformed Scholastics may have imagined. For an overview of the origin and reception of the formula, as well as an introduction to the literature surrounding these terms, see F. LeRon Shults, "A Dubious Christological Formula: From Leontius of Byzantium to Karl Barth," *Theological Studies* 57 (1996): 431-46. For a critique of the usefulness of the *anhypostatic/enhyposstatic* description of Christ's human nature, see Oliver Crisp, *Divinity and Humanity: The Incarnation Reconsidered*, Current Issues in Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 72-89.

²⁰ Barth, *GD*, 157.

²¹ Barth, *GD*, 158.

²² Barth, *GD*, 160. Barth observed that this specifically Reformed doctrine was labelled pejoratively by the Lutherans as the *extra Calvinisticum* because the Logos continues to exist outside—*extra*—the human nature of Christ. Lutheran theologians insisted that the Logos had enclosed himself in the human nature of Christ and that, in virtue of union with the divine nature, divine attributes could be properly predicated also of the human nature. Reformed theologians, including Barth, saw in the Lutheran view an inevitable evaporation of the human nature of Christ. They denied that the Logos was confined to

The final four points devoted to the conception and birth of Jesus are neither set off from the first four points on the incarnational union, nor does Barth give any hint that their significance is of less importance for understanding of Christ's person and work. Barth clearly views the virginal conception of Jesus as a material and substantive matter of Christian doctrine. Before we look at the specific doctrinal significance that Barth allots to the virgin birth at this point in his career, it is worth pausing over his treatment of the character of the virgin birth as a miracle (*Wunder*). For Barth, the virgin birth is intimately associated with revelation as the means by which the incarnation took place. As such, the character of the virgin birth is treated by Barth in continuity with the revelation with which it is involved.²³ Revelation always has to do with the freedom of God and is not a product of some capacity latent in the creature; this is why the virgin birth is to be understood strictly as a miracle. If the virgin birth is a miracle associated with revelation, then there can be no attempts to explain it on the basis of analogies in creation, such as instances of parthogenesis.²⁴ As a miracle, the virgin birth is either rejected or accepted in faith but never explained by appeal to natural phenomena.

As he will do throughout his career, Barth pairs Christ's birth with Christ's resurrection. He draws attention to how the Apostles' Creed describes both the beginning and end of Christ's life as marked with miracle. These miracles are not random; rather, they are miracles particularly appropriate to the revelatory event that transpires through

Christ's flesh and attempted to maintain a strong division between the divine and human natures, positing divine attributes, such as ubiquity, only of the Logos.

²³ Barth, *GD*, 160.

²⁴ Barth, *GD*, 161. At no time in his career does Barth engage questions of the biology of the virgin birth. That the virgin birth was a miracle implies not only that it is inaccessible to scientific historical criticism but also that speculation on its biological possibility is misplaced. The more recent discussion about Christ's genetic make-up in relation to the charge of Docetism was not on Barth's register. The classic statement of this problem is made by Peacocke, "DNA of our DNA", 59-67; cf. R. J. Berry, "The Virgin Birth of Christ," *Science and Christian Belief* 8 (1996): 101-10.

them. Barth argues that in the virgin birth on one side of the life of Christ and the resurrection on the other side, everything there is to say about the reality of the revelation and, implicitly, its objective possibility is “compressed” (*zusammendrängen*).²⁵ The miracles of the virgin birth and the resurrection are two sides of the same coin. Barth writes: “The resurrection of Christ has its basis in his miraculous conception, and is thus inevitable. The miraculous conception discloses, shows itself, and makes itself known by his resurrection....Miracle is the basis of miracle, and miracle makes miracle known.”²⁶ Neither of the miraculous events stands independently and each must be understood in relation to one another. We might summarize Barth’s discussion of the intimate relation between the virgin birth and the resurrection in the *Göttingen Dogmatics* by saying that the miraculous conception is the ontological ground of the resurrection and the resurrection is the epistemological ground for the miraculous conception. We shall revisit this connection between the virgin birth and the resurrection after Barth has come to characterize the virgin birth as a sign. At this point, however, it is important to note that the virgin birth is placed in parallel with the resurrection itself, and not with the empty tomb as Barth will do by the time of the *CD*.

In *Die christliche Dogmatik*, Barth engages in a discussion of the form that the report of Christ’s conception takes in the New Testament. He characterizes this form as “primal history” (*Urgeschichte*).²⁷ By using this term to describe the infancy narratives,

²⁵ Barth, *GD*, 162.

²⁶ Barth, *GD*, 162; cf. Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik*, 368.

²⁷ Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik*, 365. McCormack shows how Barth borrowed this term during his writing of the second edition of *Romans* from the atheist church historian, Franz Overbeck (1837-1905). See McCormack, *Dialectical Theology*, 226-235, 363; cf. Eberhard Jüngel, *Karl Barth, a Theological Legacy*, trans. Garrett E. Paul (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986), 35, 39. By the time of the *CD*, Barth had moved away from this term. For the significance of the shift away from *Urgeschichte*, see Timothy J. Gorringer, *Karl Barth Against Hegemony* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), 106-7. Jüngel explains Barth’s eventual shift away from the use of “primal history” by appealing to his conviction that revelation is not to

Barth is not denying that the virgin birth took place in space and time. On the contrary, “primal history” connotes both that the event of Christ’s birth took place in history and also that Christ’s birth is not simply a product of history and open to scientific investigation in the same way as are other events in space and time. In the event of Christ’s conception, “God’s Word itself is the subject and the event is historical only in the predicate, as such it is neither ascertainable nor generally occurring other than as the predicate of the Word of God.”²⁸ As a miracle, all analogies between the birth of Christ and other events in history have been removed, except for the act of God itself, such as in creation or the resurrection of Jesus.²⁹ Given the character of the virgin birth as a miracle, its presentation is often interpreted in relation to myth (*Mythus*). This is unsurprising, according to Barth, for myth has no analogy with history, just as “primal history” cannot be interpreted by such analogy. Events depicted in “primal history,” in order to preserve their unique character, are often expressed in myth-like forms.³⁰ For Barth, it speaks volumes that the authors of the Creed were not dissuaded from including the virgin birth in its confession, even though it sets the event outside the scope of scientific historical examination. The myth-like forms help to preserve the indirectness and the mystery of the miracle of revelation. Though employing such forms, the church did not treat the virgin birth itself as a myth because it confessed it to be a true occurrence located in space and time.³¹ The church confesses the miraculous conception of Jesus by the Spirit,

be conceived as a predicate of history but that history is to be conceived as a predicate of revelation. Properly speaking, “primal history” is the decision of God in eternity to become incarnate in Jesus Christ. See Eberhard Jüngel, *God’s Being is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth. A Paraphrase*, trans. John Webster (Grand Rapids, MI: T&T Clark, 2001), 90; cf. Barth, *CD*, I/2, 57-8; II/2, 8.

²⁸ Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik*, 365.

²⁹ Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik*, 365.

³⁰ Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik*, 365.

³¹ Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik*, 366.

not as an “interpretation” of an historical fact, “but rather as a *recognition* of a fact, which would be to establish it from the start and from itself as only a direct action of God and quite not as a fact.”³² The fact recognized by the church in the virginal conception is that God has met and reconciles himself with humanity, and as such it must be understood as either “no fact at all” (*Nicht-Faktum*) or else as a “divine fact” (*göttliches Faktum*).³³ For Barth, the form that characterizes the infancy narratives is appropriate to the event to which it attests. It appears to be myth and not historical fact, and to be precise, it is neither. It is an attestation of the concealed revelation of God in space and time, and so it is characterized as “primal history.” Barth’s discussion of miracle and primal history will be deepened and nuanced in the *CD*. By that point he will have abandoned the use of the category of myth to describe the biblical presentation of the virgin birth.

We now arrive at Barth’s discussion of the dogmatic purpose of the virgin birth. Contrary to what we shall find later in Barth’s theology, when Barth comes to view the form of Christ’s birth as a sign, in the *Göttingen Dogmatics* and the *Die christliche Dogmatik*, he argues that the virginal conception by the Spirit is what “constitutes [*ausmachen*] the doctrine of the incarnation in the strictest sense.”³⁴ Though Barth will eventually abandon this depiction of the virgin birth in favour of interpreting the virgin birth as a sign, at this point in Barth’s career, the specific form of Christ’s conception uniquely contributes to the incarnation and the atonement in a way that would not be accomplished in another way. The virginal conception was the necessary “condition” (*Bedingung*) whereby the Son could take human nature apart from contracting human sin. Barth explains this by interpreting Christ’s person and work according to the typology

³² Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik*, 366. Emphasis added.

³³ Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik*, 367.

³⁴ Barth, *GD*, 160; cf. *Die christliche Dogmatik*, 365.

between the first and second Adam.³⁵ The human descendants, who proceeded from Adam, stand in opposition to God and in contradiction of their own existence. Adam's line of opposing and contradicted human beings must be altered in order to interrupt the dominance of sin and to reconstitute it once again in proper relation to God. Barth writes:

We understand: he had to *break* [*durchbrechen*] as human being (he was also the eternal Son of God as human being) the continuity of the known, historical humanity in the accomplishment of its opposition with God and had to *restore* [*wiederherstellen*] the continuity broken with the fall of sin of the original humanity created by God in freedom with God.³⁶

By describing the purpose of the virgin birth along these lines, Barth considers himself to be standing in continuity with medieval and reformation theology. However, he understood this tradition to have mistakenly tied the transmission of original sin to the presence of concupiscence in the post-lapsarian sexual act. Barth aims to avoid this connection. This is because, as Barth explains, even if we agree that original sin is transmitted on the basis of concupiscence in the fallen sex act, there is still Schleiermacher's question of why Christ was not simply conceived through a sanctified act of normal sexual intercourse that took place between a married couple.³⁷

Rather than asking why God worked one way and not another in the incarnation, Barth intends to follow the lead of Anselm's *demonstratio rationalibilis*. This involves "following the train of thought necessary and possible" based on the matter under consideration, namely that "the reality, the subsistence, the person of the God-man is the Word, the Son of God."³⁸ In other words, we ought to proceed in our inquiry by focusing

³⁵ Barth, *GD*, 160-1.

³⁶ Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik*, 369. Emphasis in original, Cf. Barth, *GD*, 162.

³⁷ Barth, *GD*, 163; cf. *Die christliche Dogmatik*, 370.

³⁸ Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik*, 371; cf. 305-6. "To 'prove', to 'demonstrate rationally,' means simply to *explicate* the meaning of the object of faith as it is given to us in the incarnation. To 'prove' is to show how we must necessarily think about the event of revelation if our thinking is to correspond to it." McCormack, *Dialectical Theology*, 426-7.

on the relationship between the one who was born and the form in which his birth took place. What Barth advocates is an *a posteriori* theological exposition. Rather than inquiring after the absence of sexual action as such, Barth appeals to the relationship of the human father's role in human begetting.³⁹ Why is the absence of the man in the birth of Christ important? For Barth, the absence of the male act in the begetting of Jesus of Nazareth is tied directly to the doctrine of the Christ's *anhypostatic* human nature. In Barth's Christology, as we have seen, the divine person of the Logos unites himself with human *nature*, not a human *person*. The one person of Christ is the divine person of the Logos. For Barth, human beings derive their "person" from the begetting act of the father. He writes: "Now the person (which is absent in this case) *is* the human being, and the person has name, historical place, status, and rights from the father, from the relation not to the mother but to the begetting *male*."⁴⁰ The absence of a begetting father in the case of Jesus of Nazareth means that the human nature of Christ is *anhypostatic* and receives its person solely in union with the divine person of the Word, the doctrine of *enhypostasis*. We would rightly ask from where Barth derives this conclusion that the human being receives his hypostasis—his personhood—from the begetting male. Barth writes:

World history [*Weltgeschichte*] is not for nothing male history [*Männergeschichte*]. Economics, politics, art, and science, with some exceptions and exceptional circumstances such as we find today, are male affairs. The creative shaping of things, the personal fashioning of existence, so far as the eye can see, is a male privilege. This is how it is—the only thing we can say, no matter how much it is open to criticism.⁴¹

³⁹ Barth, *GD*, 163.

⁴⁰ Barth, *GD*, 163. McCormack writes: "It is not as though the Logos chose to inhabit at some point an already existing human being. Rather, a human nature which had not previously existed was created especially for this Subject (the Logos) to be His own. Thus, there was not a moment when this human nature did not have its being and existence grounded in the Person of the Logos. The affirmation of the Virgin Birth was a consequence of this 'never a moment.'" McCormack, *Dialectical Theology*, 362.

⁴¹ Barth, *GD*, 163; cf. *Die christliche Dogmatik*, 371

Given Barth's famous convictions about the danger of deriving theological conclusions on the basis of general observations in culture, history, or nature, it is surprising to hear his rationale. One would expect him to argue strictly from Scripture for his interpretation of the removal of the man from the conception of Jesus, but instead he appeals to his understanding of world-history. As we shall see, by the time of the *CD* Barth will have made explicit his theological and biblical basis for interpreting world-history as he does here.

While the removal of the human person is crucial for the coherence of Christ's divine and human constitution, it is also ingredient to the particular character of the human nature assumed by Christ. For Barth, the removal of the human person entails the removal of original sin. The male "actualizes" (*aktualisieren*) and "realizes" (*verwirklichen*) humanity through his planning and leading action.⁴² It is this function of the male that constitutes what Scripture describes as "the line of Adam." Adam and his influence must be removed if an exception is to be made to the opposition and contradiction that mark Adam's line.

Adam has to be replaced if a new Adam is to be born. Adam is the bearer of original sin, and therefore he must go or stand aside. In this renewal, this ending of his own history and beginning of a better one, he cannot participate in the typically male position of a presiding father, lord, and ruler. If he did, it would mean the prolonging and continuing of the old history....The removal of the person is the removal of the original sin. But the removal of the person is the removal of the male, his ejection from the role as creator.⁴³

It is this line of Adam, maintained through the male begetter, which must be interrupted through the revelation and reconciliation of God. This interruption is conditioned by the virgin birth, through which the second Adam enters the line of the first Adam and by

⁴² Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik*, 372.

⁴³ Barth, *GD*, 163-4.

which he escapes the sovereign determination of the first Adam. With the human father removed, the Spirit steps into his place so that the resultant human being might receive his person and spiritual character from the Word. Barth writes:

Adam is created according to the image of God (Genesis 1:27), through him came sin into the world (Romans 5:12), a second *Adam* must come from heaven to the renovation of humanity (1 Corinthians 15:47), i.e., but now, if revelation and reconciliation really become in the world, if such a second Adam should come, then this has to do at the same time with the first, the old Adam, and has to do at the same time with his son. His generation, his deed cannot create this end and this beginning. This history will not be male history, male act. Precisely the *male*, as realizer of humanity, must here step to the side....As *his* son Christ would be a sinner as all other human beings. As he is excluded, sin is excluded. In his place God himself must step, so that revelation and reconciliation become possible.⁴⁴

Barth here links “personhood,” original sin, and the male act in sexual procreation. The begetting father determines (*bestimmen*) the character of the son’s person. By removing his earthly father, Jesus of Nazareth is determined (*bestimmen*) solely through his relationship with his heavenly Father.

Once the male determiner of human being is removed, what remains is “human nature as such, man in himself, the impersonal substratum of history, man as creature, not creator.”⁴⁵ This is the contribution offered by Mary. She simply provides the bare human nature that can be united with the Logos and renewed in the resurrection. Barth writes:

The woman Mary, apart from her connection to the man, therefore the virgin, is the human being who is precisely *not* genius, *not* creative, particularly *not* history-shaping or forming, although entangled as well or as badly as the man in sin, guilt and punishment, in the opposition of the existence, she is *the* possibility of humanity, which confronts the impossible possibility of God, can become the organ for God, while made such through the miracle of God.⁴⁶

Mary, then, is truly a vessel of non-acting human nature to be taken up and implemented by the Spirit of God in union with the Logos. While the human nature that Christ takes

⁴⁴ Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik*, 372.

⁴⁵ Barth, *GD*, 164.

⁴⁶ Barth, *GD*, 164. Translation slightly revised. Cf. Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik*, 374.

from her is fallen, it is not involved in sin in the same way. For Barth, men and women contribute to their children in different ways. Barth writes:

Its bearer, the bearer of humanity in the predicate is the *woman*, the woman, who with male history, with male acts, is just as indispensable with it as the object with the subject, as the form with the content, as the sound with the word, as the contemplation with the idea, but only always is with it, with it as substratum of the act of the male, in which humanity as such becomes not only true, but rather real, historical. Adam had sinned, Eve had, in the highest known ponderable way, in no way to be thought without, sinned with, joined in the deed of Adam (Genesis 3:6). But still only joined in.⁴⁷

The result of Barth's description of the conception of Jesus is the broadly Augustinian position that the divine Son takes up sinless human flesh through which he makes atonement. Thus, the birth of Jesus apart from a human father has specific and decisive theological importance for Barth's understanding of Christ's person.

Complementing Barth's discussion of the virgin birth is his exposition of the work of the Spirit in the conception of Jesus. Barth roots his explanation for why the Spirit is the one named in the incarnation in his prior discussion about the doctrine of the Trinity, in which he understood the Holy Spirit to bring about the reception of revelation among human beings.⁴⁸ We should not, then, be too surprised to see the Spirit designated as the one who brings about the reception of the Word in human flesh, though the specific relationship between the two acts of the Spirit is left ambiguous. Barth is particularly interested in the preposition used by the Creed in this section; the Latin term "*de*" (by) is used rather than "*ex*" (from). This is significant because it makes clear that the Holy Spirit is not to be viewed as in any way the father of Jesus Christ. Rather,

The Holy Spirit takes the place of the male, yet he does not do what the male does, but what only God can do as the Creator (not the progenitor) of the creature. The virgin becomes pregnant, not of his substance, but by his power. What takes

⁴⁷ Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik*, 373.

⁴⁸ Barth, *GD*, 126-30.

place is not so much a conception but (as at creation) a “God said,” a word, a command, a blessing.⁴⁹

The work of the Spirit in the conception of Jesus, according to Barth, is akin to God’s work in creation and is to be understood according to this other act of God, rather than as an act of sexual reproduction. Barth interprets the specific work of the Spirit in the conception of Jesus by analogy with Romans 11:36 (“all things are through him”) and 1 John 3:9 (Christians are “born of God”).⁵⁰ However, rather than creating *ex nihilo*, here God creates by his Spirit out of the human nature of the virgin.⁵¹ This unique action of God the Spirit through Mary distinguishes the virginal conception of Christ from the myths of the gods procreating with human women, making the suggestion that the Holy Spirit is the father of Jesus Christ simply a “bad joke.”⁵² Implicit in Barth’s explanation of the work of the Spirit is the *anhypostatic* Christology that he articulated in the previous section. Barth writes: “As a divine *person* (and Christ is *only a divine person*) Christ has only one Father, for whom the Holy Spirit cannot be a substitute.”⁵³ As we saw earlier, “person” derives from the father, not the mother. If Jesus had a human father, he would have to be two persons. However, Jesus is only one divine person because he has no human father but only his divine generation from God the Father in eternity.

In the final section, Barth examines the protestant scholastic description of precisely what occurred at the conception of Jesus. Barth describes how the scholastics divided the work of the Spirit into three simultaneous acts.⁵⁴ First, in the “*formatio*,” the “seed” of Mary was formed to be an assumable particle of human nature. This usually

⁴⁹ Barth, *GD*, 165.

⁵⁰ Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik*, 375.

⁵¹ Barth, *GD*, 165.

⁵² Barth, *GD*, 165.

⁵³ Barth, *GD*, 165.

⁵⁴ Barth, *GD*, 166-7; *Die christliche Dogmatik*, 378-9.

requires male semen in order to take place, but, in the case of Jesus, the Spirit worked miraculously to prepare the seed of Mary. Second, the “*sanctificatio*” entailed that this particle of Adamic human nature was “forensically” spared the attribution of original sin. Third, in the “*assumptio*” the Logos takes possession of the particle of human nature and it “becomes the subject of this predicate, gives it substance in his own person, and makes it his organ, temple, or medium.”⁵⁵ Barth provides no criticism of the scholastic understanding of human reproduction or of its application in the instance of Christ. Surely, some criticism could have been made, at least in the way that human nature and human person were portrayed in the reproductive event. Yet Barth does not do this. Rather, in the final paragraph of this section, Barth answers what appears to be the charge of antiquarianism. He concedes the strangeness of the ancient church doctrines but explains his preference for them over more modern, accessible, presentations of the doctrines: for Barth, the ancients and his protestant scholastic forefathers simply had a more “profound and serious knowledge of the matter.”⁵⁶

In summary, an examination of the Göttingen and Münster lectures reveals that Barth viewed the virginal conception of Jesus by the Spirit as ontologically constitutive of Christ’s person. The virgin birth was the means by which an exception could be made within the line of sinful human beings in opposition to God. By removing the earthly, sinful father of Jesus, it was clear that God alone was his Father and that Christ received his personhood solely from him. By interpreting the virgin birth in the context of original sin, Barth shows his affinity with the Augustinian tradition, though, by focusing on the *anhypostatic* character of Christ’s human nature, he reveals the uniqueness of his

⁵⁵ Barth, *GD*, 166.

⁵⁶ Barth, *GD*, 167.

position. In this exposition, we also encountered several elements that will become normative for Barth's future accounts of the virgin birth. These include locating the virgin birth within the realm of dogmatic prolegomena, emphasizing its miraculous nature as an event within history, drawing out the parallel with the resurrection, and implementing a typology of man and woman to mark the significance of the virgin birth.

2.3 *The Great Promise*

Before we examine Barth's *magnum opus*, we shall reflect briefly on two other works that shed important light on Barth's approach to the virgin birth. It is in these works that we first see Barth refer to the virgin birth of Christ as a "sign" (*Zeichen*), and unfold his exegetical and methodological reasons for doing so. In the four lectures contained in *The Great Promise* we have Barth's only extended exegesis of a New Testament infancy narrative.⁵⁷ As such, we gain a rare insight into how Barth connected his particular treatment of the virgin birth to its depiction in Scripture. Wolfhart

⁵⁷ The four studies of the first chapter of Luke contained in *The Great Promise* were delivered by Barth to his former students at the University of Bonn during Advent of 1934 after he had been suspended from his faculty position. Busch, *Karl Barth*, 258. Comment also needs to be made about the collection of essays contained in Karl Barth's *Christmas*, trans. Bernhard Citron (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1959). In this volume are contained Barth's Christmas meditations written for German daily newspapers between the years 1926 to 1933. Each is a short essay that takes the form of a pastoral reflection on some portion of Scripture as it relates to the situation in Germany prior to World War II. Barth only addresses the virgin birth once in these meditations, the article for 1927. In this article, Barth inquires after the significance of the statements in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds that describe the incarnation of the Son of God through the Virgin Mary. His main intention is to characterize the conception and birth of the Son of God as a miracle in strict discontinuity with all experience of human Eros (17-23). The form of Christ's birth means, for Barth, that no human being can contribute to the grace of God in the incarnation (21). At the conclusion of the article, Barth asks rhetorically if belief in the virgin birth is a requirement of being a Christian. Had Barth actually viewed the virgin birth as a sign at this point in his career, this would have been an ideal opportunity for him to have used the distinction between sign and thing-signified to remove any illegitimate offense to the virgin birth as he does in his works after 1934. Instead, Barth appeals to the authority of God's self-revelation and to the appropriateness of the virgin birth as the means for the presence of God among humanity (22-3). While Barth does not at this point say that the virgin birth is constitutive of Christ's person, he suggests that Christ could not have been born any other way. He asks rhetorically, "Of course God is conceived by God Himself. How else can God be conceived but by Himself?" (19). Though Barth's silence in explicitly characterizing the virgin birth as a sign of the mystery of revelation does not prove that he did not think it was such a sign at this point in his career, the evidence of these texts would appear to corroborate the sketch of Barth's development provided above.

Pannenberg criticizes Barth precisely because he believes that Barth's characterization of the virgin birth as a sign is not derived from exegesis of the biblical texts.⁵⁸ On the contrary, Barth's lectures on Luke 1 show that Barth believed that the characterization of the virgin birth as a sign is exegetically necessary. We shall survey Barth's exegesis of Luke 1 in order to discover how he reaches this conclusion.

Barth views the annunciation stories of Jesus and John in Luke 1 as set in a relationship of mutual illumination. This parallelism is, as we shall see, crucial for Barth's decision to interpret the virgin birth as a sign. Methodologically, Barth works through the biblical text in a verse-by-verse exposition and allows the literary themes and structures of the annunciation and birth of John to help to interpret those of Jesus. Of particular importance for our purposes, Barth uses Luke's characterization of Zechariah's muteness as a sign to interpret the miraculous conception promised to Mary also as a sign. On the other hand, he also allows that which takes place later in the story—the birth of Jesus—to interpret that which occurs chronologically prior in the annunciation and birth of John the Baptist. Through the interaction of these two stories, Barth sees emerge what he believes is the true character of each event being described. It is a settled hermeneutical practice for Barth to interpret each character in the biblical witness in their relation to Christ. No figure in Scripture has significance independent of Christ because all of Scripture attests to him.⁵⁹ This is particularly true with the paradigmatic figure of John the Baptist, whom Barth describes as both a prophet and apostle of Christ.⁶⁰ The Baptist is uniquely positioned both to prepare the way for the Lord and also to point to

⁵⁸ Pannenberg, *Jesus*, 144.

⁵⁹ Karl Barth, *The Great Promise: Luke I*, trans. Hans Freund, reprint (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004), 1.

⁶⁰ Barth, *Great Promise*, 1.

him. Only in John's relationship to Christ do the first two chapters of Luke have their unity: "the birth of John the Baptist belongs to the birth of Jesus Christ."⁶¹ Luke 1 as a whole, then, is devoted to the anticipation of the promised one, whose arrival will not be depicted until chapter two. Barth finds this insight registered even in the chapter divisions of Luke's Gospel, in which the church confined all that is anticipatory to the birth of Christ to the first chapter, thus drawing a distinction between the time of anticipation and the time of fulfillment.⁶²

In the first lecture, Barth expositis Luke's portrayal of the angel Gabriel appearing to Zechariah while he is performing his priestly duty (Luke 1:5-25). The priestly actions and location within this scene immediately unveil its connection with the covenant history of Israel.⁶³ Zechariah and his wife are described as righteous and blameless, though stricken with barrenness. Their childlessness is a "shadow" and "sorrow" that Barth understands to be of great significance. In the Old Testament, children were an indication of the Lord's blessing; barrenness was a special problem.⁶⁴ This is one of the few indications that Barth interprets the birth stories of John the Baptist and Jesus within the trajectory of Old Testament birth stories. He does not, however, draw out the significance of the Old Testament birth stories in any detail. Instead, he simply states that the purpose of such stories is to show that the human personalities who play an important role in Scripture do so not through their own abilities, qualities, efforts, nor through some

⁶¹ Barth, *Great Promise*, 2.

⁶² Barth, *Great Promise*, 55-6.

⁶³ Barth, *Great Promise*, 7.

⁶⁴ Barth, *Great Promise*, 5.

historic constellation. Rather, “the Bible by relating childhood stories tells us this: the men of whom we hear are what they are totally through the *grace* of God.”⁶⁵

The appearance of the angel Gabriel signifies, for Barth, that God himself is present in his messenger. In this encounter with God, righteous and blameless Zechariah is frightened. Such fear is both understandable and warranted. “God and the fear of God cannot be separated.”⁶⁶ This fear can only be removed by God himself, and so the angel commands Zechariah, “Do not be afraid” (1:13). The angel then goes on to announce to Zechariah the birth of his son and the rejoicing that this son will bring to many (1:14).⁶⁷

In verse 18, Zechariah asks “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.” This question will earn Zechariah a strong rebuke. Barth struggled with what to make of the fact that Zechariah is punished for asking a question similar to the one Mary will ask in Luke 1:34. He understands Zechariah’s question to have arisen out of unbelief (verse 20), rather than faithful curiosity like Mary’s.⁶⁸ Particularly important for our study is Zechariah’s request for a sign (“How shall I know?”). The angel responds in two parts. In the first part (verse 19), the angel simply presents himself as the answer to Zechariah’s request: “I am Gabriel.” As a judgment for unbelief, no sign is given.⁶⁹ The second part of the sign (verse 20) is Zechariah’s inability to speak, his muteness. Barth writes:

A curious sign: The man who can no longer talk, who has lost the power of speech! At the moment when the blessed man is expected to speak, he becomes silent. What has happened? Obviously—and that must be at the beginning of the

⁶⁵ Barth, *Great Promise*, 2. Emphasis in original

⁶⁶ Barth, *Great Promise*, 8. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁷ Barth, *Great Promise*, 9.

⁶⁸ Barth, *Great Promise*, 15. 36.

⁶⁹ Barth, *Great Promise*, 15.

story of the witness—man has failed. Even man under orders, the blessed man. Insofar as his faith fails him, he cannot speak.⁷⁰

In this sign given to Zechariah, the father of the promised son is conspicuously removed from verbal participation in the events that follow and the attention of the narrative turns toward his wife, Elizabeth. As Barth notes, “Zechariah is no longer referred to. Instead, it is his wife Elizabeth who had no share in his anxious question. Because of this she may now be present where the work of God is done. Man has failed; he disgraced himself and must keep quiet.”⁷¹ These themes of election, promise, faith, signs, judgment and even gender are displayed in the annunciation story of Jesus that follows.

Barth devotes his next lecture to this second story (verses 26-38). Barth considers Luke to have set the annunciation of John and the annunciation of Jesus in the closest connection, both literarily and theologically. Both Zechariah and Mary are, above all else, witnesses of the expected one. Just as the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah in the previous section, so he appears to Mary. In comparison with the previous story, however, the setting has become much simpler and less auspicious: the temple has been exchanged for the “insignificance and strange concealment” of the house of Mary.⁷² Furthermore, just as Zechariah’s priestly service connected John with the history of Israel, here the mention of Joseph links this story with the same history.⁷³ The angel greets Mary with the famous words, “Hail, O favoured one, the Lord is with you!” (verse 28). This greeting by the angel frightens Mary just as Zechariah was frightened in the previous story. For both, the fright is natural and takes place because of the identity of the one who elects to be

⁷⁰ Barth, *Great Promise*, 16. Near the end of Barth’s life, after being struck with muteness as a symptom of a stroke, Barth recalls the story of Zechariah as perhaps interpreting even his own life as a theologian who dared to speak and question before God. See Barth, “Letter 175, To Prof. Emil Brunner,” in *Karl Barth Letters, 1961-1968*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI: 1981), 179.

⁷¹ Barth, *Great Promise*, 16-17.

⁷² Barth, *Great Promise*, 21.

⁷³ Barth, *Great Promise*, 21.

involved in the life of such ones as Mary and Zechariah.⁷⁴ In Mary's case also, this fear can only be removed by God himself.

Verse 31 contains the annunciation of Christ's conception and birth proper. At this point, according to Barth, we enter something "new" and "special" in the story of advent expectation. Mary is told that she will "bear a son," and that this son is to be named "saviour" and "deliverer." By bearing this son and giving him the name Jesus, Mary "shall carry out the will of God and set up the sign with this name."⁷⁵ Mary is the elected point of access through which the Word of God shall come to be in the flesh. Barth looks upon this verse as the "centre" of Christmas "to which we have no further access."⁷⁶ The event announced here is truly without analogy, even in Christian experience.

Only a mystical theology could here wish to continue with analogies, but the Bible knows nothing about the Savior's being born in our soul, it only knows about the totally unique event of his "outward" birth (somewhat looked down upon by the mystics) which indeed is to lead to rebirth within ourselves, but which as an event stands opposite to our faith as its object.⁷⁷

Barth is here deeply concerned with spiritualizing away the form of Christ's birth and aims to preserve it precisely as a concrete event in space and time. For Barth, through the name of Jesus, the Bible speaks with specificity and particularity, not with myth, doctrine or general truth. The name of Jesus is, for Barth, the subject to which all else in Scripture is a predicate.⁷⁸ As we shall see in our fourth chapter, however, Barth will, in his own way, use the spiritual conception of Jesus as a means by which to understand the spiritual life of Christians.

⁷⁴ Barth, *Great Promise*, 24.

⁷⁵ Barth, *Great Promise*, 29.

⁷⁶ Barth, *Great Promise*, 26.

⁷⁷ Barth, *Great Promise*, 26-7; cf. 18-9.

⁷⁸ Barth, *Great Promise*, 28.

The next passage explicates who this Jesus shall be. Verse 32 explains that this son of Mary will be “called the Son of the Most High” and that he will be given the “throne of his father David.” Barth understands the first aspect of this passage to be, not something that *constitutes* Christ as the Son of God, but that Christ will be recognized as who he reveals himself to be: the Son of the Most High. In light of the Old and New Testaments, it can be said that other human beings are called children and sons of God. But, Barth quickly adds, “If this can happen, it happens in the perspective that there is one who originally *is* what we others indeed can only *become*, who originally is from eternity and who now is revealed in time, in history, in human life as the one who is from eternity the Son of God.”⁷⁹ Furthermore, by appealing to the throne of David, this passage also shows Jesus to be recognized as the Messiah, the one who fulfills the promises made to Israel. The name of Jesus signifies the entrance of something new, something salvific, into history, though not by setting aside all that went before.⁸⁰ In response to this strange announcement, Mary asks, “How can this be, since I have no husband?” For Barth, such a question would be entirely natural if we truly understand what was being promised by the angel to Mary. It was not simply that Mary would conceive without a husband, but that the one who would be conceived in this way would be the Son of God! The answer of the angel is astounding: only God the Holy Spirit can be the answer to Mary’s question.

Where the Holy Spirit is spoken of, there even more God is spoken of. When the Bible speaks of the Holy Spirit, it speaks of God as the link between Father and Son, of the *vinculum caritatis*. This love which unites the Father and Son makes it possible that there is a Jesus for us, that for us the Son has become man. The

⁷⁹ Barth, *Great Promise*, 29.

⁸⁰ Barth, *Great Promise*, 30.

innermost, the very mystery in the eternal being of God is also the mystery of his love for us.⁸¹

The source of salvation is from God himself, and so the Holy Spirit is posited as the origin of the earthly life of Jesus, the saviour. This reference to the *vinculum caritatis* is crucial for understanding Barth's exposition of the conception of Jesus by the Spirit, which we shall investigate at length in our fourth chapter.

In symmetry to the sign given Zechariah after his response to the promise offered him, verse 35 contains the declaration of the sign given to Mary: "Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God."

From the fact that there will be something miraculous about this birth, it shall be known who he is whom you [Mary] will bear. *The miracle will be a sign for what he is, does and accomplishes.* And by this sign—we will not be able to by-pass this sign—we will know who he is.⁸²

In a significant change from the lectures at Göttingen and Münster, the virgin birth is here described as a sign. Unlike Barth's earlier lectures, it no longer has a constitutive significance for who Jesus is as the Son of God in the flesh. Rather, the miracle of Christ's birth is given a purely noetic function insofar as it unveils the identity of the one born. Through the comparison of this story with that of the annunciation of John the Baptist, Barth discerns parallel signs in each. The two annunciation stories betray a similar literary and theological structure. Literarily, the story of John precedes that of Jesus and sets its context. Theologically, however, the latter illuminates the former.

From the great miracle one looks upon the small miracle, from the great sign upon the small sign. There [with Zechariah and Elizabeth] it is not really a matter of a miracle, rather of something wondrous. From the height of the mountain, as it were, one looks back once more—the birth of John is included in the birth of Jesus Christ.⁸³

⁸¹ Barth, *Great Promise*, 32-3.

⁸² Barth, *Great Promise*, 33. Emphasis added.

⁸³ Barth, *Great Promise*, 33.

The same angel appears and announces the birth of a promised child to the graciously elected but “barren” parents. To this promise, Zechariah responds with doubt. Mary responds with faith. The sign given Zechariah for his doubt is the miracle of his muteness. The sign given Mary is that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and she will conceive a son. Both promises about their respective children and the missions they will carry out stand under the sign of the miracle.⁸⁴ In both cases, God alone fulfills the promises. So also, the human responses are analogous. Barth writes:

They belong together—that Zechariah doubting and being punished because of his doubting, and Mary, having faith. They belong together like shadow and light, and yet—we take this from the whole purport of the first chapter—the light of this behaviour of Mary falls back upon Zechariah. His doubts, his punishment, while hidden, are received into the comfort, in the clarity, into the hope which proceed from Mary. No, not from Mary, but from the word which Mary has heard and has believed.⁸⁵

By viewing the annunciation of John and Jesus as mutually illuminating stories, Barth discerns that the miraculous conception of Jesus parallels the muteness of John’s father. Both of these signs are given to the responses of the respective parents. As we shall see in Barth’s lectures given shortly after those of *The Great Promise*, this exegetical decision proved to be decisive for Barth’s future treatment of the virgin birth.

2.4 *Credo*

Credo is important to our investigation because this volume allows us to see Barth develop his realization in *The Great Promise* that the virgin birth ought to be viewed as a sign of God’s work in the incarnation.⁸⁶ This move made it easier for Barth to free the

⁸⁴ Barth, *Great Promise*, 36.

⁸⁵ Barth, *Great Promise*, 36.

⁸⁶ *Credo* arose out of a series of lectures that Barth gave from February to April 1935 at the University of Utrecht. In these lectures, Barth used the Apostles’ Creed as a reference by which to demonstrate “the main problems of dogmatics.” See Karl Barth, *Credo: A Presentation of the Chief*

doctrine of the virgin birth from some of the criticisms to which it had been subjected in the modern era. *Credo* also reveals important methodological elements in Barth's approach to the church's Creed and Scripture, both of which have significance for Barth's interpretation of the virgin birth. Though the virgin birth is a relatively minor theme in the New Testament, its place in the Christian creeds demanded that Barth deal with it at length.

For Barth, the task of dogmatics and the task of Christian confession—*credo*—are closely related. Both are human recognitions of their object—divine revelation.⁸⁷ This means that both confession and dogmatics are acts of faith, with the special task of dogmatics being to understand and explain itself as a human recognition of God in his revelation. The manner in which dogmatics does this is to “take what is first said to it in the revelation of God's reality, and to think it over again in human thoughts and to say it over again in human speech” as it “unfolds and displays those truths in which the truth of God concretely meets us.”⁸⁸ This requires a highly expositional approach, which is the only proper form whereby theological justification takes place in consequence of the specific character of the object of its inquiry. For Barth, both the *credo* and dogmatics are tasks specific to the church, rather than the individual as such. When the individual articulates the *credo*, he or she does so precisely as a confession recognized by the church.⁸⁹ The individual theologian does not have the freedom simply to state his own private views on various matters but to teach in, from, and for the church. As such,

Problems of Dogmatics with Reference to the Apostles' Creed, 16 Lectures delivered at the University of Utrecht in February and March 1935, trans. James Strathearn McNab (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936; New York: Scribner's 1962); cf. Busch, *Karl Barth*, 259-60.

⁸⁷ Barth, *Credo*, 2.

⁸⁸ Barth, *Credo*, 3; cf. Ingolf U. Dalferth, “Karl Barth's Eschatological Realism,” in *Karl Barth: Centenary Essays*, ed. S. W. Sykes (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), 14-30.

⁸⁹ Barth, *Credo*, 4.

dogmatics must pay close attention to the creedal and confessional articulations of the faith that have gone before it. The relative authority of the church's creeds and confessions prompted Barth to exposit the doctrine of the virgin birth, perhaps more frequently and in greater depth than if he were simply expositing Scripture alone.

This is not to say that Barth conceived of dogmatics as simply restating the church's symbols. There is also a critical element to dogmatics. Both dogmatics and confession are concerned with the purity of the church's proclamation. Dogmatics serves as a "watchman" in this regard.⁹⁰ The authority by which this task is carried out is derived from revelation itself communicated in the church's reading of Scripture. The creeds articulate the faith they have heard in Scripture, and so dogmatics must refer the church's confession to its final criteria in the prophetic and apostolic witness.⁹¹ There can be, however, no arbitrary appeal to Scripture on the part of dogmatics without also recognizing that the Bible itself is a confession-bound document and has its rightful place in the church. Therefore, the church's interpretive tradition deserves the respect that parents are owed from their children.⁹² Barth's approach to theological exegesis is one of generous sympathy for the authors of Scripture and the historic interpretation of Scripture by the church, as it must be for one who aims to contribute to the church as its teacher. This is not to say that Barth is uncritical toward the creeds of the church. On the contrary,

⁹⁰ Barth, *Credo*, 5.

⁹¹ Barth, *Credo*, 7.

⁹² Barth, *Credo*, 7-8. Donald Wood underscores this point with reference to Barth's book *Protestant Theology in the 19th Century* in which Barth displays that his approach to Scripture and the creeds of the church are of a part with his hermeneutical perspective on historical theology, even to include that century with which he felt himself to be in the greatest conflict. See Donald Wood, *Barth's Theology of Interpretation* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 51-99.

the creeds and confessions appear to have very little, if any, independent value for him, but only insofar as they attest to God's revelation.⁹³

The sort of exegesis with which dogmatics is concerned is “theological exegesis,” as opposed to a “historical” or “untheological exegesis.” Theological exegesis, for Barth, requires a particular posture toward the Scripture. Theological exegesis operates under specific assumptions.

That is, firstly, that the reader of the Old and New Testaments remembers that in this book the Church has up to now heard God's Word; and secondly, that this reader or investigator reads in the expectation that he himself will also for his time hear God's Word.⁹⁴

For Barth, there can be no theological exegesis that does not involve these definite presuppositions. In fact, there can be no exegesis at all that does not involve some presupposition—even the historicist assumption of a neutral outlook is itself a presupposition. For Barth, the proper way to read the church's canon is to read it in a way that corresponds to the church. Just as the church finds itself between the “remembrance and expectation” of Christ himself, so does the reading of its Scriptures presuppose the remembrance and expectation of hearing the Word in these Scriptures.⁹⁵ It is this sort of exegesis that is appropriate to dogmatics as its criterion. The fruit of this exegesis may in fact require certain long-held statements in the Creed to be struck out. For example, for Barth, it is inconceivable that the resurrection be struck from the Creed on the basis of a

⁹³ Barth, *Credo*, 9-10. For Barth's own account of the Reformed understanding of the relationship between the creeds and confessions of the faith and the role of Scripture, see his lectures on the reformed confessions given in 1923 and published in English as *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions, 1923*, trans. Darrell L. Guder and Judith J. Guder (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 1-64.

⁹⁴ Barth, *Credo*, 177.

⁹⁵ Barth, *Credo*, 177-8. Burnett denies that Barth set out *a priori* a set of presuppositions with which one must come to the Bible, except that of the memory that the Word of God has been heard there before and the expectation that it will be heard there again. See Richard Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis: the Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 86-93.

true theological exegesis, given the resurrection's central role in the entire New Testament. He does, however, mention the virgin birth and the ascension as holding a more questionable place at the "margin" of New Testament witness. This will require Barth to craft a theological hermeneutic that accounts for the virgin birth's marginal position in Scripture while also accounting for how it came to play the role it did in the church's creedal tradition. It is just this sort of theological hermeneutic that Barth discusses in *Credo*.

Barth explains that theological exegesis aims to repeat "in explanatory form what the witness as such declares, what prophets and apostles testify of the 'mighty acts of God.'"⁹⁶ Barth has exemplified this approach in his treatment of the doctrine of the virgin birth, in which he treats the event as one that occurred in space and time, but is grounded entirely in the miraculous action of God. By contrast, there is what Barth calls the "modern science of history." In this approach one aims to reach behind the biblical text and to judge it in terms of relation and analogy with other events in history.⁹⁷ In this judgment, no place is made for the possibility of God acting in history. And yet, in spite of this obvious shortcoming for historical exegesis, Barth continues to think that "untheological exegesis" can be of benefit for the theologian and should not, in principle, be disallowed. Such an approach to the Bible unearths the "humanity" of this document as it is situated in the history of religions.⁹⁸ In particular, the theologian should not be

⁹⁶ Barth, *Credo*, 187.

⁹⁷ Barth, *Credo*, 187.

⁹⁸ Barth's comments in this regard might be clarified by his reply to Harnack in their public correspondence published in 1923 in *Die christliche Welt*. Here, Barth articulates what he believes to be the continued place of historical criticism in his theology, something he has maintained since the publication of his *Römerbrief*. He explains that historical criticism is helpful to Christian theology because it shows us that we cannot make revelation, God's Word, a predicate of human history or the phenomenal world. Historical criticism makes it clear that the biblical texts are human texts used for a divine purpose. Barth writes: "*We need it because in our flight from the offense we have fallen into this impossible question [of*

concerned when the findings of historical science classify Scripture's portrayal of a biblical event as saga or legend. These categories at least presuppose that there is an event that has occurred in history but, to greater or lesser degree, expose the difficulty with human language to express these events. Barth's discussion of saga and legend here bring more precision to his earlier discussion in *Die christliche Dogmatik* of primal history. Saga, in particular, is the literary genre appropriate to the presentation of events in primal history. The category of "myth" is different, and Barth is more hesitant in regard to the use of this term.

A report that is to be understood as "myth" has not its basis in any event, nor even in something "said" to have taken place. Here, on the contrary, is nothing but a human fantasy, a speculation about God and man. With the introduction of the idea of myth, theology sees its very *presupposition* attacked. There is nothing for it to do but reject the historical method.⁹⁹

In this regard, Barth mentions the virgin birth. While not opposed to the application of the category of saga or legend to the infancy narratives, Barth resists the application of the category of "myth" to them. According to Barth, the modern tendency to categorize the infancy narratives as "myth" is actually an indication that these texts attest to a "happening of the mighty act of God" whose quality is totally other than all other events.¹⁰⁰ Myth, for modern theology, became the way of escaping the need to account for the direct action of God in history. Barth takes this modern habit as a warning to

an historically knowable "middle point" between us and revelation]. I see the theological function, especially of historical criticism, as being that of making clear to us *a posteriori* that this *cannot be done*, that in the Bible we are dealing with testimonies, and always only with testimonies. And I maintain that this is the function which, in its way, it has actually splendidly *fulfilled* among us since the days of David Friedrich Strauss, even though largely not understood, and above all not itself knowing what it did." Karl Barth, "Answer to Open Letter," in *The Beginnings of Dialectical Theology*, ed. James M. Robinson (Richmond, VA: John Knox press, 1968), 180. Emphasis in original. Cf. Bruce L. McCormack, "Historical Criticism and Dogmatic Interest in Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis of the New Testament," in *Biblical Hermeneutics in Historical Perspective: Studies in Honor of Karlfried Froehlich on His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Mark S. Burrows and Paul Rorem (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 322-38.

⁹⁹ Barth, *Credo*, 189. Emphasis added.

¹⁰⁰ Barth, *Credo*, 190.

avoid any sense of naturalist or historicist explanation of the events attested by the infancy narratives.

When we move on to Barth's exposition of the second article of the Creed, we see that his treatment of the matters contained therein overlaps significantly with what we shall encounter when we examine the first volume of the *CD*. We will therefore comment on it only briefly. In its most basic form, the content of the second article is the incarnation of the Son of God through whose death and resurrection the reconciliation of sinful human beings with God takes place.¹⁰¹ For Barth, "God for us" is the content of each statement concerning Jesus Christ in the Creed.¹⁰² The two descriptions of the identity of Jesus—that he is God's Son and the Lord—are viewed by Barth as the presupposition of the entire biblical canon and Barth implements these two titles as axiomatic in his exposition of Christ's person.¹⁰³

Barth's treatment of the phrases "*Qui conceptus est de Spiritu sancto, natus ex Maria virgine*" concern us the most. Barth understands these two statements as two different ways of speaking of the incarnation of the Son of God. However, they speak of that content in different ways. The statement of Christ's conception by the Spirit expresses the incarnation's general, inner, significative sense. The statement of Christ's birth of the Virgin Mary speaks of its special, outer, material sense. Barth writes:

But that general, inner, material thing of which they speak is the *mystery* itself and as such—that Jesus Christ is true God and true man. And the special, the outer thing, the sign of which they speak is the *miracle*—that Jesus Christ as this true God and man has *God* alone for His Father and therefore the *Virgin Mary* for His mother. The first is the fact of the free grace of God in His revelation. The second

¹⁰¹ Barth, *Credo*, 42.

¹⁰² Barth, *Credo*, 46.

¹⁰³ Barth, *Credo*, 48, 53.

is the form and fashion peculiar to His revelation, in which as free grace it gives itself to be known.¹⁰⁴

Barth here conflates the conception by the Spirit with the incarnation itself. The virgin birth stands beside this as its sign. Barth will alter this somewhat when we examine the *CD* in the next section. In *Credo*, however, the incarnation, which is the conception of Jesus by the Spirit, and his virgin birth are related as content is to form, as mystery is to miracle.

According to Barth, the statement of Jesus' conception by the Spirit has this significance, "that the human existence of Jesus Christ in its creatureliness as distinguished from all other creatures, has its origin immediately in God, and is therefore immediately God's own existence."¹⁰⁵ The correlating statement in the Creed is, according to his birth of the Virgin Mary, that Jesus also has a creaturely human origin. Thus, for Barth in *Credo*, the two statements together attest that God and humanity have become one in Jesus of Nazareth. Furthermore, the way in which the conception by the Spirit and the virgin birth attest to the fact of the incarnation is, for Barth, by expressing in a very concrete way the freedom of God from all necessity to become incarnate and the exclusion of all human possibility to bring it about.¹⁰⁶ As such, the wording of the Creed demands to be read in faith, in which human thinking follows the revelation of God. Quite simply, the form of Christ's birth needs to be judged, not according to our ideas of what is appropriate to our *a priori* conception of God, but according to the fact of the incarnation to which the form of Christ's birth attests.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Barth, *Credo*, 63.

¹⁰⁵ Barth, *Credo*, 64.

¹⁰⁶ Barth, *Credo*, 65.

¹⁰⁷ Barth, *Credo*, 66.

According to Barth, the reason for the disdain shown the virgin birth in modern theology is not due to exegetical criticisms but to theological criticisms that ensued when it failed to be understood as a sign.

With regard to my Lecture I hope that you remember not only *that* I took up on this point a positive position, but also *how* and in what connection (*res* and *signum*) I did this. I came to the position of holding fast to the Virgin Birth from having ascertained in the New Testament that here a kind of signal is given which to the early Church was at all events sufficiently important to be received into the Creed. In the sense in which I have here presented the doctrine of the Virgin Birth, I think I am able to justify it before the claims of a theological exegesis.¹⁰⁸

When it is not understood as a sign, the virgin birth appears to be either an “insufficient hypothesis on which to base the Incarnation” or as a “superfluous, miraculous embellishment.”¹⁰⁹ For Barth, we are “shown” the mystery of the incarnation in the miraculous birth from the Virgin Mary.¹¹⁰ All miracles work as signs of the revelation to which they attest.¹¹¹ As a miracle at the beginning of the life of Christ, the virgin birth is, for Barth, a “sign” of God’s mysterious revelation.

The miracle of the Virgin Birth has no ontic but noetic significance. It advertises what here takes place. As miracle in general, and now as just this special miracle, it is the watch before the door drawing our attention to the fact that we are here concerned with the *mystery*, with *God’s free grace*.¹¹²

That is to say, the miracle of the virgin birth does not accomplish the incarnation or the work of Christ in itself. What it does is attest to the incarnation and work of the free grace of God in Christ.

¹⁰⁸ Barth, *Credo*, 179. Emphasis in original.

¹⁰⁹ Barth, *Credo*, 72.

¹¹⁰ Barth, *Credo*, 68.

¹¹¹ Barth, *Credo*, 37.

¹¹² Barth, *Credo*, 69. Emphasis in original.

While Barth has distinguished between form and content, he insists that they cannot be separated. Historically, they have been separated only with great peril to the mystery. Barth writes:

It is no doubt true that the dogma of the Virgin Birth is only the form and fashion of the witness of the true godhead and manhood of Christ. But it is also true it is just in *this* form and fashion that this witness has been heard by the Church right from the beginning. And it could well be that its clarity and definiteness is inseparably bound up with this form and fashion, that therefore in its clarity and definiteness it is not to be heard otherwise than in this very form and fashion.¹¹³

Barth is rather ambiguous about why the content of the incarnation cannot be separated from its form in the virgin birth.¹¹⁴ However, to help explain the way the virgin birth relates to the incarnation, Barth uses an illustration drawn from another miracle recorded in the Gospels. Barth will use this illustration throughout his later treatments of the virgin birth. In Mark 2:1-12, Jesus pronounces the forgiveness of sins upon a paralytic man but then adds, in response to the scribes, in verse 10, “But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins,” heals the man, and commands him to take his mat home. For Barth, this order of the relationship between the declaration of the forgiveness of sins and the miracle of healing is “exactly the relationship” between the mystery of the incarnation and the miracle of the virgin birth.¹¹⁵ Here, the significance that the doctrine of the virgin birth has for the incarnation is that it safeguards the mystery by marking it with a miracle. The ancient church, according to Barth, managed to preserve the mystery precisely because it paid attention to the watchman at the door, the miracle of the virgin birth.¹¹⁶ The virgin birth, like other miracles in the life of Christ, sheds the revelatory light of the resurrection back onto the life of Jesus in order that the

¹¹³ Barth, *Credo*, 63, 72.

¹¹⁴ Barth, *Credo*, 68-9.

¹¹⁵ Barth, *Credo*, 69.

¹¹⁶ Barth, *Credo*, 69.

faithful might catch glimpses of the one who suffers and dies for them. As a rule, for Barth, however, the revelation of God remains under the veil of hiddenness.¹¹⁷ Through the disguise of the humble humanity of Christ, the significance of the life of Jesus is one that demands faith.¹¹⁸ The miracles do not, as such, add anything to the work of Christ. Rather, they simply unveil what was there taking place in concealment.¹¹⁹ According to Barth's exposition in *Credo*, even the resurrection and ascension do not contribute to Christ's work in any ontological sense, adding substantial elements to it. Rather, both of these events serve to unveil the meaning of what transpired on the cross.¹²⁰

In summary of Barth's treatment both of the Lukan infancy narrative and of the virgin birth in his exposition of the Apostles' Creed, we can say the following. First, Barth's decision to designate the virgin birth as a sign relating to the incarnation, rather than as a constitutive element of Christ's person, was one that was derived exegetically and was not a theological decision made simply to avoid the criticism of modern theology. Second, as Barth explained in *Credo*, the shift to understand the virgin birth as a sign enables him to avoid many of the criticisms typically directed at the Augustinian interpretation of the virgin birth. Quite simply, Barth was able to affirm the virgin birth without having also to affirm a particular view of original sin, its transmission and sexuality. These themes will continue in Barth's fullest exposition of the doctrine of the virgin birth in the *CD*, where he will also describe his view of the proper theological evaluation of the sign of the virgin birth.

¹¹⁷ Barth, *Credo*, 75-6.

¹¹⁸ Barth, *Credo*, 96.

¹¹⁹ Barth, *Credo*, 102.

¹²⁰ Barth, *Credo*, 103, 115.

2.5 The Word of God and the Mystery of God: *Church Dogmatics I*

By the time of the *CD* Barth had come to the firm conviction that the virgin birth is to be affirmed as a sign of the incarnation. He took the opportunity afforded him in the first volume of the *CD* to devote an entire section to his exposition of this sign. In the remainder of this chapter we shall describe the significance that Barth attached to the virgin birth as a sign and outline his view of how it ought to be interpreted according to its “fit” with the mystery of the incarnation. Since Barth was adamant that the virgin birth referred to the mystery of the incarnation, we shall briefly investigate the role that mystery played in Barth’s prolegomena.

In the 1932 preface to the first part volume, Karl Barth described the criticism he had received for his earlier doctrinal expositions. Due to Barth’s intentional departure from the liberal theological tradition of his teachers, he earned the derogatory label “scholastic.” In response, Barth affirms that he can indeed quote the medieval and Protestant scholastics without regret and that he deals explicitly with the doctrines of the early church, including that of the Trinity and the virgin birth. “The last-named alone is obviously enough to lead many contemporaries to suspect me of crypto-Catholicism.”¹²¹ Barth dismissed the charge and suggested instead that the underlying reason why modern Protestants have felt the need to question such doctrines of the early church is because of a deficiency in their own approach to the theological task. Barth writes:

Or shall I rather bemoan the constantly increasing confusion, tedium and irrelevance of modern Protestantism, which, probably along with the Trinity and the Virgin Birth, has lost an entire third dimension—the dimension of what for once, though not confusing it with religious and moral earnestness, we may describe as mystery—with the result that it has been punished with all kinds of worthless substitutes, that it has fallen the more readily victim to such uneasy cliques and sects as High Church, German Church, Christian Community and

¹²¹ Barth, *CD*, I/1, xiii.

religious Socialism, and that many of its preachers and adherents have finally learned to discover deep religious significance in the intoxication of Nordic blood and their political *Führer*?¹²²

Barth's discussion here, though polemically charged, reveals something of the importance he attached to the doctrines of the Trinity and virgin birth. He placed such doctrines in a uniquely exalted position, far above the low esteem they had received in the preceding centuries of German theology. Whereas modern theology is allergic to miracle and intricate doctrinal exposition and so dissolves mystery, Barth learned from the ancient church how to describe the mystery of God's revelation without explaining it away.¹²³ For Barth, the mystery of God especially expressed in these doctrines serves to chasten all theological over-confidence. The mystery of God's Word is a "de-assuring" and a "theological warning" against theology itself.¹²⁴ God's mystery means God's Word cannot be mastered by human principles, axioms or systems. As we shall see, Barth's interpretation of the doctrine of the virgin birth in particular exemplifies what he intends by this charge of the missing element of mystery.

After Barth's exposition of the three forms of the Word of God (§4)—as revealed, written and proclaimed—he begins to investigate the question of the "nature" of the Word of God. In this section, Barth delimits the Word of God as God's speech, God's action and God's mystery. Barth insists that these three descriptions are interrelated; each is an exegesis of the one that precedes it.¹²⁵ The fundamental thing to be said about God's Word is that it is God's speech. As the speech of God, the Word of God is God's

¹²² Barth, *CD*, I/1, xiv.

¹²³ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 125-6.

¹²⁴ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 163-5. As Mangina puts it, "Theology cannot conjure God; it can only pray that he will show himself." Joseph Mangina, *Karl Barth: Theologian of Christian Witness* (Louisville, TN: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 36.

¹²⁵ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 133.

spiritual, personal, and purposive address to human beings. As the action of God, the speech that is God's Word means its contingent contemporaneity, power to rule, and the decision of God upon human beings. This is to say that God reveals himself at his free disposal and is not in any way ascertainable through human efforts, whether rational or pious. Barth's characterization of the Word of God as God's "speech-act" is connected directly to it being a mystery. Mystery is a central theme in Barth's theology and functions, at least at a basic level, to underscore Barth's conviction that there can be no human masters of God's Word, no matter how well they think they have grasped its structure and operation.¹²⁶ At least in part, this is because even in God's self-revelation, we do not receive that revelation directly. Barth writes:

Mystery does not just denote the hiddenness of God but His revelation in a hidden, i.e., a non-apparent way which intimates indirectly rather than directly. Mystery is the concealment of God in which He meets us precisely when He unveils Himself to us, because He will not and cannot unveil Himself except by veiling Himself. Mystery thus denotes the divine givenness of the Word of God which also fixes our own limits and by which it distinguishes itself from everything that is given otherwise.... This means that we cannot establish its distinction. Otherwise it would not be a mystery. It distinguishes itself by giving itself to us in this way and this alone: not in such a way that we can arrive at a triumphant distinction, but in such a way that there is reserved for it the right to distinguish itself.¹²⁷

The mystery of God, then, is to be understood as derivative of God's speech-act in which God himself is free in his revelation. As free in his revelation, God cannot be grasped or mastered by the human hearer of his Word.

When we describe the speech-act of God as mystery we acknowledge that the Word of God cannot be treated as an object of knowledge among other objects which we

¹²⁶ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 162.

¹²⁷ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 165.

can grasp with thought. For only God can conceive of himself.¹²⁸ In *CD* II/2, Barth calls God's inter-Trinitarian knowledge of himself his primary objectivity (*Gegenstandlichkeit*).¹²⁹ The knowledge of God in which God makes possible a human participation in his own Triune self-knowledge is what Barth calls God's mediated objectivity.¹³⁰ Human knowledge of God is a "repetition" in time of the Father's knowledge of the Son through the unity of the Holy Spirit.¹³¹ In God's mediated objectivity, God elects to reveal himself through the use of signs. Due to the structures of human knowing, signs are integral for the human reception of revelation. Signs are elements of creaturely reality taken up by God to become the "organ of the divine self-witness."¹³² These signs do not cease to be created things in their implementation in God's revelation. And yet, because they are pressed into divine service as signs of God's revelation, the ground of their function as such is found only in God himself.¹³³ For Barth, the sign above all signs is Jesus Christ in his life as it extends from Bethlehem to Golgotha.¹³⁴ The humanity of Jesus is the basis of all signs, the unrepeatable sign that is the basic reality of all creaturely witness by God's grace.¹³⁵ On the basis of, and in

¹²⁸ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 164.

¹²⁹ "Barth's use of the German term *Gegenstand* builds on its root meaning, 'that which stands against,' and it is thus precisely the opposite of an 'object' that one can have in one's hand and manipulate. This 'Objectivity' is not at humans' disposal, opposes them, and moves towards the human for the purpose of encounter. There appears to be no appropriate English translation for Barth's distinctive usage of *Gegenstandlichkeit*." Eberhard Busch, *The Great Passion: An Introduction to Karl Barth's Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed. Darrell L. Guder and Judith L. Guder (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 72, 74-6.

¹³⁰ Barth, *CD*, II/1, 16.

¹³¹ Barth, *CD*, II/1, 59.

¹³² Barth, *CD*, II/1, 52-3; cf. George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: the Shape of His Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 1991), 76-85; Eberhard Jüngel, *God's Being is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth. A Paraphrase*, trans. John Webster (Grand Rapids, MI: T & T Clark, 2001), 61-9.

¹³³ Barth, *CD*, II/1, 17.

¹³⁴ Barth, *CD*, II/1, 20.

¹³⁵ Barth, *CD*, II/1, 53-4. As we shall see in Chapter 4, Barth will move away from his view that Jesus is the *first* sacrament to Jesus being the *only* sacrament. This has implications for Barth's doctrine of revelation and, obviously, baptism and human action.

analogy with, the assumption of the human nature of Christ in the incarnation, other created elements such as Scripture and church proclamation have their being as signs. Through these means, God veils himself in order to unveil himself and mystery is confirmed in revelation.¹³⁶ Even in God's revelation he remains hidden, for there is always the risk that the sign could be interpreted as nothing more than a created object like all other created objects.¹³⁷ The sign of the virgin birth is an aspect of the great sign that is the life of Jesus Christ. It sheds light upon the God who reveals himself in history.

Barth sets his position on the sign-character of revelation against other manners of communication, both direct and indirect. In direct communication, the content and the form of the communication are identical. In indirect communication, there remains a certain similarity and correspondence between form and content. In the revelation of God's Word, however, the form is an "unsuitable medium."

[The form] does not correspond to the matter but contradicts it. It does not unveil it but veils it. The secularity of the Word of God does not imply only that it meets us in the garment of creaturely reality. Because the creaturely reality is that of fallen man and because the Word of God meets us in this reality, we have to say that its form is not that of a pure nature which as such stands in immediate contrast with the distorted nature of its environment....The place where God's Word is revealed is objectively and subjectively the cosmos in which sin reigns.¹³⁸

There is thus a twofold indirectness to the self-communication of the Word of God: the creaturely medium and the sinfulness of the human subject, both of which contrast with the Word of God.¹³⁹ Such a construction sets God's self-communication apart from the scope of all human interpretation in so far as such interpretation might treat the phenomena of the form in which revelation comes as intrinsically related to God's Word.

¹³⁶ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 169.

¹³⁷ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 165.

¹³⁸ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 166.

¹³⁹ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 168.

On the contrary, God's Word, even in its communication through creaturely forms, can only be interpreted by God himself.¹⁴⁰ This is the particular role of the Holy Spirit, who is himself the Lord of the human hearing of the Word of God. That is to say, the hearing and believing of the Word of God is ultimately a miracle of Holy Spirit.¹⁴¹ As we shall see especially in our fourth chapter, the relationship between the virgin birth, the Holy Spirit and the mystery of God's revelation is an intimate one.

2.6 Jesus Christ, the Mystery of God

In this section, we shall describe the Christological shape of Barth's prolegomena. Just as he did in the lectures at Göttingen and Münster, in the *CD* Barth locates his treatment of the doctrine of the virgin birth in the prolegomena. Rather than a "crutch," however, Barth here describes prolegomena as the "attempt to give an explicit account of the particular way of knowledge taken in dogmatics, or, as we might also say, of the particular point from which we are to look, think and judge in dogmatics."¹⁴² Such an attempt is not, as Barth himself suggested in the Göttingen lectures, simply a practicality of the post-enlightenment historical situation in which the church finds itself. On the contrary, an evangelical prolegomena has the task of clarifying the formal presuppositions inwardly necessary to the carrying out of dogmatics itself, particularly in the face of heresy.¹⁴³ For Barth the church has its being in the self-originating divine action of the Word of God.¹⁴⁴ It is this Word that is the criteria for dogmatics and it is this Word that is the subject of prolegomena in dogmatics.¹⁴⁵ With the Word of God as its

¹⁴⁰ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 166-7.

¹⁴¹ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 181-2.

¹⁴² Barth, *CD*, I/1, 25.

¹⁴³ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 35.

¹⁴⁴ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 41.

¹⁴⁵ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 43.

subject there can be no thought of setting up some general anthropology or fundamental philosophy to act as a prolegomena to dogmatics. Rather, dogmatic prolegomena must itself be doctrinal exposition.¹⁴⁶ Just as he did in the Göttingen lectures, Barth's prolegomena here includes "anticipations" of doctrines regularly thought to belong in the body of a dogmatic work.¹⁴⁷ Of particular importance in this regard are the doctrines of the Trinity, the incarnation, and, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, the virgin birth. For Barth, these doctrines play a critical role by giving content and shape to the very approach and method of Christian dogmatics. Of the incarnation and virgin birth, Barth writes:

In the past these two mutually complementary statements have not been included among the basic doctrines or prolegomena of the Church dogmatics. They have not, then, added validity and effectiveness as a presupposition of the whole. Like the doctrine of the Trinity itself, they have been treated as individual statements among others. I regard this, if not as an error, at least as a lurking source of error in earlier Christian doctrine. As such, it has had a disastrous effect, and it is our present task to overcome it. After all that has befallen it, Church dogmatics will not become "church" again, i.e., free from the alien dominion of general truths and free for Christian truth, until it summons up sufficient courage to restore what is specifically Christian knowledge, that of the Trinity and of Christology, to its place at the head of its pronouncements, and regard and treat it as the foundation all its other pronouncements.¹⁴⁸

Barth unfolds his prolegomena by attempting to remain consistent with his conviction that epistemology must follow ontology; description of how God has revealed himself must follow the conviction that God has revealed himself in fact. In volume I/1,

¹⁴⁶ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 42.

¹⁴⁷ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 44. Busch writes: "The dogmatics of the nineteenth century understood the role 'prolegomena' with which it began as a preamble addressing the general human and human-religious presuppositions which would make a 'doctrine of faith' possible. Barth, however, begins his work with a crash of the drum understanding prolegomena in precisely the opposite sense....It will never get to the real theme if it does not deal with it in the very first. Moreover, it can never speak about God at all except for the fact that God began to speak to humanity....What we 'say first' comprises both our respect for and seriousness about the fact that God speaks, and must speak, first. Barth's prolegomena, then, comprises his total dogmatics in brief, or more precisely, a comprehensive doctrine of the *Word of God*." Busch, *The Great Passion*, 42.

¹⁴⁸ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 124.

the doctrine of the Trinity is used by Barth to express the subject of revelation. In volume 1/2, Barth discusses the fulfillment of that revelation in humanity. This is what Barth describes as the “possibility” of revelation in its objective and subjective aspects. This involves Barth in an exposition of the doctrines of the incarnation and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. In §15, entitled *The Mystery of Revelation*, Barth describes the objective possibility of revelation. Here, Barth (1) outlines his approach to the problem of Christology, (2) describes the main contours of Christ as God and man, and (3) describes the miracle (*Wunder*) of Christmas. In Barth’s reading of Scripture, God reveals himself as free for humanity specifically in Jesus Christ. In the incarnation of Jesus Christ there comes the sign through which God veils and unveils himself to human beings. As such, the incarnation is the central mystery of the Christian faith. Barth writes:

God’s revelation in its objective reality is the incarnation of His Word, in that He, the one true eternal God, is at the same time true Man like us. God’s revelation in its objective reality is the person of Jesus Christ. In establishing this we have not explained revelation, or made it obvious, or brought it into the series of the other objects of our knowledge. On the contrary, in establishing this and looking back at it we have described and designated it a mystery, and not only a mystery, but the prime mystery.¹⁴⁹

Jesus Christ, as the objective reality of revelation, is the place in which the divine veiling and unveiling takes place for humankind.¹⁵⁰ As that by which God’s revelation comes to us and as the limit and boundary to human knowledge of God, the incarnation can be grounded in nothing other than the direct action of God himself. Therefore, the revelation of God in Jesus Christ “stamps itself...as a mystery and in token thereof as a miracle, i.e., as an exception from the rule of the cosmos of realities that otherwise encounter man, it claims to be attested and known in this exceptional way corresponding to its exceptional

¹⁴⁹ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 172.

¹⁵⁰ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 15.

character.”¹⁵¹ As we shall see below, this language of mystery, miracle, and exception are central to Barth’s understanding of the virgin birth. In the doctrine of the incarnation the mystery of revelation is brought to its definite expression and the doctrine of the virgin birth expresses the form of that mystery.¹⁵² Thus, rather than an expression of sheer dogmatism, as one might suppose, Barth’s inclusion of the virgin birth in his prolegomena serves to provide him with an appropriate description—a sign—of the way in which revelation comes to human beings.

Before we investigate Barth’s doctrine of the virgin birth in the *CD*, we will explore briefly the Christological context of which it is a part. Barth’s Christology in *CD I/2* stands in close continuity with his earlier treatment in the Göttingen lectures and *Die christliche Dogmatik*.¹⁵³ Here, however, Barth’s Christology takes the form of an elaboration of John 1:14, “the Word became flesh.” His exposition takes place in three parts. In the first part, Barth affirms that it is the Word of God who is the acting subject in the incarnation. As such, the incarnation was an act of divine freedom, unconstrained by any external necessity. This freedom continues even in the incarnate state.¹⁵⁴ In the incarnation the Word remains the divine Word. In the second section, Barth describes the significance of the term “flesh.” To say that the Word became flesh means that the Word assumed true human essence and existence, became a particular man, and lived in the

¹⁵¹ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 28.

¹⁵² Barth, *CD*, I/2, 123-4.

¹⁵³ Barth will later recant his decision to construct a “special Christology” and come to favor instead an approach to understanding Jesus of Nazareth that is entirely integrated into his work of reconciliation. See Barth, *CD*, IV.1, 124-7. Bruce McCormack explains that at this point in Barth’s career, he was still working with the “abstract metaphysical ontology which underwrote the Christology of the Chalcedonian Council.” McCormack believes that Barth’s doctrine of election eventually enabled him to revise this ontology. See Bruce McCormack, “Karl Barth’s Historicizing Christology: Just How Chalcedonian Is It?” in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 206-7.

¹⁵⁴ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 136.

situation of all human beings after Adam who are liable to God's judgment and wrath.

The Word took on all that human beings are, including the fallenness of their flesh.

However, though the Word becomes the same as us, He lives in that situation in a different way than us; he is sinless.¹⁵⁵ We shall investigate at length Barth's treatment of this matter in relation to his doctrine of the virgin birth in the following chapter. In the third part of Barth's exposition of the meaning of the incarnation he describes the meaning of the term "became." In the becoming of the Word, Barth argues that the Word did not cease to be the Word, but rather that the Word "assumed" to itself human nature. Though suggested throughout Barth's exposition, it is only here that Barth explicitly describes the human nature of Christ as *anhypostasis* and *enhypostasis*.¹⁵⁶ With these terms Barth intends to communicate, as he did in the Göttingen lectures, that the human nature of Jesus has no independent existence outside of its existence in the Word. He also affirms his earlier decision to privilege the Reformed emphasis on the dynamic character of the incarnational event over the Lutheran emphasis on the completed nature of that event. However, now Barth concedes to the Lutherans that the Word is available only in Jesus Christ, but he continues to agree with the Reformed tradition that the Word is not exhausted in the flesh of Jesus.

2.7 The Virgin Birth as the Sign of the Mystery of the Incarnation

As we saw above, Barth locates his main exposition of the virgin birth in the *CD* under his discussion of the mystery of revelation, the incarnation. Our exposition in this section will focus on how Barth characterizes the virgin birth as a sign of the mystery of the incarnation, how he addresses the exegetical difficulties raised against the virgin birth

¹⁵⁵ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 156.

¹⁵⁶ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 162-5

and his view of how the virgin birth ought to be evaluated according to its “fit” with the mystery of the incarnation. Barth begins his treatment of the miracle of Christmas in the *CD* by outlining the main factors that press this doctrine upon his register. In terms of its biblical foundation, he lists the infancy narratives and the Immanuel prophecy in Isaiah 7. He also lists the formulation of the idea of the virgin birth in the creeds of the church. Barth admits that the biblical ground for the adoption of the virgin birth as a dogma by the church is not as strong as one might like. However, Barth does not engage here in an extended biblical exegesis to show that the virgin birth is attested in Scripture. Rather, he takes it as given that the New Testament infancy narratives in their final form attest to the virgin birth and, at least at this point in the *CD*, that Isaiah 7:14 does so as well.¹⁵⁷ He does, however, address four objections to the virgin birth on the basis of New Testament exegesis, each of which was articulated by his father.¹⁵⁸

The first objection is that, apart from Matthew and Luke, the virgin birth was not expressed by any of the other New Testament writers, nor was it included in the summary statements of the *kerygma*. It is plausible, for Barth, that Luke and Matthew took a special interest in the birth of Jesus, while others did not, simply because it suited Matthew and Luke’s particular purposes. The other New Testament writers may have

¹⁵⁷ Only several years later in *CD* IV/1 does Barth refer to Isaiah 7 at length. There, Barth appears ambivalent about whether the text actually refers to a virgin or only a young maiden. However, in this treatment of Isaiah 7, Barth uses the Immanuel tradition as an indication of the general direction of Scripture to describe the basis of the doctrine of reconciliation, the promise of God with us, see Barth, *CD*, IV.1, 5-6; cf. Mark Gignilliat, *Karl Barth and the Fifth Gospel: Barth’s Theological Exegesis of Isaiah* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 79-85.

¹⁵⁸ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 174-6; cf. Fritz Barth, *Lebens Jesu*, 257-73. Charles Waldrop argues that Barth’s treatment of the virgin birth betrays his Alexandrian approach to exegesis because he clearly favors the spiritual meaning of the text, rather than its literal meaning. Waldrop cites Brunner as an example of someone who views the virgin birth narratives literally presenting a biological explanation for Christ’s divine Sonship. On the contrary, for Barth, the New Testament infancy narratives clearly present Jesus Christ as having been born of a virgin. He has no need for allegory or spiritualization to make this claim from the text. Barth believes that the New Testament texts simply do not make the claim that the virgin birth was a biological explanation of divine Sonship. See Waldrop, *Karl Barth’s Christology*, 197

presupposed what Luke and Matthew made explicit. This possibility is corroborated, for Barth, by the fact that the other New Testament authors tend to mention the mother of Jesus and omit mention of his father.

The second objection is a textual one, in which certain manuscripts of the New Testament, such as *Syriac Sinaiticus*, include a version of the Matthean genealogy that describes Jesus as the son of Joseph. Yet Barth also finds in these same manuscripts explicit mention of the virgin birth in verses 1:18, 20, and 23. For Barth, the most that can be concluded on the ground of textual criticism is that a tradition existed at an early date in which the notion that Jesus was born of a virgin stood side by side with the belief that he was also Joseph's son.

The third objection Barth addresses is that the genealogies do not prove the point of Jesus' Davidic lineage if Joseph is not the father of Jesus. Jesus' Davidic lineage was clearly an important element for Paul (Romans 1:3; 1 Timothy 2:8) and John (John 7:42), as well as the synoptic Gospels (Matthew 1:1; 12:23, 21:9; Mark 10:42f; 12:35f). Consequently, Barth thinks it inconceivable that Matthew and Luke would include a virgin birth in their accounts if they believed that it undermined Jesus' Davidic descent. Barth believes that the best explanation for the coexistence of Jesus' Davidic descent and the presence of the virgin birth is simply that the Bible can conceive of legal and legitimate sonship in non-biological ways.

The final objection that Barth deals with is the possibility of the Lukan infancy narrative giving witness to an earlier tradition that did not include the idea of a virgin birth. By simply erasing Mary's profession that she has not known a man in 1:34 and the clause "as was being thought" from the genealogy of Luke 3:23, the infancy narrative of

Luke would suggest that Jesus was born through a work of the Spirit that did not exclude Joseph's sexual participation.¹⁵⁹ Barth simply finds that such erasures make the reading of the text more complicated than the final form received by the church. As well, one still would have to deal with the Matthean text, which clearly teaches a virgin birth. Barth concludes this brief examination of exegetical inquiries by stating that these objections raised against the doctrine of the virgin birth do not disallow its adoption as dogma, even though the doctrine is "hedged about by questions."¹⁶⁰ The questions that remain concern the details of literary attestation. For Barth, such questions can only support the decision, but cannot be the final determining factor in the church's decision to accept the dogma.

Barth's rather meagre treatment of the infancy narratives in the *CD* can be helpfully augmented by briefly examining his discussion of the creation narratives in *CD* III/1 where he lays out his understanding of literary genre in an analogous context. As we shall see, Barth believes that the content presented in the New Testament infancy narratives is closely related to the event attested in the Genesis creation narratives. Barth characterizes the creation narratives as saga (*Sage*). Saga is, for Barth, a literary form that uses "intuitive and poetic pictures" to depict a pre-historical reality of history (*praehistorischen Geschichtswirklichkeit*).¹⁶¹ While saga is used to express events that are genuinely historical in the sense they took place in space and time, it does so by presenting the event in its immediate relation to God. As such, saga is to be distinguished from myth and also historicist history (*historische Geschichte*). Unlike myth, saga does not express a timeless state of God and the world, but depicts events that are genuinely

¹⁵⁹ Mueller suggests that Barth is likely thinking here of Wilhelm Bousset's *Kyrios Christos* in which this objection is set forth, but each of these objections were offered by Barth's father. See Mueller, "Karl Barth's View of the Virgin Birth," 512.

¹⁶⁰ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 176.

¹⁶¹ Barth, *CD*, III/1, 81.

historical.¹⁶² Unlike historicist history, saga is not confined to evaluating events according to their connection and analogy with other events in creation.¹⁶³ While the creation narratives are entirely saga, due to the fact that they present God's creation of the world to which there is no other analogy in creation, most of Scripture contains elements of saga interwoven in greater or lesser degrees with historical narrative. This mixture of saga and historical narrative is because all biblical events after creation presuppose both a connection with the history that went before it, as well as a relationship immediate to God. In the miracle stories of Scripture, in which God's immediacy to history is particularly evident, the use of saga becomes more pronounced.¹⁶⁴ The degree to which saga is present in the biblical text does not cause Barth to question the doctrinal usefulness of these texts. Rather, the theological evaluation of all Scripture, whether history or saga, is described by Barth in this way:

The decision about its nature as revelation, the confirmation of its reality as the Word of God, is reached by the fact that in its "historical" parts and also particularly and precisely in its "non-historical" (or sagas)—although always in connexion with the former—it attests the history of the great acts of God as genuine history, and that this witness is received and accepted through the power of the Holy Spirit.¹⁶⁵

When we consider the infancy narratives in light of some of these comments, we begin to understand a bit more about their function in the biblical witness. For Barth, the infancy narratives are indeed accounts that depict events that took place in space and time. However, the divine action relayed by them is grounded in God himself. As such, they are taken outside of the scope of scientific historical inquiry which depends on analogy with other like events and known creaturely phenomena. The tensions between

¹⁶² Barth, *CD*, III/1, 84-90.

¹⁶³ Barth, *CD*, III/1, 78-81.

¹⁶⁴ Barth, *CD*, III/1, 79.

¹⁶⁵ Barth, *CD*, III/1, 82.

the two accounts of the infancy of Jesus, just like the contradictions between the first two chapters of Genesis, alert us to the fact that saga is involved and not pure history. The fact that the infancy narratives and the creation narratives are not historical accounts in the modern sense does not negate the fact that they may be faithful witnesses to God's action in history and elected and inspired to function as such. On the contrary, saga is necessary in order to present the connection between the events depicted in relation to the immediate action of God. The method by which we interpret these Scriptures is one based solely on the object to which they attest, namely the Word of God. It is only in their connection to this Word that their theological and exegetical usefulness as a witness to God's revelation is determined. In the end, Barth is satisfied with simply showing that the objections to the virgin birth that are drawn from historical criticism are not conclusive. Historical criticism has not accounted for how the final form of Matthew and Luke, which was received by the church, came to be. It has not interpreted the "parts" of the Gospels—the infancy narratives, which include the virgin birth—in light of the whole—the Word of God.¹⁶⁶ Dogmatics must evaluate these texts by another means.

For Barth, the criteria by which the church should make its decision to adopt the biblical attestation of the virgin birth into its understanding of the biblical message should be the same as the criteria by which the New Testament authors themselves decided to incorporate the virgin birth into their witness. In both cases, questions of the age and source value of the tradition were not conclusive. Instead, the doctrine was accepted because of its "fit" with the central elements of Christian faith. Barth writes:

¹⁶⁶ "The point is: whatever presuppositions we might entertain as to what a given text is about, we are obliged to understand the whole of the text in light of its parts. But in saying in light of its parts Barth meant and was quite serious about not just some of its parts but *all* of its parts!" Burnett, *Theological Exegesis*, 81; cf. 78-84.

But a certain inward, essential rightness and importance [*innere, sachliche Richtigkeit und Wichtigkeit*] in their connexion with the person of Jesus Christ first admitted them to share in the Gospel witness....The question to which we must address ourselves here and give a serious answer is, whether this rightness and importance, which they must have had at the rise of the canonical New Testament, and then again at the framing of the dogma, are so compellingly illuminated [*zwingend einleuchten*] for us that we, too, must acknowledge the essential rightness and importance of the narratives of the Virgin birth.¹⁶⁷

The criterion by which the church should decide about the status of the virgin birth is the doctrine's ability to attest to God's revelation in the person of Jesus Christ. Once it is accepted that Jesus of Nazareth is true God and true human being, the criterion to distinguish the main contours of this confession becomes how those contours relate to the main fact about Christ. It could be that some alleged contours actually do not elucidate the significance of the revelation of God in Christ and should not be incorporated into the church's main statement (*hervorgehobener Satz*) of the New Testament message. These should be, if we follow Barth's approach to the end, relegated to a "subordinate clause" (*Nebensatz*) in the biblical message.¹⁶⁸ Therefore, what is needed is a doctrinal exposition of the virgin birth in relation to the mystery of God incarnate. The status of the virgin birth will be determined by this demonstration. In this regard, Wolf Krötke argues that Barth's approach to the doctrine of the virgin birth, particularly Barth's evaluation of it in terms of its appropriateness and the essential rightness with the mystery of the incarnation, glosses over questions of the historicity of the infancy narratives and the

¹⁶⁷ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 176-7.

¹⁶⁸ In describing the two options for where the virgin birth should fit, Barth implements a grammatical analogy. The main thrust of the New Testament message is to be the "main clause." Those matters that really remain on the periphery of the New Testament message are merely the "subordinate clause." In *CD* I/2, Barth places the virgin birth in the main clause; cf. Barth, *CD*, I.2, 176. Louth helpfully comments along this line: "[F]or Barth the Virgin Birth is not simply something implied in two or three passages in the New Testament; it is not simply one of the facts accompanying the narratives of the birth of Jesus, like the shepherds or the wise men, say, but it is the outer historical wrapping of the whole significance of that birth, so rightly enshrined in the Catholic Creeds." Louth, *Mary and the Mystery of the Incarnation*, 11.

contradictions between them.¹⁶⁹ In response, it is to be noted that Barth believes that because the events attested in the infancy narratives are grounded in the action of God, they are, like the creation narratives, presented in the form of saga. As such, they demand to be evaluated by theological criteria. This is precisely what Barth does, as we saw, in his exposition of Luke 1. In the *CD*, Barth establishes simply that it is plausible that the infancy narratives cohere with the rest of the New Testament witness. Ultimately, however, theological criteria must have the final word as to the faithfulness of the infancy narratives as a witness.

It is important to note, however, what it is that this sort of theological exposition can accomplish. First of all, Barth's approach to the evaluation of the virgin birth is *a posteriori*. As such, exposition is the primary mode of discourse. The aim of such discourse, for Barth, is not to establish the doctrine on its own terms independent from the main theme of Christian faith. On the contrary, Barth intends to presuppose the main theme of Christian faith—that God was in Christ—and to judge the notion of the virgin birth on the basis of how this particular element could serve that main element. In principle, the doctrine of the virgin birth could be rejected by the church if the notion was shown to obscure impossibly the main message of the New Testament. What is required theologically at this point is to follow the lead of the early church and to examine the relation between sign and thing-signified, virgin birth and the mystery of God in Christ, “and so come to understand the miracle constituting this content in its essential appropriateness [*Angemessenheit*].”¹⁷⁰ Barth writes:

By putting the question in this way we shall be quite clear that in answering it we are concerned only with an *a posteriori* understanding of the rightness and

¹⁶⁹ Krötke “Christologie Karl Barths,” 13-4.

¹⁷⁰ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 184.

importance which belong to this matter in revelation itself, for only in so far as this rightness and importance arise out of revelation can they shine upon us with compelling light.¹⁷¹

Second, Barth is not claiming to answer the question of the historical factuality of the virgin birth. That is to say, Barth's exposition of the inner rightness and importance of the virgin birth cannot establish that the event actually took place. Neither exegetical nor doctrinal exposition can prove such a thing. On the contrary:

It can only be shown what the elements are which lead us to acknowledge its necessity. If we affirm this necessity, we must regard the acknowledgement involved as a decision, which in the last resort can only authenticate itself by virtue of its conformity to the object which is demanded of it. It can and will receive further confirmation, however, in the detailed exposition of the dogma, to which we have now to turn.¹⁷²

In large measure, grasping the inner rightness and importance of the virgin birth is dependent upon realizing that the purpose of doctrine, as well as the New Testament basis for it, is of a different sort and level of testimony than that for belief in the true divinity and true humanity of Jesus Christ. Though the virgin birth is related directly to the person of Jesus Christ, it is related to the person of Christ in a particular manner. Rather than simply duplicating the content of the doctrine of the incarnation, the virgin

¹⁷¹ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 177.

¹⁷² Barth, *CD*, I/2, 185. Oliver Crisp ("On the 'Fittingness' of the Virgin Birth," *Heythrop Journal* XLIX [2008]: 197-221) has recently argued that though it is quite plausible to construct a doctrine of the incarnation that is entirely faithful to the Chalcedonian definition without the doctrine of the virgin birth, a Christology that includes the doctrine of the virgin birth proves to be more "fitting" than one that does not. While Crisp's approach would appear to have much in common with that of Barth, several differences remain. First, Crisp argues that the inclusion of the doctrine of the virgin birth in the New Testament Scriptures and the church's creeds is sufficient grounds for acceptance of the doctrine (198). As we have seen above, Barth is far more critical of the biblical and theological tradition. It is only in the doctrine of the virgin birth's conformity to the main themes of the central referent of Scripture that Christians should confess the doctrine at all, regardless of its mention in the Bible or in the church's tradition. Second, for Barth, the evaluation of the doctrine of the virgin birth according to its fittingness is a consequence of its status as a sign. As a sign, the virgin birth says something about that which it signifies. It is then entirely appropriate to inquire after the means by which the virgin birth attests to its referent. It is this special relationship between sign and thing signified that provides the warrant for Barth's approach. For Crisp, it would appear that any doctrine should be evaluated for its fittingness. Third, the virgin birth is construed by Crisp as befitting the incarnation itself and as such (215). As we have seen, Barth is careful to note that the virgin birth fits, not simply with the incarnation, but with the *mystery* of the incarnation.

birth guards the mystery of the person of Christ from being collapsed into a general truth.

Barth writes:

[The virgin birth] denotes not so much the christological reality of revelation as the mystery of that reality, the inconceivability of it, its character as a fact in which God has acted through God and in which God can likewise be known solely through God. The dogma of the Virgin birth is not, then, a repetition or description of the *vere Deus vere homo*, although in its own way it also expresses, explains and throws light upon it. As a formal dogma, as it were, which is required to explain the material, it states that when the event indicated by the name Emmanuel takes place, when God comes to us as one of ourselves to be our own, to be ourselves in our place, as very God and very Man, this is a real event accomplished in space and time as history within history.¹⁷³

It is crucial to note, here, that the virgin birth is to be interpreted in relation to the mystery of revelation in Jesus Christ, not simply to Jesus Christ or the doctrine of the incarnation. Failure to respect this distinction between the mystery of God's revelation and the doctrine of the incarnation itself results in a serious misunderstanding of Barth's doctrine of the virgin birth. The virgin birth is not simply theological shorthand for the doctrine of the incarnation. Rather, the virgin birth is the sign that sets the limit to any attempt to grasp the revelation of God in Jesus Christ by merely human means.¹⁷⁴

Barth himself describes the function of the virgin birth in the New Testament as a "boundary line" drawn around Jesus Christ that forbids the explanation of him as the expression of some general truth accessible to human beings. In this connection, Barth deals with the explanation of the virgin birth by Adolf von Harnack, who argued in a way similar to what we saw in our treatment of Strauss, that the virgin birth tradition arose out of Christian reflection on the LXX of Isaiah 7:14 and that the tradition was invented to fit

¹⁷³ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 177, cf. 178: "[W]e must emphasize the fact that it is the description of this mystery that is the purpose of the dogma." In support of this, Barth simply quotes a line from Luther's sermons and mentions that Isaiah 7:14 describes the virgin birth as a sign.

¹⁷⁴ "Another way of looking at the significance of the Virgin Birth would be to say that the Virgin Birth ensures that we see the story of Jesus as the revelation of God among men, rather than a human parable about God." Louth, *Mary and the Mystery of the Incarnation*, 10.

with a pre-existing Christology.¹⁷⁵ Barth retorts that Harnack's approach is essentially Docetic in structure in that he believed that there was an idea pre-existing in Judaism that presumed that the Messiah would be born of a virgin—expressing a general religious truth—and that the Christians crafted narratives to show Christ to have realized this expectation. According to Barth, Harnack fails to note that Judaism has never viewed Isaiah 7:14 messianically and that early Judaism did not at all conceive of the Messiah to come into the world through an act of supernatural generation and, thus, it is highly unlikely that the Isaiah passage itself led the New Testament authors to invent the virgin birth. Furthermore, Barth objects that the New Testament infancy narratives portray the origin of Jesus, not as an intellectual truth, but as a spiritual truth in which Jesus' earthly origin is posited as a mystery.¹⁷⁶

Essential to the virgin birth's function as a sign of the mystery of God in Christ is the fact that it is a miracle. Given the nature of God's revelation as his free act, the manner by which it comes to human beings in history is as a *Novum*. It is a miracle and must be characterized as such. "[W]e cannot incorporate [it] in the series of our other objects, cannot compare [it] with them, cannot deduce [it] from their context, cannot regard [it] as analogous with them."¹⁷⁷ Marking this *Novum* is the virgin birth's fundamental dogmatic purpose. Thus, the virgin birth acts as a "guard" at the gate of this mystery of revelation, an "alarm bell" alerting readers of Scripture to the act of God in

¹⁷⁵ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 178.

¹⁷⁶ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 178.

¹⁷⁷ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 172.

history.¹⁷⁸ As a miracle, the virginal conception of Christ is an event that took place in time and space but whose grounding is solely in God. Barth writes:

We merely make the point that by these assertions is meant an event occurring in the realm of the creaturely world in the full sense of the word, and so in the unity of the psychical with the physical, in time and in space, in noetic and ontic reality. It cannot be understood out of continuity with the rest that occurs in this world, nor is it in fact grounded in this continuity.¹⁷⁹

The virgin birth is such a miracle because both it and that to which it attests are grounded in God alone. “It is a sign set up immediately by God, and can only be understood as such.”¹⁸⁰ It is precisely the virgin birth’s function as a sign that distinguishes its occurrence as a miracle, rather than simply a marvellous event. While marvellous events may evoke awe, they have no specific epistemological function in coming to the knowledge of God. The virgin birth is “the sign of the freedom and immediacy, the mystery of His action as a preliminary sign of the coming of his Kingdom.”¹⁸¹ As a sign of this reality, the miracle is in analogy with the mystery. A sign, then, must be appropriate to that which it intends to communicate. Only as such can a sign be considered legitimate.

As a miraculous sign, Barth views the virgin birth as related directly to the empty tomb and evaluates them together. Here in the *CD*, the parallel is developed between the virgin birth and the empty tomb and not the resurrection itself, as it was in some of

¹⁷⁸ That Barth chose the term “*Wunder*” for the title of his exposition of the virgin birth is supremely revealing in light of the use that Barth makes of *Wunder* in his writings. He often makes reference to the wonder, astonishment, and awe that is appropriate to those who stand before the act of God in history. *Wunder* is one of Barth’s chief theological “existentials.” According to Barth, the Bible is full of astonishing stories that serve as “alarm signals” to alert readers to “the new man,” Jesus. Jesus is the miracle of all miracles who is himself the presence of the kingdom of God in all of its newness. Wonderment before this *Wunder* is the affection appropriately elicited. See Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, trans. Grover Foley (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1963), 63-73.

¹⁷⁹ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 181.

¹⁸⁰ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 187.

¹⁸¹ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 182.

Barth's earlier writings. Though Barth does not say so explicitly, this shift from the resurrection to the empty tomb bears striking resemblance to Barth's change in his characterization of the virgin birth from a constitutive element in person and work of Christ to his interpretation of it as a sign. For Barth, the empty tomb is the "presupposition" of the Easter event, but not the Easter event itself. It is the sign, presented in the New Testament in the form of saga or legend, that guards against misunderstanding by showing that Jesus was truly delivered from death.¹⁸² Barth describes the sign of the virgin birth and the sign of the empty tomb as mutually interdependent. The fact signified in the empty tomb is the fact signified in the virgin birth: "That God Himself in His complete majesty was one with us, as the Virgin birth indicates, is verified in what the empty tomb indicates, that here in this Jesus the living God has spoken to us men in accents we cannot fail to hear."¹⁸³ The two signs—virgin birth and empty tomb—relate to their common subject in different ways, one indicating the fact of God in Christ as such, the other indicating the unveiling of God in Christ to human beings.¹⁸⁴ Together, the two signs mark out the life of Jesus as the act of God, free

¹⁸² Barth, *CD* III/2, 452-3. Hunsinger writes: "'Sign' is essentially an intratextual category whose extratextual force is that of analogy. As an intratextual category, the sign of the empty tomb calls for explication in terms of related intratextual 'signs,' such as the 'ascension' (a sign of the end to the Easter appearances) and the 'virgin birth' (a sign of the earthly Nativity of the eternal Word of God)." George Hunsinger, "Beyond Literalism and Expressivism: Karl Barth Hermeneutical Realism," in *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns, 2000), 212.

¹⁸³ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 183.

¹⁸⁴ Both Pannenberg and Strümke appear to conflate the empty tomb with the resurrection, even though Barth is careful to distinguish them in their parallel to the virgin birth and incarnation. Pannenberg (*Jesus*, 149) charges that Barth's connection between the resurrection of Christ and his virgin birth is entirely illegitimate. This is because, for Pannenberg, the resurrection is historical and the virgin birth narratives are pure legend. As we saw above, Barth understands even those events depicted in saga to be genuinely historical (though not in the historicist sense) but relayed in such a way as to draw out the immediacy of God in his action in history. Furthermore, Barth does not intend the virgin birth and the resurrection to function as signs to the same degree. They relate to their subject matter in different ways, and the virgin birth derives its revealing power precisely from the resurrection. A similar sentiment is echoed by Strümke ("Die Jungfrauengeburt," 434-5) for the simple reason that the resurrection texts in the New Testament get along quite fine without recourse or reference to the virgin birth. It should be noted, however, that Barth never intended to suggest that the biblical witnesses to the resurrection or the virgin

of all of the arbitrariness that marks the rest of our human historical existence. Barth writes:

They constitute, as it were, a single sign, the special function of which, compared with other signs and wonders of the New Testament witness, is to describe and mark out the existence of Jesus Christ, amid the many other existences in human history, as that human historical existence in which God is Himself, God is alone, God is directly the Subject, the temporal reality of which is not only called forth, created, conditioned and supported by the eternal reality of God, but is identical with it....Marked off in regard to its origin: it is free of the arbitrariness which underlies all our existences. And marked off in regard to its goal: it is victorious over the death to which we are all liable.¹⁸⁵

The specific form of each miracle displays the freedom of God against all creaturely forces, namely, birth and death, neither of which is left to the winds of human willing and historical contingency in the life of Jesus.

Related to this, Barth also addresses the question why one cannot affirm the revelation of God in Jesus Christ without also affirming the form of this event in the virgin birth and empty tomb. Barth admits that the external forms of the virgin birth and empty tomb are insufficient to unveil the incarnation or resurrection. Yet, it is in these external forms that the mysteries have been communicated to the church in the Scriptures and Creed. Barth states that the mysteries connected with the virgin birth and empty tomb are indicated and preserved in a manner that is more dependable than simply leaving it up to the individual's judgment. This dependability is based on the recognition of the connection between these particular forms and their content. Barth writes:

Sign and thing signified, the outward and the inward, are, as a rule, strictly distinguished in the Bible, and certainly in other connexions we cannot lay sufficient stress on the distinction. But they are never separated in such a

birth had to reference one another. That a miracle marks the beginning and end of Christ's earthly life is enough of a parallel for Barth.

¹⁸⁵ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 182.

(“liberal”) way that according to preference the one may be easily retained without the other.¹⁸⁶

It is because Barth does not draw out the necessity of the virgin birth in terms of causation that scholars have charged Barth with being in “ominous proximity to dogmatism.”¹⁸⁷ Strümke believes that Barth’s dogmatism is due in large measure to his inability to state precisely the implications should one fail to affirm the virgin birth. Barth, however, does attempt to draw out the necessity of the virgin birth, but only in terms of its coherence and “fit” with his understanding of the revelation of God in Christ, not in terms of its causative effect.

Barth finds it highly dubious that there would be no implication for Christology if one were to deny the form by which the mystery of God in Christ is indicated. Though God is not bound by the forms by which he has revealed himself, the church is so bound. Should one attempt to bypass these signs by which God has revealed himself, the only possible result can be the dissolution of God’s revelation into a general truth ascertainable to human reason. In this regard, Barth includes an excursus on Schleiermacher, Paul Althaus and Emil Brunner, each of whom claimed to do away with the virgin birth while maintaining that they could preserve the mystery of God in Christ. Barth argues that for Schleiermacher the “mystery” of God in Christ is something that can be known apart from Christ because it is the completion of the human species, the necessity of which we may know *a priori*.¹⁸⁸ As such, it is hardly a mystery. Barth assesses Althaus to be of similar stock. By doing away with the virgin birth, what is of consequence in Christ is already present and accessible to human beings. Thus, in both

¹⁸⁶ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 179.

¹⁸⁷ See Strümke, “Die Jungfrauengeburt,” 232, 435-6.

¹⁸⁸ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 180.

the writings of Althaus and Schleiermacher, the absence of the virgin birth betrays a natural theology that, in the end, does away with the offence of revelation otherwise preserved by the sign. “Where the sign is dispensed with, any conquest of the offence seems to be superfluous and recollection as such leads to the goal.”¹⁸⁹ For Barth, the virgin birth should be regarded as an authentic element of Christian faith; it is something to be retained and honoured precisely because it places a limit to our claim to mastery of that to which the sign attests. Similarly, Barth rejects Brunner’s account of the virgin birth as a biological explanation of the incarnation. Barth argues that in the New Testament there is no indication that the virgin birth is treated as an “explanation” for who Christ is or that the manner of Christ’s birth makes him who he is. The virgin birth is but a sign of the mystery of the incarnation. Barth writes: “[T]he sign did not in the least explain the thing signified. Rather it brought to light essentially and purposefully its very inexplicability, its character of mystery.”¹⁹⁰ Once again, we see the importance of the virgin birth in relation to mystery, rather than simply in relation to the incarnation. By eliding the difference between the mystery of the incarnation and the incarnation itself, Brunner’s evaluation of the virgin birth is skewed from the outset. This places Brunner’s entire Christology in doubt, for Barth, because he risks importing an implicit natural theology to explain the logic of Christ’s life after the manner of Schleiermacher and Althaus. The virgin birth, by marking the human origin of Jesus as mystery, protects against explaining it away.

¹⁸⁹ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 181. Barth argues that surrendering the virgin birth is tantamount to exchanging revealed theology for natural theology. Conversely, Barth argues that where the incarnation and free grace of God are taken seriously “it will not be strange to find just this miracle. On the contrary, it would be surprising if it were not there.” Karl Barth, *The Faith of the Church: A Commentary on the Apostles’ Creed according to Calvin’s Catechism*, trans. Gabriel Vahanian (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), 86.

¹⁹⁰ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 184; cf. *CD*, IV/1, 207.

2.8 Conclusion

In this chapter we have focused on Barth's dogmatic location and characterization of the doctrine of the virgin birth. In order to do so, we have outlined the most significant developments of these matters throughout Barth's career. In the lectures of Göttingen and Münster we discovered that Barth viewed the virgin birth as an event at the origin of Christ's human life that had constitutive implications for his person and work. By the mid-1930s, however, Barth came to characterize the virgin birth, not as a constitutive element in Christ's life, but as a sign of Christ's identity. The virgin birth no longer had ontological significance for who Christ was as the incarnate Son of God or for what he accomplished, but only had epistemological significance for the church to know his identity in relation to God. As we saw in *The Great Promise*, Barth believes that he reached this conclusion through a careful exegesis of the infancy narratives, albeit one undertaken in relative isolation from their wider literary and canonical context. In the *CD*, Barth made his characterization of the virgin birth even more precise. By marking the origin of Christ's life with a miracle, Barth interpreted the sign of the virgin birth to be a guard that protected the mystery of God in Christ from being dissolved by the explanations of a natural theology. When understood as such, the proper criterion by which the virgin birth is to be evaluated as a doctrine of the church becomes its theological fit with the mystery to which it attests. However, Barth does not draw out the specific limitations and boundaries for evaluating the virgin birth's fittingness beyond asserting that the virgin birth must attest appropriately to the mystery of the incarnation. Thus, in the following chapters, we shall devote ourselves to examining Barth's

description of the theological appropriateness of the virgin birth and spiritual conception of Jesus.

Chapter 3: The Virgin Birth as the Sign of God's "Yes" and "No"

3.1 Introduction

In the following two chapters we shall examine how Barth understood the form of Christ's birth to relate to the mystery of the incarnation as a fitting sign. In this chapter we shall focus on the virgin birth itself and in the following chapter, the conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit. We shall see here that Barth describes Christ's birth from a virgin woman to attest to the "Yes" of God's grace to humanity and the absence of a father to attest to God's "No" of judgment against sinful human beings. The virgin birth is, for Barth, a dialectical expression of God's grace and judgment in the act of revelation and reconciliation. As an expression of God's "Yes," Barth believes that the virgin birth attests to the unique and genuine humanity of Christ without compromising his solidarity with other human beings. As an expression of God's "No," Barth believes that the virgin birth attests to the judgment of sin represented in the figure of Adam as he is rejected in the conception of Jesus. As Barth interprets the virgin birth in relationship to the doctrine of sin and to his conception of the grace of God in the humanity of Jesus Christ, he is working with themes bequeathed to him from the Augustinian tradition. As we saw in the first chapter, modern theologians charged the classical Augustinian interpretation of the virgin birth with relying upon a faulty doctrine of original sin and with compromising the solidarity of Jesus Christ with humanity. Therefore, in addition to expositing Barth's treatment of the virgin birth, we shall also examine how he constructs his doctrines of the humanity of Christ, original sin and Christ's sinlessness in a way that he believes will avoid the modern critiques of the virgin birth.

3.2 The Virgin Birth as the Sign of Genuine Humanity and Judgment of Sin

In this section, we shall see how Barth expositis the virgin birth as a dialectical attestation of Christ's genuine humanity and God's judgment upon human flesh. According to Barth, the virgin birth and the conception of Jesus by the Spirit are two aspects of the one sign that is Christ's miraculous human origin. As such, the relation between them must always be kept in view, though they may be discussed separately, as Barth does in his exposition of the phrases of the Apostles' Creed. In the *CD*, Barth reverses the order of the presentation of the Apostles' Creed. He treats the clause *natus ex Maria virgine* first, which will be our focus in this chapter, and in the following section he treats the *conceptus de Spiritu sancto*, to which we shall give attention in the following chapter. Barth's reason for reversing the order of the creedal presentation is that he believes there is a danger that one might understand the doctrine of the incarnation as a possibility latent within humanity as such, a possibility left open were the spiritual conception affirmed alone. Schleiermacher, as Barth reminds us, denied the doctrine of the virgin birth but continued to hold to Christ's conception by the Spirit, viewing Christ as the perfection of humanity.¹ As we shall see in this section, the *natus ex Maria virgine* helps Barth to situate the proper understanding of the human being in relation to the revelation and reconciliation of God in such a way as to avoid making Schleiermacher's error.

We will address first that about which the virgin birth speaks positively. That is, Barth believes that Jesus, by being born of a woman, is affirmed as truly human. Jesus' birth of a human woman is thought by Barth to be something assumed by all New Testament writers and he appeals to it throughout the *CD* as evidence of Jesus' full

¹ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 180-1.

humanity.² Barth also believes that the relationship between the virgin birth and the genuine humanity of Christ was affirmed in the Apostles' Creed. "By its *natus ex Maria* [the Creed] states that the person Jesus Christ is the real son of a real mother, the son born of the body, flesh and blood of his mother, both of them as real as all the other sons of other mothers."³ It is helpful here to note what Barth writes about the Gnostic and Docetic ideas of the virgin birth, in which Christ receives nothing from his mother but passes through her merely as "water through an aqueduct." In these views, Barth believes that humanity is presented as a mere cipher for God's independent work. As such, the Gnostic and Docetic construal of the miracle does not point to the mystery of Christmas attested by Holy Scripture. Rather, such a view points to an "arbitrarily invented *mysterium*, the meaning of which could not be God's revelation to us, and our reconciliation to God."⁴ The Gnostic and Docetic descriptions of the virgin birth simply do not fit with the wider framework of God's action in relation to human beings because they remove entirely all human participation in the event of Christ's birth. Barth is adamant that the virgin birth actually includes genuine humanity in the event of the incarnation. That it does so is, according to Barth, a sign of the "Yes" of God's grace to humanity.

Though Barth maintains that the virgin birth attests to the genuine humanity of Christ, he is careful to keep from stating that a human birth in itself is constitutive of true humanity or even suggesting that it is the decisive factor. Rather, a human birth is only an *indication* of genuine humanity. Christ was born of a *virgin*, after all. This poses a problem for what Barth has written thus far: the uniqueness of Jesus' birth appears to set

² See, for example, Barth, *CD*, III/2, 58.

³ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 185.

⁴ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 186.

him apart from all humanity rather than showing his solidarity with it. Barth acknowledges this problem but does not believe that Christ's unique birth compromises his true humanity. Barth explains: "In this complete sense, then, He is man in a *different* way from the other sons of other mothers. But the difference under consideration here is so great, so fundamental and comprehensive, that it does not impair the completeness and genuineness of His humanity."⁵ Furthermore, according to Barth, it is precisely in the birth of Jesus by a *virgin* woman that the mystery of the incarnation can be attested. Jesus is a human being like all other human beings, but the human life of Jesus is unlike any other. The difference between the manner of Christ's conception and that of other human beings serves to indicate, for Barth, the unique relationship between Christ's human nature and the Son of God. According to Barth, the virgin birth adequately signifies the inexpressible mystery of the Word made flesh precisely because the virgin birth asserts the primacy of God's sovereign act in such a way that genuine humanity is shown its true and proper place in relation to God's grace. About the event of the virgin birth, Barth explains:

It is man who is the object of sovereign divine action in this event. God Himself and God alone is Master and Lord....Man is not there only in a supplementary capacity. In his own place, his own sharply defined manner, he participates in the event as one of the principles [*ein Hauptperson*]; not as a cipher [*ein Nichts*] or only seemingly [*nicht nur scheinbar*], but as the real man that he is. The Word became flesh. He participates in it as a real man can, where God Himself, God alone is the Subject, Lord and Master. It is not that he is not in it. But even the more refined and precise statements we make regarding the sovereignty of God in this event can only describe how real man participates in it and to what extent he can do so.⁶

We shall address the question of the uniqueness of the human nature of Christ in a later section in this chapter and the question of human agency in relation to the virgin birth in

⁵ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 185. Emphasis added.

⁶ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 186. Translation slightly altered. Cf. *KD*, I/2, 203-4.

the chapter that follows. At this point, however, we simply note that Barth believes the birth of Jesus Christ of a human mother indicates the inclusion of genuine humanity in the incarnation. This is understood by Barth to be an expression of God's gracious "Yes" to human beings.

In addition to indicating Christ's genuine but unique humanity, the virgin birth also communicates something to humanity as it stands in rebellion against God. It expresses God's judgment upon and limitation of sinful humanity. The *natus ex Maria virgine* unambiguously negates the possibility of viewing revelation and reconciliation as a possibility latent within human beings by describing the mystery of the sovereign act of God in the incarnation. It does this "by an express and extremely concrete negative."⁷ This negative—symbolized by the removal of the man—indicates the limitation of human participation in the incarnation. Barth derives this perspective from the miraculous nature of the virgin birth. A miracle, for Barth, as we saw in the previous chapter, is a sign effected by God within time and space that cannot be attributed to the continuity of events surrounding it but is grounded solely in God. Barth notes the repeated emphasis in the infancy narratives on the experience of fear that surrounds Christ's conception and birth. Mary is afraid, as are the shepherds. Even Mary's prayer, Barth points out, reminds us of Christ's own prayer of trepidation in the garden of Gethsemane (Luke 2:38; cf. 22:42). The Matthean version, which portrays the story of Joseph, also suggests such trepidation (Matthew 1:18-25). A sense of awe and fear characterizes the infancy narratives. This is because in nature miracles, explains Barth, human beings experience the act of God as something which befalls them, "something with which [they] cannot come to terms without pain and astonishment, without humiliation, which [they] can

⁷ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 185.

affirm and appreciate only in faith and not otherwise.”⁸ The biblical descriptions of the experience of the characters in the infancy narratives suggest, for Barth, that the miracle of the virgin birth involves God’s judgment.

Why, exactly, does a virgin birth present judgment to humankind? Barth argues that the virgin birth indicates God’s judgment because, though it includes genuine humanity in the event of the incarnation, the virgin birth describes the incarnation as taking place solely through the action of God himself. Humanity is shown to be utterly incapable of any active contribution to the incarnation. Barth explains it as follows:

When Mary as a virgin becomes the mother of the Lord and so, as it were, the entrance gate of divine revelation into the world of man, it is declared that in any other way, i.e., by the natural way in which a human wife becomes a mother, there can be no motherhood of the Lord and so no such entrance gate of revelation into our world. In other words, human nature possesses no capacity for becoming the human nature of Jesus Christ, the place of divine revelation.⁹

Barth explains that Mary’s virginity is an expression of God’s judgment upon humanity that reveals the incapacity of humanity for God’s revelation and reconciliation. By Christ being born of a powerless virgin, the sovereignty of God’s grace is shown to be all the more astonishing and surprising. The incapacity of human beings to bring about the incarnation, described in the virgin birth, even indicates the incapacity of human nature as such to be adopted by the Son of God. Barth writes:

And this human nature, the only one we know and the only one there actually is, has of itself no capacity [*keine Möglichkeit*] for being adopted by God’s Word into unity with Himself, i.e., interpersonal unity with God. Upon this human nature a mystery must be wrought in order for this to be made possible. And this mystery must consist in its receiving the capacity [*die Fähigkeit*] for God which it does not possess. This mystery is signified by the *natus ex virgine*.¹⁰

⁸ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 188.

⁹ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 188.

¹⁰ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 189.

By removing active humanity from the incarnation, Barth believes that the virgin birth reveals a judgment of God upon human beings by making their incapacity for God obvious. The virgin birth sets out plainly this incapacity and thus indicates the “No” of God’s judgment.

As noted in the previous chapter, in the Göttingen lectures Barth interpreted the virgin birth as the manner by which the Son could become incarnate within the line of Adam without also receiving his determination [*Bestimmung*] from Adam and his personhood from his human father.¹¹ At that time, Barth understood the virgin birth as crucial for how Christ could create a new beginning within the line of sinful humanity. In the *CD*, Barth continues to view the virgin birth in relation to human sin. As we saw in our first chapter, the Augustinian tradition typically interpreted the virgin birth as the means by which Jesus Christ could be said to have a fully human nature and also avoid the stain of original sin, which was often understood to be transmitted through procreation. While Barth accepts the broad themes with which the Augustinian tradition interpreted the virgin birth, he explicitly denies that the virgin birth conditions the person or work of Jesus Christ. This is a consequence of Barth’s decision to view the virgin birth as a sign and it marks a significant shift in Barth’s relationship to the Augustinian tradition and his earlier writing on the virgin birth. Barth writes:

It is well to remember again at this point that the *ex virgine* must always be understood as a pointer to this penetration and new beginning [*als ein Hinweis auf diesen Durchbruch und Neuenfang*], but not as the conditioning [*Bedingung*] of it. (Failure on my part to make this distinction in the first draft of this book [*Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf*], p. 276 ff., meant that the questions and answers involved were obscured.) If there is a necessary connection between this sign and this thing signified, the connection is not a causal one. We shall say, then, that

¹¹ *Bestimmung* has been translated as “determination” in the English version of the *CD* and I have sought to follow this practice. The German term, however, bears a more teleological connotation than what the English “determination” allows.

God willed this content in this form, and therefore we shall keep to its actual form. We shall not say that God could not have given it quite a different form. Therefore we can separate form and content, sign and thing signified. But we cannot derive them from each other, any more than we can separate them from each other, by any method of calculation. According to Scripture and creed, Jesus Christ is not the second or new Adam because He was born of the Virgin. His being the second or new Adam is indicated...by His being born of the virgin.¹²

This is a crucial move on Barth's part. Through it, Barth believes that he can sidestep the theological criticism of the virgin birth put forward by Schleiermacher and those who followed him. We will recall that Schleiermacher questioned how Christ could avoid original sin if he is still of Mary's flesh. According to him, if Christ is sanctified in his human nature solely through the virgin birth, then this would require Mary also to be sanctified. Barth agrees with Schleiermacher's critique, but argues that though the virgin birth points to the fact that Jesus is the new Adam and the limitation of original sin, it does not itself *constitute* these things. The theological context within which Barth interprets the doctrine remains the same as that of the Augustinian heritage, but the virgin birth's theological function is vastly different for Barth in the *CD*. The virgin birth has shifted from being interpreted as an event that contributes ontologically to the person and work of Christ, as with Augustine and the classical tradition generally, to an event that noetically indicates the mystery of the incarnation.

How exactly does the virgin birth indicate a new beginning within humanity established with Jesus? The doctrine of the virgin birth asserts that no act of sexual intercourse took place with Mary prior to the birth of Jesus, but this led the Augustinian tradition to believe that the point of the virgin birth was to exclude from the origin of Jesus something sinful about post-lapsarian sex itself. Barth, however, believes that this misses the mark. For him, the exclusion of sexual life itself is too narrow an

¹² Barth, *CD*, I/2, 189-90; cf. *Faith of the Church*, 84.

interpretation of the virgin birth, though he admits that sex clearly has something to do with its theological intent. Instead, he construes the matter as follows. Barth holds that human beings are sinful from birth and live out of disobedience all their lives. Just as all of human life is tainted by sin, so is sexual life. Yet this does not mean that the virgin birth is about the exclusion of sexual life so that Jesus could somehow be free from original sin. If that were the case, Barth asserts along with Schleiermacher, theology would have to take the route of a Roman Catholic Immaculate Conception of Mary.¹³ This approach causes all sorts of complications for the Christian ethics of marriage and family, as well as for Christology, in Barth's opinion. Interpreted primarily in terms of excluding the sinfulness of sex, the virgin birth inclines toward celibacy and the monastic ideal. Furthermore, it does not provide any reason for why Jesus was not simply conceived by a married couple through a sanctified act of sexual intercourse, and thus lacks any inner necessity.¹⁴ Barth remarks:

Here I can no longer follow the tradition of the early theologians who insisted that sexuality was sinfulness in itself, and had to be excluded! I see nowhere in the Bible...that the sexual realm is the receptacle of sin. Such an interpretation, so characteristic of the Christian milieu, smacks of the cloister, the monks. Sexual asceticism is a pagan and not a biblical idea.¹⁵

Barth avers that the attempt to discern the meaning of the virgin birth from the perspective of what is left out—sex or lust—is misconstrued; it suggests that the meaning

¹³ Barth is mistaken in connecting the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception to the protection of Jesus from the contagion of sin. If Thomas Aquinas's construal of the sanctification of Mary, which we examined earlier, is normative, then the doctrine developed as a dignity of Jesus' mother due to her proximity to the Christ and not as a way to safeguard Christ's sinlessness.

¹⁴ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 190-1. Curiously, when Barth does finally treat the ethics of marriage and family in *CD* III/4 he does not address the difficulties that he suggests the virgin birth presents for these themes. For Barth, the advent of Jesus Christ brings with it revolutionary implications for the biblical understanding of marriage and childbearing. See Barth, *CD* III/4, 141-8, 259-64. However, the virgin birth specifically is not mentioned in this regard, though he does make much of the boy Jesus in the temple and other portions of the infancy narratives. This is particularly surprising given the similarity between Barth's theology of marriage and childbearing and that of Augustine, who made much of the virgin birth for understanding Christian celibacy and marriage.

¹⁵ Barth, *Faith of the Church*, 84.

of the virgin birth can be discerned from the perspective of that which is limited and rejected, rather than from the perspective “of Him who limits or judges, that is, of what God is, wills and does here in excluding the sinful life of sex.”¹⁶ This means that the virgin birth must be interpreted from the positive vantage point of revelation and reconciliation. The inquirer must ask how the virgin birth indicates this revelation and reconciliation. Barth’s answer to his own question helps us to appreciate how he understood the way in which the virgin birth indicates the “Yes” and “No” of God. The virgin birth, he explains,

is the sign that the sinful life of sex is excluded as the origin of the human existence of Jesus Christ. In that God in His revelation and reconciliation is the Lord and makes room for Himself among us, man and his sin are limited and judged [*begrenzt und verurteilt*]. God is also Lord over His sinful creature. God is also free over its original sin, the sin that is altogether bound up with its existence and antecedent to every evil thought, word and deed. And God—but God only—is free to restore this freedom to His creature. This freedom will always be the freedom of His own action upon His creature, and so the negation of a freedom of this creature’s own. Since it lives by His grace, it is judged in its own will and accomplishment. If the *natus ex virgine* with its exclusion of the sinful life of sex points to this gracious judgment of God, it really signifies the exclusion of sin in the sense of *peccatum originale*. That it does actually point to this gracious judgment of God, we realize when we consider that in the birth without previous sexual union of man and woman (of which Scripture speaks), man is involved in the form of Mary, but involved only in the form of the *virgo Maria*, i.e., only in the form of non-willing, non-achieving, non-creative, non-sovereign man [*nur in Gestaltedes nicht wollenden, nicht vollbringenden, nicht schöpferisch, nicht souverän Menschen*], only in the form of man who can merely receive, merely be ready, merely let something be done to and with himself [*Menschen, der bloß empfangen, der bloß bereit sein, der bloß etwas an und mit sich geschehen lassen kann*].¹⁷

Barth’s thought in this matter is complex. We can notice that Barth places a significant amount of capital in his understanding of the significance of female virginity. For Barth, virginity means human non-involvement and readiness. Virginity attests to the fact that

¹⁶ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 191.

¹⁷ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 191-2.

no action has been taken or can be taken on the part of humankind for revelation and reconciliation to occur. Virginity is the sign that human beings cannot contribute to this revelation and reconciliation.¹⁸ On the contrary, human beings can only stand ready for God to act upon them. The virgin symbolizes the precise opposite of sovereign humanity. In particular, sexual life is excluded because human generation is always the product of such willing and doing. Barth writes: “The sinful life of sex is excluded as the source of the human existence of Jesus Christ, not because of the nature of sexual life, nor because of its sinfulness, but because every natural generation is the work of willing, achieving, creative, sovereign man.”¹⁹ The virgin birth of Jesus, then, indicates a judgment on human nature when it occupies that posture of sovereign acting and willing in relation to revelation and reconciliation. The virgin birth excludes all such postures, except that which is proper to it in relation to God’s sovereign grace. Should the birth of Christ have been accomplished through a natural act of procreation, it could have been mistakenly thought that human *Eros* was responsible for the redemption and the revelation of God.²⁰ The virgin birth, however, insures that no such mistake can be made. By removing sexual life from the origin of Jesus, it is made clear that the responsibility for his life lies solely in God alone.

¹⁸ “In the face of the creative act of God the whole human race is virgin, that is, unable for itself to make any point of connection to divine grace....Virginity thus sums up the helplessness of human beings in the face of divine grace.” Fiddes, “Mary in the theology of Karl Barth,” 113.

¹⁹ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 192.

²⁰ In the following chapter, we will discuss further Barth’s attitude toward the relationship between the virgin birth and *Eros*. Here, however, we shall note that Barth does not have a wholly negative assessment of *Eros* in relation to the divine *Agape*. In *CD III/2*, 274-85, Barth argues that *Eros* is ingredient to created humanity and in *CD IV/2*, 736-51, while distinguishing sharply between *Agape* and *Eros*, never dismisses *Eros* as genuinely human. In his discussion of the virgin birth, Barth simply wants to make clear that nothing in human nature, not even the mystery of human *Eros*, can be viewed as responsible for or conducive to the in-breaking of revelation and reconciliation in Jesus Christ; the incarnation is wholly an act of God that sets aside all human willing and action.

From here we can attain a clear sense of how the virgin birth indicates dialectically the “Yes” and “No” of God. The presence of the woman in the conception of Jesus ensures that human nature is preserved through her in the incarnation of the Son—God’s gracious “Yes.” The fact that the woman is a virgin indicates the fact that this human nature is incapable of bringing revelation and reconciliation to the world in its willing and achieving capacity—God’s “No” of judgment. Human nature must be acted upon by the grace of the sovereign God in order to participate in revelation and reconciliation. The very structure of the birth of Christ preserves these truths and attests to them. Had Jesus been created by the direct hand of God like Adam, then the first part of the dialectic would have been abolished. Human nature would have been excluded altogether. Likewise, had Jesus been conceived through an act of sexual intercourse, then the second half of the dialectic would be cut off. Human nature could be mistakenly thought of as confirmed, even blessed, in its rebellion before God. Only in the virgin birth are both sides maintained and presented, thus casting light on and interpreting the meaning of the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

Until this point, Barth has focused on the virginity of the mother of Jesus. Barth has not yet explained why it is specifically the *man* who is removed from the conception of Jesus and the *woman* who is retained. He does this in a lengthy small-print excursus, which has received much criticism because of the way it apparently perpetuates conservative nineteenth-century views of gender.²¹ We shall see that, for Barth, the

²¹ See Strümke, “*Die Jungfrauengeburt*,” 439. The literature on the male and female relationship in Barth’s work is immense. For a recent and balanced treatment, see Lisa Stephenson, “Directed, ordered and related: The male and female interpersonal relation in Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61.4 (2008): 435-49; cf. Clifford Green, “Karl Barth’s Treatment of the Man-Woman Relationship: Issues for Theological Method,” in *Reflections on Bonhoeffer: Essays in Honor of F. Burton Nelson*, ed., Geoffrey B. Kelly and C. John Weborg (Chicago, IL: Covenant Publications, 1999): 228-37; Paul S. Fiddes, “The Status of Woman in the Thought of Karl Barth,” in *After Eve*, ed., Janet Martin

presence of the female at the conception of Jesus is decidedly not about femininity *per se*, but about the biblical symbolism of the woman, who denotes human nature as the object of God's grace, and the man, who denotes sinful, willing humanity under the judgment of God. The virgin birth is not about the theological status of man and woman in their own right, but is an illustration of the judgment of God's grace. At the outset of this section, Barth reminds his readers that his reasoning on this matter is only a *parergon* to that which he believes is central to the doctrine of the virgin birth. By making this caveat, Barth corrects what he believes was a misstep in *Die christliche Dogmatik*, in which this question of the appropriateness of the man and the woman "dominated the field of view to an excessive extent."²² The corrective that Barth offers in the *CD*, however, does not change the basic structure of the function of the absence of the man and the presence of the woman in the conception of Jesus. Rather, because the form of Christ's birth is understood as a *sign*, its function is now viewed as symbolic rather than "real." The elements of the form of Christ's conception do not accomplish what they signify; they simply attest symbolically to the meaning of the event.

Barth begins this section with a favourable reference to the Reformed scholastics, who connected the absence of Jesus' human father to the *enhypostatic* character of Christ's human nature. The sign of the virgin birth signifies that the being of Jesus Christ is none other than the being of the Son who is begotten of the Father from all eternity.

Barth appears to agree with this interpretation. He writes:

Now it is precisely the human father whom a human son has to thank for everything that marks his existence as belonging to him—his name above all, and

Soskice (London: Marshall Pickering, 1990): 138-55; Elouise Renich Fraser, "Karl Barth's Doctrine of Humanity: A Reconstructive Exercise in Feminist Narrative Theology" (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 1986).

²² Barth, *CD*, I/2, 193.

with it his position, his rights, his character as such and such an individual, his place in history [*seinen Namen vor allem und damit seinen Stand, sein Recht, seinen Character als dieses und dieses Individuum, seinen geschichtlichen Ort*]. Thus His begetting by a human father could not be the sign of the existence of the man Jesus alone as the Son begotten of the Father in eternity.²³

In addition to moving his explanation of the absence of the male to the small print of the *CD*, Barth also appears to have altered somewhat his view of the role of the human father in conception from that of the Göttingen lectures. Barth continues to hold that a son receives the shape of his existence from his father. Thus, according to Barth, the absence of Joseph from the conception of Jesus is a sign that indicates that the man Jesus Christ is determined directly by God himself and not by the influence of his earthly father. The human nature of Jesus Christ is *enhypostatic*. Barth does not say, however, as he did in the Göttingen lectures, that the son's "personhood" itself derives from his father or, consequently, that the absence of the human father *allows* the human nature of Christ to exist *enhypostatically*. Here, rather, the *enhypostatic* character of Christ's humanity is *indicated* through the sign of the human father's exclusion from Jesus' human generation.

Barth writes:

In terms of the doctrine of the *enhypostasis* we can say quite simply—as the God who as the eternal Father of His eternal Son will not have a human father side by side with Himself. His eternal generation of this eternal Son excludes a human generation, because a human father and human generation, the whole action of man the male, can have no meaning here. Therefore it is the very absence of masculine action that is significant here. Hence, *natus ex virgine*.²⁴

The significance of the absence of the human father of Jesus remains the same as in his earlier treatment in that it refers to the determination of Christ's personhood solely by

²³ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 193. Daniel Migliore appears too eager to absolve Barth of his early views and in so doing underplays the continuity between the early and later treatments of the virgin birth. The value that Barth attaches to the sexes remains the same in both treatments, even though the later treatment casts these sexual views symbolically. See Daniel Migliore, "Karl Barth's First Lectures in Dogmatics: *Instruction in the Christian Religion*," in *The Göttingen Dogmatics*, Vol. 1, ed., Hannelotte Reiffen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), L-LI.

²⁴ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 194.

God the Father. However, the absence of the man in the conception of Jesus is understood here as an indication, and not the condition, of the *anhypostatic/enhypostatic* character of Christ's human nature.

According to Barth, the absence of Joseph not only indicates the *enhypostatic* character of Christ's human nature, but also signifies a judgment upon that which is characteristic of a man's influence on his son. Joseph's absence is God's *exclusion* of Joseph's fatherly influence upon Jesus. As such, the sign of the exclusion of Joseph ties into the theme of judgment upon sinful human beings that Barth has already developed in his exposition of the virgin birth. Barth writes:

[W]e can go on to say that willing, achieving, creative, sovereign man, man as an independent fellow-worker with God [*jener wollende, vollbringende, schöpfersche, souveräne Mensch, der Mensch als eigenständiger werkgenosses Gottes*], man in the impulse of his *eros*, who as such, where God's grace is concerned, simply cannot be a participator in God's work, is *a parte potiori* man the male in the father of man in the sexual act which man is to thank for his earthly existence.²⁵

Barth understands the man and his action in the sexual act to signify human nature in its action of rebellion from the grace of God. As such, it must be excluded from the conception of Jesus. Jesus is not the product of the rebellious action of human beings, and so must not have a human father. This is not to say that Barth intends to imply that womanhood or manhood is particularly more or less sinful than the other. Women and men are both entangled in sin. Nevertheless, Barth also makes clear that in their mutual sin, the relationship between men and women has been severely distorted. After the Fall,

²⁵ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 193. While Susan Selinger rightly notes the continuity between the *Göttingen Dogmatics* and the *CD* on this point, she misses the significant shift that has taken place between them, namely the shift from the virgin birth's causal significance to its significance as a sign. See Suzanne Selinger, *Charlotte von Kirschbaum and Karl Barth: A Study in Biography and the History of Theology* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 100-7; cf. Migliore, "First Lectures," XLVII-XLVIII.

Barth argues, men are now in a position of domination and women in a position of subservience. Barth states that though God alone knows the true course of history, the history with which we are familiar is the history of men, the history of patriarchy.²⁶ It is this history that the biblical witness assumed and that the subsequent Christian church has taken over. Barth is here more cautious than he was in the Göttingen lectures where he made his observations of world-history to be decisive for his interpretation of the virgin birth. In the *CD*, Barth does use observation from world-history as evidence for this view but treats these observations as derivative of the vision of world-history established in the biblical witness. When we examine Barth's doctrine of original sin later in this section, we shall see more clearly why Barth interprets world-history the way he does.

For Barth, it is not at all evident that the dominance of men over women must follow necessarily from the original creation depicted in Genesis 2. The relation of dominance is not an order of creation but an ordinance imposed after the Fall, expressed in 1 Corinthians 11:3 with the idea of male headship, in Genesis 3:9 with the summoning of Adam as responsible for sin and in the curse upon the woman in Genesis 3:16. Barth writes:

Thus, not because of an original mark of distinction, but because of the common Fall of man and woman, in which both step out of a relationship in which there is no word at all of super- or sub-ordination, there arises the unlikeness, and man becomes the lord of woman and therefore significant for world history. It is from this angle that the counter sign, the sign of the mystery of Christmas, the sign of the lack of a human father for Jesus, becomes understandable as a sign. Willing, achieving, creative, sovereign man as such cannot be considered as a participator in God's work. For as such he is the man of disobedience. As such, therefore, if God's grace is to meet him, he must be set aside. But this man in the state of disobedience is *a parte potiori* [for the most important part] the male.²⁷

²⁶ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 193.

²⁷ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 194; cf. *Credo*, 71. In *The Faith of the Church*, Barth describes the man as the "glorious aspect of mankind" who is also the "fallen sovereign." As such, he is "rendered useless" by the

For Barth, the male bears this symbolic significance within world-history and it is due to this symbolism that he must be set aside. As such, Jesus must have no earthly father to stand beside his heavenly father. Barth writes: “The sign declares that if Christ were the son of a male He would to be a sinner like all the rest, and that therefore He cannot be the son of any male.”²⁸ The sign of the virgin birth shows that the domination of the man has been judged and can serve as a sign to women indicating the reversal of male dominion:

If woman demands justification and rehabilitation in face of the significant preeminence of the male for world-history—and it is better that she should not—let her keep to this sign. By its limitation of man and his sin it means at the same time the limitation of male pre-eminence.²⁹

In addition to discussing the reason why it is the man who is removed, Barth also addresses with special caution the question about the appropriateness of the retention of the woman in the conception of Jesus. At the beginning of this chapter, we saw that the fact that Jesus has a human mother expressed the solidarity of Jesus with the rest of humanity. However, in that description there was nothing said specifically about the appropriateness of Jesus having a human mother rather than a virgin human father. Presumably, for Barth, it would have been within God’s power to establish the link between Christ and the rest of humanity through a man. As we saw above, though, Barth believes that the man holds a symbolic value in world-history and so must be excluded at the birth of Jesus. Barth believes that the woman holds a symbolic value as well. He explains that though the woman is implicated in sin along with the man, to the woman also belongs “that which in the form of receptivity, readiness, etc., represents the human

Holy Spirit. The female, on the other hand, is “the weaker aspect of mankind” and, because of this, she is chosen by God (85).

²⁸ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 194.

²⁹ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 194.

possibility of female virginity.”³⁰ Barth is aware that he is here dabbling in treacherous waters. He quickly asserts that the German romantic notions found in Goethe and Schleiermacher, in which the female is spiritually idealized, do not hold. Mary plays the role that she does by grace, not by nature. Barth writes:

[T]he female is as significant for human nature as such as the male is for human history, and that if in the sign of the miraculous birth of Christ the male as representing human history must withdraw, still (so far as she represents man as such who acts in this story) the female can and must be there, be there for God, if God on his part wishes to act on man and with man.³¹

For Barth there can be no question that women escape original sin or are pure in and of themselves. Rather, the woman is chosen to be the mother of Jesus Christ solely due to God’s election. She is an object of grace. In the virgin birth, the removal of the man is a sign of judgment on the sovereignty of human beings, while the retention of the virgin woman is a sign of God’s grace to human beings. This symbolism is not animated by anything inherent in either the man or the woman, but is appropriate only in relationship to the biblical narrative of the Fall of Adam and Eve and the biblical characterization of world-history as Adamic history.³²

³⁰ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 194-5.

³¹ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 195. Donald Dawe makes the highly regrettable proposal that Barth’s theology of Mary can be extended to craft a specifically Reformed Mariology in which Mary is regarded as the “Eternal Bearer of Christ” as an expression of “those dimensions of faith that have been lost in a male-dominated piety” and that “opens the emotionally profound realm of family life and home to divine renewal by being the faithful mother.” See Donald G. Dawe, “The Virgin Mary in Modern Reformed Theology” *One in Christ* 16 (1980): 134-6. It would be impossible for Barth to admit that such a proposal is in any way an extension of his thought because it treats a particular construction of femininity as bearing independent significance. Barth is adamant that the election of Mary to be the mother of Jesus is symbolic of a broader biblical portrait of man and woman, sin and grace.

³² In *CD* III/4 Barth explains that the relationship between man and woman, in the way it reflects God and his people in covenant, involves an order of succession. As such, man and woman cannot be dissolved into androgyny. There is an order of “preceding and following,” an “A” and a “B” amidst the equality of man and woman (169). Barth is especially concerned to underscore the fact that, even in this order, men and women are incomplete when alone; humanity means fellow-humanity, and so there is some measure of equality-in-difference present in Barth’s view. Thus, the disruption of the order by either is a matter of damage for both the man and the woman (170). For Barth, the man is properly the initiator and leader of fellowship, while the woman has the task to “actualize” this fellowship. In the woman’s actualization of the initiative of the man, the woman comes to occupy, in her own way, a special place of

In the remainder of the chapter, we shall exposit how Barth constructs his doctrine of the human nature of Christ and its relation to other human beings, as well as the doctrine of original sin and the sinlessness of Christ in such a way as to avoid the modern critiques of the virgin birth. Before we attempt to do so, however, we should respond to the objection that the virgin birth ceased to be a concern for Barth in the later volumes of the *CD*.³³ It is true that Barth did not provide another lengthy exposition of the virgin birth in the *CD* after that in volume *I/2*. However, this should not be taken to suggest that Barth repealed his position. On the contrary, Barth held to the view of the virgin birth as he outlined it in *CD I/2* throughout his career. The consistency of his view can be corroborated by appeal to his later discussions of the virgin birth, in such works as *Dogmatics in Outline* (1943) and *CD IV/1* (1953).³⁴ Barth's exposition in the latter is particularly interesting for our purposes because in it Barth explicitly directs his readers to his treatment of the virgin birth in §15 of *CD I/2*. Barth conducts a short discussion of the essential features of the virgin birth in the context of Christ's divine Sonship, in which he criticizes the view that Christ is to be understood as the physical son of God.

primacy. This is because when the woman follows the man, she reflects the proper obedience that the church offers to Christ. The result is that the man can see in the woman's subordination an example for him to follow (171). Certainly something of this nature is going on in Barth's description of the man and the woman in his discussion of the virgin birth. While the context of Barth's discussion of the virgin birth is to be set in postlapsarian symbolism of man and woman, in which the man is the dominator of the woman, and the harmonious order is disrupted, by grace the figure of Mary is enabled to reflect the proper female and ecclesial obedience to the Word. It would appear that the postlapsarian and prelapsarian images of man and woman coalesce in Barth's doctrine of the virgin birth, in which the woman fulfills her role as the image of the church and the man is rejected as a symbol of judgment of the disordered domination of the man over the woman and as a symbol of sinful humanity (175).

³³ Jones (*Humanity*, 138) implies that Barth's treatment of the virgin birth in *CD IV/1* corrects that of *CD I/2* by reducing the "overblown" discussion of it to a "passingly affirmative" small print section.

³⁴ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. J.T. Thompson (Harper & Row: New York, NY: 1959), 95-100; Barth, *CD IV/1*, 207. One might also include Barth's French lectures on the Apostles' Creed delivered in the 1940s. Though the content of these lectures is in line with Barth's other treatments of the virgin birth, their nature as spontaneous lectures later edited by one of Barth's pupils make them less satisfactory for comparison than the other sources mentioned here. See Barth, *Faith of the Church*, 78-87; cf. Busch, *Barth*, 300.

The virgin birth cannot be made to press this point. On the contrary, the virgin birth continues to be viewed by Barth as a “sign which accompanies and indicates the mystery of the incarnation of the Son, marking it off as a mystery from all the beginnings of other human existences.”³⁵ As well, the manner by which the sign indicates that which it signified remains the same for Barth. He writes:

[The sign of the virgin birth] consists in a creative act of divine omnipotence, in which the will and work of man in the form of a human father is completely excluded from the basis and beginning of the human existence of the Son of God, being replaced by a divine act which is supremely unlike any human action which might arise in that connexion, and in that we characterized as an inconceivable act of grace.³⁶

Just as in 1938, Barth’s comments in 1953 show that he viewed the removal of the man as a sign that stands against all human willing and for the sovereign grace of God. The continuity that Barth discerns in his own position throughout his career helped provide warrant for exploring Barth’s explicit teaching on the virgin birth in relation to other themes developed years later within his theology.

3.3 The Humanity of Jesus Christ

Barth makes two claims with regard to the humanity of Christ in his affirmation of the virgin birth. First, Barth believes that the virgin birth indicates that Jesus exists in full solidarity with the rest of humanity. Second, Barth believes that the virgin birth sets out the way in which the humanity of Jesus Christ is different from other human beings because of the unique way in which it exists in relationship with God. It is crucial for him to be able to hold both of these claims together or he risks falling to the charge of

³⁵ Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 207; cf. *Dogmatics in Outline*, 96. If it were true that the virgin birth and spiritual conception of Jesus were a primitive or mythical expression of Christ’s divine Sonship, then the tradition, one would think, would have fallen away with the establishment of Christ’s eternal Sonship. It did not, however, and both traditions continued to coexist together. Furthermore, at least one theological tradition—that of the Qu’ran—affirmed the virgin birth but explicitly denied Christ’s divine Sonship (Surah 19:16-40).

³⁶ Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 207; cf. *Dogmatics in Outline*, 99.

Docetism in his affirmation of the virgin birth. In this present section we shall exposit Barth's second claim—the uniqueness of Christ's humanity—in order to have a vantage point from which we can address the first. We shall see that Barth understands the uniqueness of Christ's humanity to consist in the way in which the human essence of Jesus Christ is determined entirely by the grace of God given it through union with the Son of God. The virgin birth is suitable as a sign because it attests to this exclusive determination at the very origin of Jesus' human life. In the following section, we shall see how Barth views the unique humanity of Jesus Christ as integral and indispensable to the solidarity of Jesus Christ with his fellow human beings. Thus, the virgin birth is understood by Barth to be an appropriate sign that holds both of these statements in tension: by being born of a human mother Jesus is shown to be in full solidarity with human beings, but because his mother is a virgin Jesus is shown to be uniquely related to God.

Barth did not approach the topic of the humanity of Christ as though it were in question. Rather, in Barth's theology the question of fact precedes the question of the interpretation of the fact; reality precedes possibility.³⁷ According to Barth, both the statement of the divinity of Christ and the statement of his humanity are "analytic statements," not synthetic ones.³⁸ In Barth's view, the New Testament presupposes the divinity and the humanity of Jesus Christ, but only occasionally presents both sides at the same time. Usually, however, the New Testament will begin with *either* the humanity or the divinity of Christ and lead the reader to conclude that Jesus is *also* the other, divine or

³⁷ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 7.

³⁸ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 22. This means that Barth offers no argument for why Jesus must be considered fully human. There are, however, certain indications that Barth offers to demonstrate how the New Testament assumes Christ's true humanity, such as his human birth. See Barth, *CD*, III/2, 58.

human.³⁹ From wherever the particular text begins, they reach the same conclusion that identifies the man Jesus as the divine Son of God or the Son of God as the man Jesus. The only synthesis of the two perspectives in the New Testament is the name Jesus Christ itself, in which both perspectives are true and held together. Barth believes that the mutual perspectives of New Testament rule out of court any possibility of Docetism, in which Jesus is seen to fit an *a priori* idea of God that can do without his human nature, or Ebionism, in which the humanity of Jesus is affirmed but his divine nature denied.⁴⁰ Barth attempts to maintain this assumption throughout his *CD* and to give each of the New Testament's perspectives its proper due.

In the section entitled “The Homecoming of the Son of Man” (§64), found in the second part-volume of his doctrine of reconciliation, Barth begins with the humanity of Christ and shows its relationship to his divinity. Barth refers to this section as “the decisive center” (*entscheidend Mitte*) of his Christology that is determinative for the whole of the doctrine of reconciliation.⁴¹ Here, when Barth uses the term “human nature” (*menschliche Natur*), he means “quite simply that which makes a man man as distinct from God, angel or animal, his specific creatureliness, his *humanitas*.”⁴² We shall see, however, that this short definition must be nuanced greatly. First of all, we note that Barth has a particular aversion to use of the term “nature” (*Natur*). One can detect a notable shift away from this term in Barth's later writings. This is the case whether he is speaking of either humanity or divinity. In both cases, the term “nature” might suggest

³⁹ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 16. The Gospel of John, for example, presents God's Son or Word as identical with the man Jesus Christ. The synoptic Gospels, on the other hand, present the man Jesus Christ as identical with God's Son or Word. Their difference in perspective is a result of their different starting point, beginning either with the divine Word or with the human Jesus.

⁴⁰ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 17-8.

⁴¹ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 36; cf. Barth, *CD*, IV/2, x.

⁴² Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 25.

particular qualities of God or of human beings that can be abstracted or known independently of Jesus Christ. It is this misunderstanding that Barth believes has marked the Christian heritage of the doctrine of the two natures.⁴³ Barth's conviction has two main methodological implications. The first is that the doctrine of Christ's humanity must be understood through the particularity of Christ himself. As we shall see especially in the following section, it is only through this way of particularity that a theological anthropology which embraces all human beings can be established, according to Barth. The second implication is that by holding only loosely to the term "nature" Barth has set himself in a critical relationship with the creedal tradition. Barth finds himself within the broad trajectory of Chalcedonian orthodoxy but prefers to use significantly different language to describe Christ's person. To be specific, Barth prefers to describe the person of Christ as a "history," indicated by the use of the term "essence" (*Wesen*), rather than as a "nature" (*Natur*). With this nuance Barth intends to recast what he takes to be the fundamentally true conviction of the early church—that Christ is both truly human and truly divine—but to remove from it what he takes to be static categories, reformulating Chalcedon's essential insight in terms that denote the biblical event-character—the actualism—of the reality of Jesus Christ.⁴⁴

⁴³ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 26-7.

⁴⁴ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 105. McCormack writes: "God is what God does—and humanity is what Jesus does. 'Essence' is thus a description of a person or thing in its entirety, in the sum total of its existence, in all of its acts and relations—above all, where the question of that which differentiates the person or entity from others is in view." Bruce L. McCormack, "Participation in God, Yes; Deification, No: Two Modern Protestant Responses to an Ancient Question," in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 238; cf. Jones, *Humanity*, 26-37. Barth's decision to reformulate what he understands to be Chalcedon's essential insight has given rise to diverse interpretations of his Christology and contributes to why Barth cannot easily be typed as either Alexandrian or Antiochian as Waldrop attempted. See Charles T. Waldrop, *Karl Barth's Christology: Its Basic Alexandrian Character* (New York: Mouton, 1984). For a helpful corrective to this approach, and for insight into Barth's basic Chalcedonianism, see Hans Boersma, "Alexandrian or Antiochian? A Dilemma in Barth's Christology," *Westminster Theological Journal* 52 (1990): 263-80; George Hunsinger, "Karl Barth's Christology: Its

The incarnation is, for Barth, the event in which “God assumed a being as man into His being as God.”⁴⁵ He describes the contours of this event under four main points. First, in the incarnation, the Son became and *is* a human being. This took place among the people of Israel and finds its point of entry in the figure of Mary.⁴⁶ With echoes of his discussion of the virgin birth in *CD I/2*, Barth describes how God acts among these people and through this woman to establish a new creation apart from any cooperation on the part of the creature. Within the lineage of which Jesus Christ is a part, God effects a “new event” that cannot merely be understood as a consequence deduced from the history of Israel.⁴⁷ The event of the incarnation thus gives priority to divine acting over human acting; John 1:14 is irreversible.

Hence the movement from below to above which takes place originally in this man does not compete with the movement of God from above to below. It takes place *because* and *as* the latter takes place. It takes place as the response of gratitude to the grace of God.⁴⁸

As such, human participation in the divine work is always in response to and elicited by prior divine action. Barth’s particular conception of Christ’s human agency is closely tied to the uniqueness of Christ’s human nature, particularly its *anhypostatic/enhypostatic* character. Barth is adamant that the Son did not assume a particular man who exists independently, but human essence itself. As such, Jesus has relevance for all human beings.⁴⁹ It is only because humanity exists in the concrete form of individual human beings that the Son became a particular man, Jesus Christ.⁵⁰ We shall give further

basic Chalcedonian character,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 127-42.

⁴⁵ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 41.

⁴⁶ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 45.

⁴⁷ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 37.

⁴⁸ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 47. Emphasis added.

⁴⁹ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 49.

⁵⁰ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 48.

exposition to Barth's doctrine of human agency in the following chapter. Here, however, we note the Christological contours of Barth's conception of human agency.

In the second point Barth discusses the hypostatic union (*unio hypostatica*). He declares that the existence of the Son became the existence of Jesus Christ. For Barth, there can be no thought given to the Nestorian error of the man Jesus Christ existing alongside of the existence of the Son. Quite the contrary, for "we have to do with God Himself as we have to do with this man."⁵¹ As such, the acting and speaking of this man concerns all human beings because God *himself* acts and speaks where this man does. The hypostatic union is, according to Barth, *sui generis*. All other relations between God and creation are qualitatively different from the union of the divine Son with human flesh.⁵² As such, explains Barth, this union is marked by the sign of Christ's miraculous conception—the virgin birth.

In the third point, Barth asserts that the Son participates in human essence and that the Son gives to human essence a participation in the divine essence.⁵³ Thus, in Jesus Christ there is a true *communio naturarum* in addition to a *unio hypostatica*. This union is both complete and indissoluble. For Barth, the communion of natures follows upon the hypostatic union, which has priority. It is only in the divine mode of being (*Seinsweisen*) of the Son that the divine essence is united to human essence.⁵⁴ Due to his decision to focus and predicate the communion of natures on the hypostatic union, Barth finds himself in agreement with the Reformed tradition over and against the Lutheran tradition.

⁵¹ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 51.

⁵² Barth does allow for created realities, such as the relationship between a man and a woman in marriage, to be in some analogous relationship to the hypostatic union insofar as they are related to the covenant between God and his people. This is because Jesus Christ is himself the basis of the covenant. See Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 58-9.

⁵³ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 62-3.

⁵⁴ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 65.

The implications of this for Barth's Christology are particularly felt when Barth critiques the notion of the deification of Christ's human nature, which we shall see below.

In Barth's fourth and final point he argues that in the union of the Son with human flesh, the Son exalts human essence. It is because human essence was exalted in Jesus Christ that he can be our "first-born Brother."⁵⁵ In Jesus Christ, the divine essence is determined (*bestimmen*) toward the human essence and, in its own way, the human essence is determined (*bestimmen*) from the divine.⁵⁶ The differentiation between the divine essence and the human essence is due to their different relationship to the subject, the divine Son. The divine essence is proper to the person of the Son. However, in the Son's taking up of human essence, human essence is given a true fellowship with divine essence. In this fellowship the human essence always remains human, just as the divine essence always remains divine. Barth writes:

This is the twofold differentiation of the mutual participation of divine and human essence in Jesus Christ. For all their reciprocity the two elements in this happening have a different character. The one, as the essence of the Son of God, is wholly *that which gives*. The other, exalted to existence and actuality only in and by Him is wholly *that which receives*. Thus, even as the two elements in this happening, they maintained their own distinctiveness. The humiliation of the Son by the assumption of human essence is His becoming man. But His exaltation as the Son of the Man is not the divinization of His human essence. It means that, unchanged as such, it is set in perfect fellowship with the divine essence.⁵⁷

The human essence of Jesus is unique from all other human beings due to its special relationship to God in which it is brought to perfect fellowship with and by the divine Son. The description that Barth offers of the hypostatic union will be determinative for his understanding of human action, which we shall examine in the following chapter, and for the suitability of the virgin birth as a sign of the mystery of the incarnation.

⁵⁵ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 69.

⁵⁶ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 70.

⁵⁷ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 72; cf. McCormack, "Participation in God," 240-3.

After discussing these four basic points, Barth turns to discuss the specific effects of the relationship between the divine and the human in Jesus Christ. Barth undertakes this task with attention to three scholastic terms. The first of these is the so-called *communicatio idiomatum*. Barth uses this term to describe the impartation of the divine essence to the human and the human reception of the divine essence.⁵⁸ Thus, all that is proper to the divine essence and all that is proper to the human essence can be legitimately predicated of Jesus Christ. On the main point of this doctrine—the impartation of the divine to the human essence—Barth believes that Reformed and Lutheran Christologies were in agreement. Where they differed was in the Lutheran insistence that the human nature of Jesus Christ was deified by the interpenetration of the divine nature—the doctrine of the so-called *genus majesticum*.⁵⁹

Rather than speak of a *genus majesticum*, Barth chose to speak of the divine address to the human essence in Jesus Christ with recourse to the *communicatio gratiae*, the second term Barth discusses in detail. With this term Barth intends to communicate the idea that the human essence of Jesus Christ is addressed by the acting subject, who is the Son of God, in Jesus Christ. This is the impartation of grace in which the divine essence “determines” (*bestimmen*) itself to the human essence in humiliation.⁶⁰ The human essence is not deified by the determination of the divine essence. On the contrary, just as the divine essence remains divine so does the human essence remain human. The

⁵⁸ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 74.

⁵⁹ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 78. In Barth’s opinion, the error of the *genus majesticum* lay in the tendency of Lutheran doctrine to abstract the human and divine natures from the actual history of Jesus Christ. Rather, when one looks to Jesus Christ one is to see the dynamic enactment of fellowship between God and human being played out in history. Furthermore, the deification of human nature in Christ is viewed by Barth as actually compromising the *communicatio idiomatum*’s main intention insofar as human nature ceases to be true human nature. See Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 81-3.

⁶⁰ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 84-5.

human essence is determined, however, by the determination of God towards it. Barth describes what this means for the human essence as follows:

The Son of Man exists only in His identity with the Son of God, and His human essence only in its confrontation with His divine. Its determination [*Bestimmung*] by the electing grace of God is not only its first but also its last and total and exclusive determination. It is human essence, but effectively confronted with the divine, in the character with which it is invested by the fact that God willed to be and became man as well as God, so that without itself becoming divine it is an essence which exists in the end with God, and is adopted and controlled and sanctified and ruled [*angeeignetes, disponiertes, geheiligtes und regiertes*] by Him. This is the exaltation which comes to human essence and the one Jesus Christ.⁶¹

While it is the human essence of all human beings, the human essence of Jesus Christ is uniquely determined by the fact that this instantiation of human essence in Jesus Christ is *fully* determined by the grace of God. This has important implications for how Barth conceives of the sinlessness of Jesus and his uniqueness and relationship to the rest of human beings, as we shall see below. The *communicatio gratiae*, however, does not at all compromise the fully human essence of Jesus Christ, for “it is genuinely human in the deepest sense to live by the electing grace of God addressed to man.”⁶² Barth brings up the virgin birth in this connection. Barth restates that while the virgin birth does not establish the full determination of human essence in Jesus Christ, it certainly “indicates” this fact. For Barth, the virgin birth bears witness to the total and exclusive determination of the human essence of Jesus Christ by the election of grace.⁶³ For Barth, neither the total determination of the human essence of Jesus, nor the sign that indicates it, alters the

⁶¹ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 88.

⁶² Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 89. Webster expositis the wider contours of Barth’s doctrine of moral agency by describing how he frames and orders the possibility of human action by God’s prior act of grace. As such, Barth’s account of the human agent “proposes a fundamental *passivity* as anthropologically basic.” See Webster, *Ethics of Reconciliation*, 94.

⁶³ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 90.

human essence of Jesus as such. Rather, it brings true human essence into perfect fellowship with God.⁶⁴

Next, Barth discusses the common actualization in Christ of divine and human essence. This is known in scholastic theology as the *communicatio operationum*, the third term discussed by Barth. For Barth, there is no place for static concepts in Christology. Rather, the event of Jesus Christ has to be understood precisely as a history. Jesus Christ himself is the subject of this history and he himself is the mystery of the Christian faith. The “common and coordinated work” of the divine and human essence in the historical event of Jesus Christ is the content of the *communicatio operationum*.⁶⁵ Barth unpacks this idea in the following way. The divine essence of the Son of God actualizes itself in the human essence of Jesus Christ; the human essence of Jesus Christ is actualized, not of itself, but by the creative will and the act of God. It is not that the two essences actualize themselves independently of one another and in union with one another, but that the divine essence of the Son of God actualizes itself *in* the human essence of Jesus Christ, the human essence being *enabled* by the divine to participate in that actualization. In this common actualization, the divine essence of the Son of God does not work alone but only in conjunction with the human essence of Jesus Christ that is enlivened. Barth’s description is worth quoting at length:

Common actualisation means that what Jesus Christ does as the Son of God and in virtue of His divine essence, and what He does as the Son of Man and in exercise of His human essence, He not only does in the conjunction but in the

⁶⁴ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 91-2. Particularly helpful in this regard is Neder’s discussion of Barth’s distinction between “history” and “state” in *CD* III/2, 157-64. For Barth, a state involves the idea that a being exists confined within its own limitations and capacities. A history, on the other hand, occurs when these limits are transcended by an outside factor. Thus, Jesus Christ is a history because he is a being who exists constantly and repeatedly in the encounter of God within his human limitations. Jesus Christ “is always the uninterrupted dynamic movement of divine lordship and human obedience.” See Neder, *Participation in Christ*, 32-5.

⁶⁵ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 113.

strictest relationship of the one with the other. The divine expresses and reveals itself wholly in the sphere of the human, and the human serves and attests the divine. It is not merely that the goal is the same. The movement to it is also the same. It is determined by two different factors. But it is along the same road. At no point does the difference mean separation....Common actualization also means, however, that what Jesus Christ does as the Son of God and in virtue of His divine essence, and what He does as the Son of Man and in exercise of His human essence, He does (in this strictest relationship of the one to the other) in such a way that they always actualize themselves as the one and the other: *per efficaciam distinctam utriusque naturae*. Joined in the One who is very God and very man, they are always as different as God and man are different.⁶⁶

The doctrine of the virgin birth is, for Barth, an appropriate sign for the way in which the human essence of Christ is related to the divine. Just as the human essence of Jesus Christ exists solely and is enabled by the divine grace given it, so was the mother of Jesus acted upon and enabled to conceive the Son of God. In both Jesus and his mother, human essence was not overcome, but rather exalted to fellowship with God. As we shall see in the following chapter, the pattern of the relationship between the divine and human natures of Jesus Christ is the basis for how Barth conceived of all proper human action as it is enabled by the Holy Spirit.

In this section we have seen that though the divine Son has assumed the human essence common to all human beings, Christ's humanity is unique because of the way in which it perfectly corresponds to the grace of God given to it. This is a result of the special union of the human nature of Jesus Christ with the divine Son, a relationship that cannot be duplicated in any human being apart from Christ. Barth believes that this union of divine and human essence in Jesus Christ is appropriately marked by the virgin birth,

⁶⁶ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 115-6. Neder (*Participation*, 70-1) comments, "Jesus Christ is a human being, and the acting human agent, inasmuch as he is *responsive* to the actions of God. His human actions do not originate with his humanity but happen humanly as he responds to the actions of God. That is what Barth is affirming when he says that the man Jesus is a human subject. The one person Jesus Christ is the event of the confrontation of the Son of God and the Son of Man, the event of this history. Jesus Christ is the man he is wholly within this history, but within it, and in response to the will of God, he is fully human—a fully obedient and therefore human subject. Nevertheless, his human actions do not originate independently, but always in response to the divine action toward him."

because, by removing the symbolic determination of the human father, Jesus is shown to be determined entirely by God. Though the existence of the human nature of Christ is unique and is uniquely marked with the sign of the virgin birth, Barth believes that the veracity and genuineness of Christ's human essence is in no way compromised.

3.4 The Humanity of Christ and Other Human Beings

In the previous section, we saw that the human nature of Jesus Christ is unique because it exists solely by the grace of God and, as such, exists in perfect fellowship with God. In addition to signifying the uniqueness of Christ's relationship with God, Barth always maintained that the virgin birth signified the solidarity of Jesus Christ with all other human beings. In this section, we shall examine how Barth conceives of the relationship between the human nature of Jesus Christ and that of other human beings. Here we shall see how Barth attempts to avoid the charge that the doctrine of the virgin birth compromises the full humanity of Jesus Christ even though it sets Christ apart from all other human beings. In fact, we shall see that the unique conception of Jesus, as the sign of the peculiar existence of Christ's human nature, actually functions for Barth as decisive in his understanding of human nature generally.

In order to craft a truly theological anthropology and to remain true to his doctrine of revelation, in which there can be no abstract knowledge of humanity apart from the Word of God, Barth grounds anthropology on Christology. It is the unique task of theological anthropology to ask what kind of being it is that stands in relation to God. This requires the theologian to view human essence and existence in light of the covenant.⁶⁷ Specifically, this means focusing on the elect man, Jesus Christ, and the actions of God in relation to him. In this "mirror" we can discern indirectly something of

⁶⁷ Barth, *CD*, III/2, 19.

the nature of all human beings.⁶⁸ As Barth puts it, “The nature of the man Jesus alone is the key to the problem of human nature. This man is man.”⁶⁹ For Barth, Jesus Christ is himself the content of God’s eternal election, the sum of the divine purpose. As Barth described it in *CD* II/2, Jesus Christ is both the electing God and the elect man.⁷⁰ This means that in the election of Jesus Christ, God has also elected fellowship with humanity. This has revolutionary implications for Barth. It means that human beings exist and are elected because the human nature of Jesus Christ has been elected from all eternity as the beginning of God’s works. For Barth, the eternal election of Jesus Christ determines the being of God for humanity and determines human essence to God. This was displayed fully and perfectly in the relationship between the divine and human natures of Jesus Christ, which we discussed above. Furthermore, because humanity as such is elected in the humanity of Jesus Christ, the divine decision and determination concerning the human being of Jesus Christ is universally applicable.⁷¹ When Barth interprets the

⁶⁸ Barth, *CD*, III/2, 40-1. For a more extensive treatment of Barth’s theological anthropology, see Gary W. Deddo, *Karl Barth’s Theology of Relations: Trinitarian, Christological, and Human: Toward and Ethic of the Family*, Issues in Systematic Theology, Volume 4 (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 36-107.

⁶⁹ Barth, *CD*, III/2, 43. For a concise analysis of this axiom in Barth’s anthropology, see Wolf Krötke, “The humanity of the human person in Karl Barth’s anthropology,” in the *Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (CUP: Cambridge, 2000), 159-76.

⁷⁰ Barth, *CD*, II/2, 99-145.

⁷¹ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 34-6. Bruce McCormack has captured the revolutionary nature of Barth’s doctrine of election for human ontology: “The election of Jesus Christ to be the ‘royal’ human, to inaugurate a new humanity under the conditions of the old, carries with it an implied human ontology which corresponds to...[the] divine ontology. For Barth, human ontology, too, is ‘covenantal ontology.’ To the act of Self-determination in which God chose himself for us there corresponds an act of human self-determination in which Jesus chose himself for God and other humans and then, and on this basis, we too choose ourselves for God and others. True humanity is realized in us where and when we live in the posture of prayer. Where this occurs, that which we ‘are’ corresponds to that which we have been chosen to be. There true humanity is actualized by faith and in obedience.” Bruce L. McCormack, “Grace and Being: The Role of God’s Gracious Election in Karl Barth’s Theological Ontology,” in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 198. Cf. Bruce McCormack, “Karl Barth’s Christology as a Resource for a Reformed Version of Kenoticism,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8.3 (July 2006): 243-251; “Seek God where he may be found: a response to Edwin Chr. van Driel,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60.1 (2007): 62-79. For insightful criticism of the implications that McCormack draws from Barth’s doctrine of election for his doctrine of the Trinity, see Edwin Chr. van Driel, “Karl Barth on the Eternal Existence of Jesus Christ,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60.1 (2007): 45-

incarnation and the human being of Jesus Christ, he believes that he is dealing with a fact grounded and decided in eternity. The humanity of Jesus Christ is thus the reason by which human beings exist and the interpretive key by which their humanity is known. As the elect human being, the remainder of human beings derive their humanity from him.

Barth writes:

What man is, is determined by God's immediate presence and action in this man, by His eternal election and the mighty work of His life and death and resurrection corresponding to this election. There in the eternity of the divine counsel which is the meaning and basis of all creation, and in the work of His life accomplished at the heart of time, the decision was made who and what true man is. There his constitution was fixed and sealed once for all. For this reason it cannot be different in any other man. No man can elude this prototype [*Vorbildlichkeit*]. We derive wholly from Jesus not merely our potential and actual relation to God, but even our human nature as such.⁷²

True humanity is not known in Jesus Christ in spite of his uniqueness but precisely because of it as the eternally elect of God. As the one with whom God has eternally bound himself, the man Jesus reveals to us what real humanity is.⁷³ This point is

61; George Hunsinger, "Election and Trinity: Twenty-Five Theses on the Theology of Karl Barth," *Modern Theology* 24.2 (April 2008): 179-98.

⁷² Barth, *CD*, III/2, 50; cf. *CD*, II/2, 778: "His person, the person of the Son of God and therefore of God Himself, is by God's gracious and righteous will *the* human person, our common Head and Representative. In Him God has seen each human person all eternity. As He judges Him, and He is judged by God, judgment is executed on every human person. He is the Word that was in the beginning with God. He is, therefore, the Word that is true of every man. He is our sanctification for God and eternal life as it is unshakably and irrevocably accomplished." Neder (*Participation in Christ*, 22-3) comments that "Jesus Christ does not represent the whole of humanity—his existence is not of decisive significance for the rest of humanity—because he assumes human 'nature' as such and does something to it. On this view, objective participation in Christ would mean that human beings share the same essence or substance that the Son of God assumed into his person and healed or cleansed. Such an idea is utterly foreign to Barth's way of thinking. According to Barth, human nature—the *humanum* of every human creature—is something that Jesus Christ creates through his life of faith and obedience in fulfillment of the covenant of grace determined from all eternity. What human nature or essence *is* is decided by God in election and is actualized by Jesus Christ in the series of decisions and actions that correspond to that eternal decision and which constitute the history of the covenant. Human nature is as Jesus Christ does it, not as he does something to 'it'."

⁷³ Busch (*Great Passion*, 102) writes: "Thus, true humanity is no distant ideal that we can only strive after and only approximately attain. True man is the *real* man who is real in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. Jesus is *vere homo* [= true man] not because he is like us but because he is 'different' from us...so that we might become truly human in him and like him. The man truly *accepted* by God in his incarnation is true man. As Jesus takes our place and acts on our behalf, the new and true man who, exalted

the basic insight into all of Barth's theological anthropology. It is also of the utmost importance for how Barth intends to avoid the charge of Docetism in his doctrine of the virgin birth. According to Barth, we are not to judge the veracity of the humanity of Jesus Christ on the basis of comparison with what we assume we know about the existence of human nature in general. If we were to proceed this way, we would be asserting that there was some platform or some vantage point from which we have clear knowledge of our own human nature. Barth devotes a great deal of time to showing that the main phenomenologies of his day—such as scientific materialism, idealism, existentialism, and theistic anthropology—each run up against a limit through which it cannot pass; they are only able to reach a “shadow” of real human being.⁷⁴ Theologically, we can only understand human nature via reflection on the true and elect human nature of Jesus Christ, from whom all human beings derive their nature. This is not to say that anthropology can be Christology. We cannot simply read our human nature off the human nature of Jesus Christ. On the contrary, the human nature of Jesus Christ is unique, as we have seen, due to its special union with the Word of God. Furthermore, all other human beings contradict their nature, whereas in the life of Christ “a protest” is lodged against the contradiction of human nature.⁷⁵ What is required is a more nuanced approach to deriving the truth of human nature from the special human nature of Jesus Christ, from whom our human nature derives. Barth unfolds these ideas throughout the remainder of the volume. While space forbids a thorough explanation of Barth's

in God's acceptance in a *grace that cannot be gainsaid*, is now *truly there*. The ‘*vere homo*’ [= true man] is thus inseparable from Jesus Christ, for he is inseparably ‘enclosed’...in the fulfillment of the covenant in the incarnation of God.”

⁷⁴ Barth, *CD*, III/2, 71-132. Through a close comparison of Barth's anthropology with modern “object relations psychology,” Daniel Price argues for a convergence between the two that would suggest a closer relationship between Barth's theology and the human sciences than is often supposed. See Daniel J. Price, *Karl Barth's Anthropology in Light of Modern Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).

⁷⁵ Barth, *CD*, III/2, 48.

Christological anthropology, we shall briefly survey some of the conceptual moves that Barth makes in order to grasp a sense of how he conceives of human nature.

In the first place, Barth posits that the human nature of Jesus Christ is primarily to be understood as *for* God. When Barth reads the New Testament witness to Jesus Christ, particularly the four Gospels, he is struck by the fact that this witness has precious little interest in the personal life of Jesus of Nazareth. Rather, the New Testament presents Jesus solely as the bearer of an office, namely that of the Messiah.⁷⁶ Through this insight, Barth comes to the conclusion that the human nature of Jesus Christ is distinguished by the fact that it is united wholly to the work and will of God; Christ's human nature is there *for* God. However, only the human nature of Jesus Christ is for God exclusively and directly; other human beings are for God only in Jesus Christ.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, we can still learn something about human nature generally from the unique human nature of Jesus Christ. Barth explains that because we have to do with God directly in the elect man, Jesus, and because God is among us in Jesus as a true human being, we can conclude that an essential element of true human nature is to be *with* God.⁷⁸ "Man is with God because he is with Jesus."⁷⁹

Barth further nuances his understanding of human nature by appealing to Christ's relationship with his fellow human beings. Barth believes that the Scriptures portray Jesus Christ as wholly and totally devoted to his fellows. Jesus takes upon himself their misery and their concern, feeling it within himself even more deeply than they do

⁷⁶ Barth, *CD*, III/2, 56-8.

⁷⁷ Barth, *CD*, III/2, 70-1.

⁷⁸ Barth, *CD*, III/2, 132.

⁷⁹ Barth, *CD*, III/2, 135-6.

themselves.⁸⁰ It is through Christ's being *for* other human beings that Barth is able to derive further material for his general anthropology. Barth believes that there is a "correspondence," an "inner material connection" and a "formal parallel" between Christ's being *for* God and his being *for* other human beings.⁸¹ In the being of Jesus Christ for his fellow human beings, God repeats in Jesus Christ something of his own triune essence, namely a "co-existence, co-inherence and reciprocity."⁸² As such, Jesus is the *imago Dei* itself.⁸³ Of course, Barth is quick to add, no other human being can exist in total devotion and orientation to others, as does Jesus Christ. In this, Christ is unique. Nevertheless, there is a correspondence between the determination of human beings for covenant partnership and the "basic form" of their creatureliness.⁸⁴ If the humanity of Jesus Christ consists in his being *for* other human beings, then humanity itself consists in its being *with* others. For Barth, this is articulated through the notion that humanity is always "fellow-humanity."⁸⁵ The fellow-humanity of all human beings is registered in the very fact that all human beings are male or female, and fellow-humanity has its special expression in the marriage relationship.⁸⁶ The fact that human beings are male or female attests to their essence as ordered for fellowship with one another, which itself is set in

⁸⁰ Barth, *CD*, III/2, 211-2.

⁸¹ Barth, *CD*, III/2, 203, 217.

⁸² Barth, *CD*, III/2, 218.

⁸³ Barth writes: "We have seen that there is a factual, a materially necessary [*sachlich notwendig*], and supremely, as the origin of the factual and materially necessary, an inner divine correspondence and similarity [*göttlich-wesentliche Entsprechung und Ähnlichkeit*] between the being of the man Jesus for God and His being for his fellows. This correspondence and similarity consists in the fact that the man Jesus in His being for man repeats and reflects the inner being or essence of God and this confirms His being for God.... The humanity of Jesus is not merely the repetition and reflection [*Wiederholung und Nachbildung*] of His divinity, or of God's controlling will; it is the repetition and reflection of God Himself, no more and no less. It is the image of God, the *imago Dei*." Barth, *CD*, III/2, 219.

⁸⁴ Barth, *CD*, III/2, 222-4.

⁸⁵ Barth, *CD*, III/2, 245, 249.

⁸⁶ Barth, *CD*, III/2, 288; cf. *CD*, III/1, 288-329.

correspondence to their essence as called to fellowship with God in the covenant. As such, they are the image of God indirectly.⁸⁷

We have now surveyed two ways in which Barth derives conclusions about the nature of human beings from his understanding of Jesus Christ. He begins with the Gospel depiction of Jesus Christ, whom he maintains as unique due to his relationship with God, and from there attempts to derive indirectly conclusions about human nature generally.⁸⁸ Barth attempts to disallow phenomenological observations of human beings from figuring into his understanding of the genuine human nature. This becomes quite complicated in Barth's third section in which he discusses the theological status of the psychical and biological constituents of the human being. This section is particularly important for our understanding of the virgin birth in relationship to genuine human nature because it is precisely here that critics have argued that the doctrine of the virgin birth lends itself to Docetism. According to Barth, Jesus Christ lives as body and soul that co-exists in a definite order through the Spirit of God.⁸⁹ Jesus Christ is, accordingly, "whole man." All that is essential to the psychical and biological makeup of human beings is present also in Jesus. This, Barth believes, is the presupposition of the entire New Testament evidence, particularly in the unanimous conclusion that Jesus Christ was

⁸⁷ Barth, *CD*, III/2, 324.

⁸⁸ Thus, as Webster explains: "Already, then, Barth is pressing the point that 'being human' is a function of the relation borne to us by another, and a very particular other. Barth is not offering a general ontology of sociality or relationality, but making the very particular assertion that it is because Jesus Christ is Neighbour, Companion, Brother and Counterpart...that we are constituted as the beings that we are and knowable as such. Noetically and ontologically, human being is unthinkable apart from the fact that 'man is with God because he is with Jesus.'" John Webster, *Karl Barth, Outstanding Christian Thinkers* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 101.

⁸⁹ Barth, *CD*, III/2, 325. For an exposition of Barth's treatment of the soul—body relationship, see Marc Cortez, "Body, Soul, and (Holy) Spirit: Karl Barth's Theological Framework for Understanding Human Ontology," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 10.3 (July 2008): 328-45.

born of a woman.⁹⁰ Furthermore, as “whole man,” the various interconnections of the body and soul of Jesus Christ are perfectly ordered: there is no rift or cleavage between Christ’s soul and body and Christ is always in complete possession of himself.⁹¹ Jesus lives in this way because of his relationship to the Spirit. In a way that is fascinating for its boldness, Barth mentions here the unique conception of Jesus as an important aspect of the biblical grounding for his belief in the perfect ordering of the body and soul of Christ. Barth explains that the “most fundamental New Testament statement” about Christ’s unique relationship to the Holy Spirit is to be found in the description of Christ’s conception by the Holy Spirit, particularly Luke 1:35.⁹² Here it is shown that Christ owes his entire existence to the Holy Spirit because it is from the Holy Spirit that Christ took his human origin. Barth believes that this basic fact about the Spirit-constituted and ordered existence of Jesus Christ is confirmed by Scripture as it depicts the unfolding of his entire life. From this analysis, and following a similar mode of thinking as we saw in Barth’s discussion of the previous two aspects of his conception of human nature, Barth concludes that human beings generally, in the soul and body of their existence, are ordered by the Holy Spirit and in a way that corresponds appropriately to the soul and body of Jesus Christ.⁹³ Through his analysis of the New Testament depiction of Jesus Christ, Barth affirms the psychical and biological aspects of the existence of all human beings, and underscores the basis of this existence in the Spirit. Rather than detracting from Christ’s solidarity with humanity, the uniqueness of Christ’s birth becomes for

⁹⁰ Barth, *CD*, III/2, 329.

⁹¹ Barth, *CD*, III/2, 332.

⁹² Barth, *CD*, III/2, 333, 337. It is this passage that gives some scholars the suggestion that Barth also intended to develop a Spirit-Christology, in which Jesus is principally understood as the bearer of the Spirit. See Philip J. Rosato, *The Spirit as Lord: The Pneumatology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981), 173-80.

⁹³ Barth, *CD*, III/2, 366-436.

Barth an important clue to the existence of human beings generally. It is important to note, however, that Barth does this without actually addressing questions of a biological nature to do with Christ's human existence. Unlike Aquinas, for example, Barth does not attempt to map his doctrine of the virgin birth onto a scheme of human procreation.

In our survey of Barth's understanding of the relationship between Christ's humanity and other human beings we have seen that Barth treats the humanity of Christ as the "mirror" by which he indirectly constructs a general theological anthropology. In so doing, we see how Barth addresses the critique that the doctrine of the virgin birth compromises the veracity of Christ's human nature. For Barth, the question is not whether Jesus is fully human, but whether we are fully human like Jesus. The humanity of Jesus Christ is an axiom by which true human nature can be known. Accordingly, Barth does not allow the uniqueness of the birth of Christ to call into question the genuineness of the human nature of Jesus. To do so would be to posit that there was definitive knowledge of human nature that could be known outside of Christ, namely that all human beings have human fathers and are conceived through acts of sexual intercourse. Instead, Barth uses Christ's conception as a means to come to his understanding that all human beings exist and are ordered by the Spirit.

3.5 Original Sin

We have seen above how Barth construes the humanity of Jesus Christ in relation to God and other human beings in such a way that the virgin birth fits as an appropriate sign and in a way that Barth believes avoids the charge of Docetism. We have yet to see how Barth addresses the main function of the virgin birth in the Augustinian tradition in

which he located himself. We will remember from our previous chapters that the Augustinian tradition viewed the sin of Adam as corrupting all of human nature and believed that corrupt human nature was passed on through procreation. It was here that the virgin birth received its distinctive place and function. By removing the male role in the conception of Jesus, the virgin birth provided an exception to the rule of normal human procreation and so allowed Christ to assume sinless human nature and offer it as a perfect sacrifice of atonement. Barth refused to allow the virgin birth to have any such constitutional significance for the person of Jesus Christ. This leads us to ask the question, How does Barth envision original sin and the sinlessness of Christ? In this section we shall discover how Barth formulated the doctrine of original sin in such a way as to underscore the responsibility of human beings for sin but also to account for the universal fallenness of humanity. This renders unnecessary any role for the virgin birth in constituting Christ's sinlessness. The doctrine of the virgin birth and Barth's doctrine of sin are mutually illuminating aspects of Barth's vision of the reconciliation of God in Christ in which the virgin birth symbolically removes Adam, the shaper of world-history, from the origin of Christ.

It is crucial to preface our discussion of Barth's view of original sin with some explanation of how Barth goes about crafting his hamartiology generally. In the first place, Barth's hamartiology is integrated entirely into his doctrine of reconciliation. In contrast with the Reformed tradition, in which the doctrine of sin was often placed at the end of anthropology, Barth includes a discussion of sin in every part-volume of the doctrine of reconciliation in correspondence to his primary Christological and soteriological subject matter. This is in order to correct an error that Barth perceived to be

present in the Reformed tradition: treating sin in abstraction from the work and being of Jesus Christ. According to Barth, knowledge of human sin is an aspect of the knowledge of God and we only have knowledge of God as he has been revealed to human beings in Jesus Christ. To look elsewhere—perhaps to some eternal law or to human conscience—for any aspect of the knowledge of God would be to fall into natural theology.

Furthermore, sin itself precludes human beings from knowing its true extent. As Barth says: “[Man] sees and thinks and knows crookedly even in relation to his crookedness.”⁹⁴

Thus, it is only from Jesus Christ that we learn the truth about human sin. From him we see that sin consists of human beings choosing that which God has forbidden, condemned and excluded. As that which is against God’s will and excluded by that will, sin has no basis. It is an absurdity. It is the possibility that God rejected in his creation (Genesis 1:2).⁹⁵ Evil exists only in an *anhypostatic* relation to the good, in a parody of the existence of the human nature of Christ. Whereas Christ’s human nature corresponds to the nature of the divine Son, evil exists as a parasite to the detriment and destruction of creation.⁹⁶ As the choice against the will of God and for the absurd, sin, at its very root, totality and unity, is unbelief that bears the character of pride.⁹⁷ Rather than accept with thankfulness the life given them by God, human beings exalt themselves to a life not

⁹⁴ Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 361. It should also be noted that Barth is critical of the Magisterial Reformers for developing a biblical, but not *Christological*, doctrine of sin. In the same way as Barth was critical of the reformers for their failure to read Scripture christologically in their doctrine of election, so was he critical of them in their doctrine of sin. For a helpful comparison between Barth and Luther on some of these themes, see Eberhard Jüngel, “Gospel and Law: The Relationship of Dogmatics to Ethics” in *Karl Barth, a Theological Legacy*, trans. Garrett E. Paul (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986), 103-26.

⁹⁵ Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 410; Barth, *CD*, III/1, 108.

⁹⁶ See Wolf Krötke, *Sin and Nothingness in the Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. Philip G. Ziegler and Christina-Marie Baumel (Princeton: Westminster Theological Seminary, 2005), 50-1; cf. John Webster, “The Firmest Grasp of the Real’: Barth on Original Sin,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 4 (1988): 20.

⁹⁷ Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 413; cf. Krötke, *Sin and Nothingness*, 60.

given them.⁹⁸ Pride is the dominant motif of sin even as sin manifests itself in other ways, such as in sloth and falsehood. Barth concludes that sin has this root and this character by reflection on the humble obedience of Jesus Christ: sin is the opposite of the basic orientation of Christ's life and death. The Word became flesh, but human beings aspire to be God; the Lord became the servant, but human beings aspire to be the Lord; Jesus accepts the judgment of God, but human beings want to be their own judge.⁹⁹

In Barth's discussion of the "Fall of Man," he raises the question "Who is the man of sin?" Barth answers this question by stating that the man of sin is the one whom the Son of God stooped to become.¹⁰⁰ It is by looking at the human being judged by God and done away with in death that Barth intends to elucidate a portrait of the man of sin, the human being who stands under God's "No."¹⁰¹ As we surveyed in our previous section, Barth believes that human beings were created as covenant partners with God and, as such, are graciously addressed by God and ought to respond in freedom and thankfulness. However, when this covenant relationship is transgressed, human beings become guilty of contradicting the grace of God. While God's grace is constant and always remains grace, when human beings contradict this grace, grace then contradicts them.¹⁰² This is what constitutes the "No" of God's judgment upon them. As we saw above, the unity of God's "No" and "Yes" is attested in the virgin birth where humanity is graciously maintained in the incarnation in the woman but its sin is set aside in the rejected man.

⁹⁸ Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 478. Barth is careful to prevent misunderstanding; he wants to make it clear that while human beings have been corrupted, human sin has not created some new thing. Fallen human beings have not gone beyond the grasp of God himself. Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 480.

⁹⁹ Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 418, 432, 445.

¹⁰⁰ Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 478.

¹⁰¹ Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 390; cf. Krötke, *Sin and Nothingness*, 14, 21. Due to its Christological determination, Barth's hamartiology has fallen under the charge of fideism—that sin is merely asserted and not displayed. See Mangina, *Karl Barth on the Christian Life*, 95-7.

¹⁰² Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 489.

Barth argues that the guilt accrued by human beings is not simply the result of individuated acts of sin, but, because of the prideful character of the sin committed, the whole life of human beings becomes one of guilt. Barth writes:

And the Word of God does not accuse man merely of the individual thought or word or act, but convicts because he lives his whole life on the basis of this pride, finding all his strength in it from first to last, in great things and in small. It convicts him that in his existence as man he lives and moves and has his being in this corruption of his nature which is good, in this breach of the covenant which God has made with him. Always and everywhere he is guilty of responding to the grace of God, not with a corresponding thankfulness, but in one or many forms of his wretched pride.¹⁰³

Human beings are in no position to make restitution because they transgress the grace of God, which became judgment, and no human being has control of God's grace. Indeed, to attempt to control God's grace is pride! This is the very character of sin which now animates human life in relation to God.¹⁰⁴ This circle of sinful being and doing constitutes the helplessness in which human beings find themselves as sinners. This is Barth's version of the Reformed doctrine of total depravity.

When Barth discusses the doctrine of original sin (*peccatum originale*) he sides strongly with what he calls the Augustinian-Reformed view in contrast to Roman Catholic and Pelagian views. He does, however, significantly reshape this tradition. Barth affirms the tradition's belief in the radical nature of human corruption and the near identity between original and actual sin. As such, Barth believes there is no untouched relic or uncorrupted core of human goodness in fallen human beings.¹⁰⁵ What Barth finds objectionable in the Augustinian-Reformed view, however, is its tendency to minimize

¹⁰³ Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 489.

¹⁰⁴ Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 490, 492.

¹⁰⁵ Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 499; cf. Webster, "Firmest Grasp," 25. For a treatment of Barth's doctrine of original sin in the period of his Romans commentary, see Richard Roberts, "Sin, Saga and Gender: The Fall and Original Sin in Modern Theology," in *A Walk in the Garden: Biblical, Iconographical and Literary Images of Eden*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 136, ed. Paul Morris and Deborah Sawyer (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 246-55.

human responsibility for sin. The Augustinian-Reformed tradition did this by explaining the universality of sin through appeal to human procreation. Original sin (*Ursünde*—*peccatum originale*) was transposed with inherited sin (*Erbsünde*—*peccatum hereditarium*). By so doing, the Augustinian tradition likened sin to some manner of spiritual disease contracted at birth or through the act of conception, which then becomes the presupposition of human existence. Barth believes that the idea of hereditary sin is an “extremely unfortunate and mistaken one” because it “has a hopelessly naturalistic, deterministic and even fatalistic ring.”¹⁰⁶ While the idea of original sin is quite adequate in Barth’s estimation, insofar as it denotes the radical and comprehensive prison of sin that takes place in the circle of the being and act of human beings, the notion of inherited sin must be excised. Barth writes:

In this imprisonment God speaks to him and makes Himself his liberator in Jesus Christ. But it is still his *peccatum*, the act in which he makes himself a prisoner and therefore has to be a prisoner. This is the point which is obscured by the term hereditary sin. What I do as the one who receives an inheritance is something that I cannot refuse to do, since I am not asked concerning my willingness to accept that.¹⁰⁷

It is crucial for Barth to stress that sinful human beings are not to be viewed as victims. The totality of their sin is not to be understood as something that human beings have no control over and for which they are not responsible. Thus, it is only accurate to speak of human nature being “poisoned” by sin if it is made clear that human beings poison *themselves* by their pride.¹⁰⁸ Human beings are transgressors because they transgress the grace of God and, thus, their *own* freedom. They lead *themselves* into captivity.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 500-1.

¹⁰⁷ Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 500.

¹⁰⁸ Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 494.

¹⁰⁹ Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 495.

Barth's view of original sin is one in which human beings become guilty before God precisely because they have sinned responsibly. Sinful humanity is united in their sin, not because of a hereditary disease passed from their originator to all of his descendants, but because all human beings sin and the single judgment of God is the same for them all. Central to Barth's argument is his reading of Romans 11:32:

The fact that God willed this mercy and did have mercy on all men and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, means that "He hath concluded [*verschließen*] all in disobedience." "Concluded" [*verschließen*] means that He has placed them under an authoritative verdict and sentence which cannot be questioned or disputed, let alone resisted, with all the consequences which that involves.¹¹⁰

It is God's judgment that unites human beings in sin, not an inherited flaw in their nature. Certainly, there is a flaw present in human existence—it takes the form of human pride that issues in disobedience—but the flaw is a flaw precisely because of the judgment of God which marks it with a definitive "No" in the cross of Christ. A by-product of constructing the doctrine of original sin on the basis of the common guilt of human beings for the sin for which they are responsible, and not likening sin to a hereditary disease, means that there is no longer a need for Christ to be conceived in an exceptional manner.

In Barth's treatment of Adam we gain further insight into why it must be the man who is removed at Christ's birth. Barth explains that in Christ we see the new and present reality that unites all human beings in him based on the completion of his reconciling work. On the other hand, we see that the man of sin is decidedly past; he is a "has been" because he has no basis in the reality of Christ and is known only retrospectively from the

¹¹⁰ Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 501. Webster argues that Barth has come close here to the Pelagian position, except for two important qualifications. First, Barth affirms that sin is radical and universal among human beings and, second, the sin of human beings involves enslavement to malevolent and lordless powers. Thus, no human being can extricate himself from the sin in which he has willingly entangled himself. See Webster, "Firmest Grasp," 26-7.

verdict of Christ's death and resurrection as we see the depth to which Christ humbled himself.¹¹¹ The history of the human race is the history of the "man of sin." This history stands under the "No" of God. Historical scholarship discovers this "No" when it attempts to express the history of humankind in abstraction from the work and will of God. This is what Barth calls the finding of "world-history" (*Weltgeschichte*) and it is this history that is epitomized in the symbol of the man removed in the birth of Christ.¹¹²

What is the obviously outstanding feature of world-history? Is it the occasional symphonies and euphonies? We must not ignore these. Is it the constant cacophonies? We certainly cannot ignore these. But the really outstanding thing beyond and in the antitheses is the all-conquering monotony—the monotony of the pride in which man has obviously always lived to his own detriment and to that of his neighbour, from hoary antiquity in through the ebb and flow of his later progress in recession both as a whole and in detail, the pride in which he still lives to his own and his neighbour's detriment and will most certainly continue to do so till the end of time.¹¹³

In its own way, the Bible gives attestation to this history of this "man of sin" in abstraction from the work and will of God. For Barth, world-history is a theological history because it is the history of humankind apart from God in which the monotony of human pride continues to assert itself; it is the history of the man of sin. For Barth, the saga of the third chapter of Genesis communicates "that world-history began with the pride and fall of man."¹¹⁴ As such, "Adam" is the name that God gives to world-history as a whole, which sums up this history of the human race given up to its pride. Under the name of Adam, the history that proceeds is the history that, for all its variations,

¹¹¹ Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 502.

¹¹² Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 505. It is important to here underscore that Barth views "world-history" in this negative light, as adamic history, only when such history is viewed apart from Christ. In reality, argues Barth in other places, world-history is the history of Jesus Christ. Cf. Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 269-70.

¹¹³ Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 507.

¹¹⁴ Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 508.

“constantly re-enacts the little scene in the garden of Eden.”¹¹⁵ The story of the Fall, then, is a typological story that is re-enacted in the life of every human being and in the life of every nation before God. The Bible portrays Adam, by virtue of his sin, as the type of all human beings. For Barth, this Adam is only of interest for the writers of Scripture because of the sin he committed. Adam was not of interest to the biblical authors because he is the origin of the human race. Rather, the Bible is interested in Adam because he did as a “beginner” that which we all do in our own responsibility. However, Barth writes: “The only difference is that what we all are and do he was and did at the very gateway of history, and therefore he was reached first by the Word and judgment of God in a way which is typical for all his successors.”¹¹⁶ Adam is given typological significance for who human beings are and what humankind is in its act of pride. Adam’s typological significance also constitutes his relationship to his successors. As we saw in Augustine, Aquinas and in the Reformers, Adam is related to his descendants as the begetter and as the one from whom each subsequent human being receives his human nature which has been corrupted by sin. Barth rejects this account of the relationship between Adam and his successors. Instead, Adam is the type of humankind because all human beings do what Adam did first.¹¹⁷

According to Barth, we do not know that Adam’s sin is typical of human sin simply because we have an existential connection with the biblical narrative that communicates Adam’s transgression. On the contrary, such an existential connection is secondary to the truth of our sin as it is revealed in Christ. Here Barth refers directly to

¹¹⁵ Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 508. Webster, “Firmest Grasp,” 25-6, explains that by de-historicizing Adam, Barth has lifted Adam’s sin out of the realm of causality and placed it in the realm of typology.

¹¹⁶ Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 509-10.

¹¹⁷ Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 510-1.

Romans chapter 5. For Paul, as Barth reads him, Adam has significance because the biblical account of him reflects the truth of Jesus Christ. Barth writes:

In that first and isolated figure, in that one who is created and exists by the will and Word and work of God, in the great and typical sinner and debtor at the head of the whole race, in that dark representative of all his successors who bear his name, [Paul] recognized quite a different figure. This other, too, came directly from God, not as a creature only, but as the Son of God and Himself God by nature. He, too, was a sinner and debtor, but as the sinless and guiltless bearer of the sins of others, the sins of all other men. He too, was the Representative of all others. The only difference is He was not like them. He was not the *primus inter pares* in a sequence. He represented them as a genuine leader, making atonement by His obedience, covering their disobedience, justifying them before God.¹¹⁸

In addition to noting the parallel between the two Adams in their direct existence from God, Barth finds Adam to be of significance precisely in his relation to Christ. Christ does not fulfill the mold set by Adam and then reverse it. On the contrary, we know Adam and ourselves in Adam precisely by the work of Christ. Our connection to Adam is, thus, established by God himself because it is he who reveals to us, through Christ, that Adam's story represents and expresses the truth of the man of sin.

The connection that this has with our discussion of the virgin birth is as follows. First, we learn from Barth's discussion of original sin that he has rejected the Augustinian account of the transmission of original sin and has argued, instead, for a doctrine of original sin that attributes guilt directly to the responsible act of human beings in relationship to the judgment of God. As such, he no longer needs to use the virgin birth to exempt Christ from the contagion of sin. Second, through attention to Barth's doctrine of sin, we see further description of the connection between the character of sin as pride in contradicting the grace of God and the removal of the male who symbolizes prideful, willing, acting human being in relation to God's grace in the conception of Christ. Third,

¹¹⁸ Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 512.

God's judgment of sinful human acts of rebellion is that which constitutes the "No" of grace. When human beings contradict grace, they place themselves under this "No." As we recall, the virgin birth functioned for Barth as the dialectical expression of the grace and judgment of God. Finally, the typological significance of Adam in Scripture and world-history are themes that fund Barth's doctrine of the virgin birth. It is the *man*—Adam, the beginner of world-history—who is removed in the conception of Christ because of the typological significance that he bears as the man of sin.

3.6 The Sinless, Fallen Humanity of Christ

We have seen that Barth has reinterpreted the doctrine of original sin in a way that does not attempt to explain its transmission through sexual means. While it has been made clear that Barth does not view the virgin birth as the mechanism by which Christ became sinless, we shall devote a brief examination to how Barth does, in fact, construe the sinless, fallen humanity of Christ. Some interpreters of Barth, such as Riesenhuber, Berkhof and, more carefully, O'Meara, mistakenly understand Barth's rejection of the man at the conception of Jesus to imply that Barth believes the virgin birth spares Christ original sin.¹¹⁹ However, such an intention is utterly foreign to Barth, who rejects the idea of hereditary sin and, as we shall see, actually believes that Christ must exist under the conditions of sinful human flesh in order for revelation and reconciliation to take place. Again, lack of attention to the sign-character of Barth's doctrine of the virgin birth has hindered interpreters from separating the ontic and noetic function of Christ's special conception. Thus, while Barth believes that the absence of the man in Christ's conception

¹¹⁹ See Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959), 336; Riesenhuber, *Maria*, 50; O'Meara, *Mary in Protestant and Catholic Theology*, 216-7.

indicates that Jesus is not simply the product of sinful human flesh, such a birth does not spare Christ's humanity from being sinful flesh.

As we have seen in previous sections, Barth argued that the human nature assumed by the Word is real "flesh." Barth understands flesh in a particular way. It is not simply human essence and existence, but human essence and existence as they are marked by the Fall and are subject to God's judgment. Barth writes:

But what the New Testament calls σαρκῆς includes not only the concept of man in general but also the narrower concept of the man who is liable to the judgment and verdict of God, who having become incapable of knowing and loving God must incur wrath, whose existence has become one exposed to death because he has sinned against God. Flesh is the concrete form of human nature marked by Adam's fall, the concrete form of the entire world which, when seen in the light of Christ's death on the cross, must be regarded as the old world already past and gone, the form of the destroyed nature and existence of man as they have to be reconciled to God.¹²⁰

Barth argues that the affirmation of Christ's sinful flesh is required by the doctrine of revelation and reconciliation itself. In order for Christ to be accessible to us and to redeem the whole of human beings, he must have become a human being in the very situation in which we find ourselves. This is Barth's appropriation of Gregory of

¹²⁰ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 151; cf. *CD* IV/1, 175: "[T]o be flesh is to be in a state of perishing before God." Oliver Crisp argues against the coherence of the notion that Christ assumed a fallen human nature and cites Barth as a leading proponent of this view. However, Crisp evaluates Barth according to the criteria of Reformed scholasticism and the conceptions of human nature and original sin present with them. As we have seen, Barth rejects the notion of a human nature understood in abstraction from Christ and refuses to concede to a view of original sin that depends on heredity for its transmission and the imputation of guilt. Crisp does concede that there could be a notion of fallen human nature for Christ if one could coherently attribute to Christ such a nature but without also attributing any guilt to him. It should be noted that this is precisely the opposite of what Barth has envisioned. For Barth, human existence, or nature, is fallen precisely because it stands under the judgment of God. See Oliver Crisp, *Divinity and Humanity: The Incarnation Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 91, 94-6, 104. For an alternative treatment that attempts to expose the coherence of the fallenness view in relation to an Augustinian perspective on the original sin, see Ian A. McFarland, "Fallen or Unfallen? Christ's Human Nature and the Ontology of Human Sinfulness," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 10.4 (2008): 399-415.

Nazianzus' principle that "the unassumed is the unhealed."¹²¹ As we saw above, however, the situation of the "man of sin" is that in which human beings find themselves because of their responsible acts of sin. Christ, however, does not find himself to be the "man of sin" in this way. Barth staunchly maintains that Christ never sinned, but rather *voluntarily* assumed human essence as it exists under the judgment of God. Thus, there is no intrinsic impurity to Christ's flesh, nor is his human nature infected by some contagion received from his mother; it is the judgment of God upon his human essence that determines flesh as *sinful* flesh. Barth describes it in this way:

Jesus Christ is like us in our creaturely form, but also in its determination by sin and death [*Bestimmung durch Sünde und Tod*]; in our human nature, but also in its concealment under the human "un-nature" which results from the opposition of man to God....He is our Brother in which each of us can and may recognize himself as His brother, and also recognize the form and aspect of every other man...yet also his form and aspect as the man who has fallen away from God and is accused by Him and perishes under His wrath, adamic man. It is the situation of man who is the good creature of God and also flesh that the Son of God made his own when He became man.¹²²

Given what we learned about Barth's doctrine of sin and the emphasis that he places on responsibility, we can see that Barth disassociates the notion of a fallen human nature from the bondage of the will and the inevitability of sin. For Barth, to say that Christ assumed Adamic human nature is to say that the Word assumed human nature in a particular relationship or situation with God. It says nothing of the ability of the man Jesus Christ to sin or not sin, or about his intrinsic sinfulness.

¹²¹ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 152; cf. Gregory of Nazianzus, "Letter CI," in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed., Edward R. Hardy (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 218. T.F. Torrance argues that Barth's insistence on the fallenness of Christ's human flesh is part of his means of overcoming the so-called "Latin heresy," in which Torrance charges the western Christian tradition with abstracting the grace and knowledge of God from Christ and supplementing the mediation of Christ with the priesthood and sacraments etc. See Thomas F. Torrance, *Karl Barth, Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990), 213-40.

¹²² Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 27.

According to Barth, the Son takes up human essence in its fallen situation but he does not repeat or affirm the sinful existence of the flesh he takes up. For Barth, the sinlessness of Jesus does not mean that Jesus is some moral exemplar who fulfills an ethical system crafted *a priori*. Rather, Christ's sinlessness consists of his willingness to accept the judgment of God as the humiliated Son of God. By assuming flesh, Jesus Christ does not refuse to stand under God's judgment, but does so willingly.

Unlike Adam, as the second Adam, He does not wish to be as God, that in Adam's nature acknowledges before God and Adamic being, the state and position of fallen man, and bears the wrath of God which must fall upon this man, not as a fate but as a righteous necessary wrath. He does not avoid the burden of this state and position that takes the conditions and consequences upon Himself.¹²³

Barth describes Christ's voluntary assumption of the state of sin by appealing to Christ's reception of John's baptism of repentance, in which he identifies himself with the lot of human beings. In so doing, Jesus acknowledges that God is in the right and accepts God's wrath as justifiable. Barth explains: "[T]he sinlessness of Jesus demonstrated itself, and He acted in supreme knowledge of God, precisely in the fact that He did not refuse this confession, this baptism of John, but submitted to them, and therewith gave the glory unreservedly to God."¹²⁴ The baptism of Jesus marked the beginning of his confession of God's judgment, which extended through his life and ultimately culminated in his death. By proceeding along the way of his baptism to the cross Christ did what no other has done: accept the righteousness of God. This point is particularly important for understanding the relationship between the humanity of Jesus Christ, the virgin birth and

¹²³ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 157. Williams ("Barth on the Triune God," 163) explains that, "Jesus' obedience, Jesus' righteousness, consists in the willing assumption of the limitations of sinful creatureliness. Alone among men, he declines the temptation to 'impenitence,' to rebellion against these limitations....His 'free penitence,' wholly accepting the condition and consequence of sin, he begins with his baptism and culminates in the Cross."

¹²⁴ Barth, *CD*, IV/4, 58.

the status of Mary. It is not as though Christ represents human beings in the reception of revelation and reconciliation only as he is an ideal or pristine human being. Such a view would then require, in Barth's opinion, a special reception of revelation and reconciliation by a fallen human being, i.e., Mary. In Barth's view, however, Jesus Christ assumes human flesh and in it responds obediently to the judgment and grace of God.¹²⁵

For Barth, sinlessness is not a condition of the being of the man Jesus Christ, but "the human act of his life working itself out in this way from its origin."¹²⁶ Jesus Christ had no will to sin because his will was determined fully by the grace of God, and so it is quite proper to say that it is "impossible" for Jesus to have sinned. Yet this impossibility to sin is not a condition of the human essence he took up, but rather of the exaltation of that human essence by virtue of its full determination by the grace of God.¹²⁷ The impossibility for Christ to sin is thus only rightly said of the situation in which the history of Christ took place and ought not to be construed as a property of Christ's human nature. The impartation of the divine essence to the human essence of Jesus involved the exaltation of the human essence to perfect fellowship with God and perfect obedience. In virtue of being the human essence adopted by the electing grace of God in the Son, Jesus Christ is constantly given the power and authority to be obedient to God.¹²⁸ It is crucial, for Barth, to underscore the fact that this is not a matter of a metaphysical state but of the act of God and the reciprocal act of human nature unfolded in history. In this history, human essence is given a share in the triune fellowship, but a specifically *human* share in

¹²⁵ See, by contrast, Fiddes, "Mary in the Theology of Karl Barth," 123.

¹²⁶ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 92.

¹²⁷ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 93.

¹²⁸ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 97.

this fellowship.¹²⁹ Christ's sinlessness is a *grace*: "a determination of the human essence of the Son of God from the fact that it has existence in Him alone, that it is actual only in the Son of Man."¹³⁰ The sinlessness of Jesus is a result of the *communicatio gratiae* and *communicatio operationum*, which we examined above.

The One who lived as a man in this harmony with the divine will, this service of the divine act, this correspondence with divine grace, this thankfulness, had no place for sinful action. Necessarily, of course, He knew it well enough when He took our human essence. He knew it even as a tempting question addressed to Himself, as emerges clearly enough in the Gospels. But there could be no question of it ever becoming His act. Because and as He was man only as the Son of God, it was excluded from the choice of His acts. In virtue of this origin of His being, He was unable to choose it. Therefore He did not choose it. And He did not do it.¹³¹

The grace of sinlessness requires a real choice on the part of Jesus Christ. However, this choice for obedience and against sin proceeds unobstructed in Jesus Christ in virtue of the unique relationship that exists between the human and divine essence within him as described in the *communicatio gratiae*, which describes how the humanity of Christ is determined solely by the grace of God, and the *communicatio operationum*, which

¹²⁹ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 100-2.

¹³⁰ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 92.

¹³¹ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 93. Barth's discussion of the sinlessness of Christ does not hinder him from also affirming the genuineness of Christ's temptations. Rather, Barth views the temptation narratives as affirmations of Christ's true fallen humanity in its susceptibility to the onslaught of the devil. The temptations show that Jesus Christ took up his task as it had been given to him by God and was willing to fulfill it to the end, not despising human weakness and sin. See Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 259. On the one hand, Barth asserts that it was actually impossible for Jesus Christ to sin "because the eternal Word of God is immune from temptation even in the flesh." See Barth, *CD*, I/2, 158. On the other hand, Barth maintains that the flesh itself must be said to be susceptible to temptation. Barth does not attempt to resolve this tension systematically. Rather, through an exposition of the temptation narratives and the struggle that Christ underwent, Barth believes he can affirm the temptations as authentic, though ultimately overcome. The essence of the temptations was simply to convince Jesus to fulfill his task in a way other than God ordained for him. See Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 261-3. The scene of the Garden of Gethsemane, in which Barth believes Christ was again tempted to leave behind the path and judgment chosen for him by God, reveals the depths of Christ's human struggle. In his exposition of this narrative, Barth goes to great lengths to accentuate the difficulty by which the human will of Jesus conformed to the will of God (Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 264-273). See Paul Dafydd Jones, "Karl Barth on Gethsemane," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9.2 (April 2007): 148-71.

describes how the work of Christ takes place in a coordination of divine and human agency.

Once the link is severed between original sin and the notion of a disease passed on through procreation, Barth's doctrine of the virgin birth is free from bearing the function of having to establish Christ's sinlessness. Barth has no desire to set Christ up as a figure free from original sin as he has conceived it. To the contrary, it is precisely in sinful flesh that Christ has victory over sin and temptation by submitting himself to the judgment of God, the guilt and situation of which he takes on and confesses voluntarily. Christ's victory consists in his full submission to the grace of God, to which he stands in correspondence. The virgin birth, as the appropriate sign of the *anhypostatic/enhypostatic* human nature of Christ, indicates that the human nature of Christ is determined entirely by the grace of God. As such, Christ exists under the conditions of sinful flesh, but confesses the judgment of God and obeys where all other human beings disobey.

3.7 Conclusion

In the preceding account we have attempted to set out Barth's understanding of the appropriateness of the virgin birth to the mystery of the incarnation. We have seen that the virgin birth, for Barth, dialectically indicates the participation of genuine human nature in God's revelation and reconciliation—God's "Yes"—and also indicates that God stands above sinful human beings in judgment against any notion that they can bring about revelation and reconciliation themselves—God's "No." We have been specifically concerned to come to an understanding of how Barth construes Christ's humanity in relation to our humanity, given Christ's unique conception apart from a human father and his special existence as fully determined by the will of God. We have seen that in Barth's

theological anthropology it is precisely in virtue of Christ's unique assumption of human essence, elected from all eternity, that human essence as such is to be understood and interpreted. However, the precise implications that this has for the biological constitution of the humanity of Christ in relation to other human beings is left without clear comment from Barth. Furthermore, we have attempted to set out how it is that Barth construes Christ's human flesh and freedom from the act of sin without appealing to the doctrine of the virgin birth. Barth does this by reconstructing a doctrine of original sin, free from any notion of hereditary sin, which emphasizes personal responsibility and universal judgment upon all choosing against the will of God. As the elect of God, Christ bears human flesh under this judgment, confesses the judgment to be true and so lives without sin. Once the link is severed between the virgin birth, original sin and the sinless flesh of Christ, we are left to ask what function the virgin birth does have in the life of Christ. This is a question we shall take up in the conclusion to the thesis.

Chapter 4: The Conception of Jesus and the Work of the Holy Spirit

4.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter we examined Barth's understanding of the theological "fittingness" of Jesus being conceived of a virgin woman. In this chapter, we shall continue our examination of Barth's construal of the "inner necessity" of the form of Christ's birth, though here we shall focus on the claim that Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit. We shall endeavour to show that Barth describes the conception of Jesus as an event that fits with his understanding of the identity of the Holy Spirit as the bond of love within the eternal Trinity and functions as a pattern for the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christians. As such, the conception of Jesus by the Spirit informs and interprets Barth's understanding of human agency. In order to make this clear, we shall begin with an exposition of Barth's comments on the conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit in *CD I/2*, in which we shall become attuned to the pneumatological themes that we will examine further in the chapter. Following this section, we will explore Barth's description of the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Trinity, particularly his view of the Spirit as the "bond of love" that eternally unites Father to Son, human nature to the divine Son in Christ, and the church to its Lord. The bulk of this chapter, however, will consist of a survey of Barth's use of the conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit in the doctrines of revelation and reconciliation. We shall see that the spiritual conception of Jesus serves Barth as a heuristic device by which he interprets the life of the Christian, particularly as a way to describe how the Spirit enables human beings to receive the grace of Christ. Just as Mary was enabled by the Spirit to conceive Christ within her womb, so

are Christians enabled by the same Spirit to receive the revelation and reconciliation of God.

4.2 The Conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit

We begin our exposition by looking at Barth's explicit description of the conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit in *CD I/2*. What Barth has to say in this section will attune us to the themes of human agency and the action of the Spirit form the basis for Barth's use of the spiritual conception of Jesus in the remainder of the *CD*. We will remember that Barth structures his exposition of the birth of Jesus around the two clauses of the Apostles' Creed but reverses the order in which he treats them. According to Barth, the two clauses are bound together. If the virgin birth communicates the largely negative aspect of the sign of God's judgment upon sinful human beings, the conception by the Spirit communicates the positive aspect of the sign of God's grace within humankind. Both aspects of the sign are related to the mystery of the incarnation. As a sign, the *conceptus de Spiritu sancto* indicates the ground and content of the incarnation in the Triune God, whereas the *natus ex Maria virgine* indicates the form and shape of the incarnation in history.¹ By indicating the ground and content, the sign of Christ's conception by the Spirit stands closer to the thing signified than the virgin birth *per se*. And yet, Barth insists, the two statements cannot be treated in such a way as to allow the spiritual conception to refer to the thing signified and the virgin birth merely to the sign, thus separating the two and possibly making the virgin birth superfluous. In Barth's understanding, the conception of Jesus by the Spirit is the "direct citation" from Scripture (Matthew 1:18, Luke 1:35) of the miracle of Christ's human origin, whereas the virgin

¹ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 196.

birth is the “dogmatic presentation” of this event.² The former indicates the miracle itself, while the latter denotes the *form* this takes in history. The virgin birth and conception by the Spirit are the “outer” and “inner” descriptions of the miracle of the origin of Jesus Christ.³ The conception of Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit states positively what the virgin birth states negatively, namely, that God himself has acted in spite of human beings to show grace to them in the incarnation of the Son of God.

Barth insists that a proper exposition of Christ’s spiritual conception must take place in the context of the broader doctrine of the Holy Spirit. We shall endeavour to sketch Barth’s understanding of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in relationship to the conception of Jesus below. At this point, however, let it suffice that Barth’s particular view of the Holy Spirit as the Lord is that which he believes sets apart the conception of Jesus from the myths of the birth of gods and heroes in the ancient world, in which a deity mates with a human female to produce supernatural sons. The Holy Spirit, who is the Lord, is depicted in Scripture as markedly distinct from the gods of the ancient world, and so Barth devotes himself to draw out the uniqueness of the spiritual conception of Jesus. It should also be noted that Barth’s treatment here of the so-called pagan myths of divine births differs from his treatment of the topic in the *Die christliche Dogmatik*. In the *CD*, Barth interprets Christ’s conception and birth through the category of the sign, whereas in *Die christliche Dogmatik*, Barth did not avail himself of this category and so conceded the mythical character of the New Testament infancy narratives. With the

² Barth, *CD*, I/2, 196-7. As we noted in our second chapter, there appears to be a slight change in the *CD* with regard to Barth’s understanding of the relationship between the two clauses of the Apostles’ Creed. In *Credo* Barth appears to conflate the spiritual conception of Jesus with the incarnation itself, whereas in the *CD* Barth treats the spiritual conception of Jesus as a second, complementary aspect of the one sign of Christ’s human origin. See Barth, *Credo*, 63.

³ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 197.

category of the sign Barth is able to distinguish between the spiritual conception of Jesus and the conception of ancient heroes by appealing to the theological intent of each.⁴ For Barth, the fundamental difference between the conception by the Holy Spirit and these myths is most importantly that the gods spoken of in the myths are not God in the fullest and strictest sense of the term; they are not the *Lord*. Instead, they are hypostatizations of human Eros or expressions of the apotheosized male. Barth argues that these stories betray the fact that they are not true miracles because they do not function as *signs* which direct human beings to know the limits of creation and the sovereignty of the Lord.⁵ Rather, such myths and legends are at best descriptions of extraordinary occurrences within the world itself. Furthermore, Barth explains that the fact that Jesus is conceived by the Holy Spirit does not entail the Holy Spirit being Jesus' father after the manner of pagan myths. On the contrary, the Holy Spirit "overshadows" Mary (Luke 1:34), and this indicates that the conception of Jesus is removed from the realm of Eros.⁶ Along this line of reasoning, Barth finds the patristic idea that Christ was conceived by faith through the ear, rather than by lust through the sexual organs, to be a credible interpretation of the incarnation because it sets the conception by the Spirit apart from the creaturely, particularly erotic, sphere.⁷

Barth believes that Christ's divine origin is indicated theologically by the biblical reference to the Holy Spirit as the agent of Christ's conception. Thus, Barth argues that we cannot attempt to understand the spiritual conception through biological means. "By

⁴ See Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik*, 366-7.

⁵ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 197.

⁶ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 201; cf. Barth, *Faith of the Church*, 84. It would appear that the dominant interpretation in modern European theology of the conception of Jesus by the Spirit is a version of the mythical reading that Barth rejects here. Moltmann and Pannenberg, for example, view the biblical portrayal of the conception of Jesus as a primitive way to describe Christ's divine sonship and/or his life in the Spirit of God. See Pannenberg, *Jesus*, 141-50; Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 78-87.

⁷ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 201.

being called the work of the Holy Spirit the conception of Christ is actually withdrawn from any analogy save the analogy of faith and, like every genuine miracle, from any explanation of its How.”⁸ Thus, the conception of Jesus by the Spirit must be understood in analogy with the Spirit’s work at the creation of the world (Romans 11:36), the rebirth of Christians (John 1:13; 1 John 3:9), and the baptism of Jesus and his resurrection (Mark 1:9f., cf. John 1:32; Romans 1:4). In each of these instances, the work of the Spirit “obviously does not signify the *causa materialis*, the substantial procession of the world or of Christians from the being of God, but the *causa efficiens* of their existence, the transcendent ground of their being.”⁹ In the same way as the Spirit works in these other spheres, his work is best understood as the efficient cause of the origin of Jesus. In the Holy Spirit’s work of creation and regeneration “he imparts to human nature a capacity, a power for Himself, which it does not possess of itself and which it could not devise for itself.”¹⁰ Just as the Holy Spirit did in creation, and just as the Holy Spirit does in the regeneration of Christians, so does the Holy Spirit work in the conception of Jesus, whereby human nature is prepared and enabled to receive the Word of God. This act of the Holy Spirit is the effecting of a new beginning within creation that sets aside all supposed parallels in the created order, including instances of parthenogenesis or the myths of human Eros.¹¹

Barth argues that the significance of the Holy Spirit being named in the conception of Jesus is twofold. First, mention of the Holy Spirit locates the origin of the

⁸ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 201. For an excellent discussion of the relationship between the analogy of faith and the analogy of being in Barth’s theology, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. Edward T. Oakes (1992), 108-13.

⁹ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 200.

¹⁰ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 201.

¹¹ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 198. Interestingly, Barth does not use the conception of Jesus to help him to elucidate the doctrine of creation in *CD* III/1 as he does when he treats the doctrine of reconciliation in *CD* IV.

human nature of Jesus Christ in the mystery of God himself. It tells us that God himself “creates a possibility, a power, a capacity, and assigns it to man, where otherwise there would be sheer impossibility.”¹² Second, mention of the Holy Spirit in the conception of Jesus ties together reconciled human beings with the person of the reconciler. Both owe their origin to the work of the Holy Spirit. “For it is on this ground that the same work, the same preparation of man for God by God Himself, can happen to us also, in the form of pure grace, the grace manifested in Jesus Christ, which meets us and is bestowed upon us in Him.”¹³ In this light it is particularly appropriate for the Holy Spirit to be the one named as effecting Christ’s conception. Barth understands the Holy Spirit to be the person of the Trinity who opens creation to God and bestows upon it creaturely freedom for divine fellowship.

The Holy Spirit is God Himself in His freedom exercised in revelation to be present to His creature, even to dwell in him personally, and thereby to achieve his meeting with Himself in His Word and by this achievement to make [this meeting] possible. Through the Holy Spirit and only through the Holy Spirit can man be *there for God* [*für Gott da sein*], be free for God’s work on him, believe, be a recipient of His revelation, the object of the divine reconciliation. In the Holy Spirit and only in the Holy Spirit has man the evidence and guarantee [*Zeugnis und Bürgschaft*] that he really participates in God’s revealing and reconciling action. Through the Holy Spirit and only through the Holy Spirit does God make his claim on us effective [*Anspruch an uns wirksam*], to be our one Lord, our one teacher, our one Leader [*Führer*]. . . . The freedom which the Holy Spirit gives us in this understanding and in this sphere—gives, so far as it is His own freedom and so far as He gives us nothing else and no less than Himself—is the freedom of the Church, of the children of God.¹⁴

As we shall see, this theme of the Holy Spirit as the creator of the human capacity for fellowship with God is repeated throughout the *CD*. It is rooted in Barth’s doctrine of the identity of the Spirit and is of the utmost importance in understanding Barth’s view of

¹² Barth, *CD*, I/2, 199.

¹³ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 200.

¹⁴ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 198. Emphasis added.

human agency. The Holy Spirit is that which makes human beings free and capable for God. That the Spirit does this is related directly to the fact that the Spirit is the principle of the unity of the being of the Father and the Son within the holy Trinity itself, as we shall see below. Furthermore, this same Spirit that binds Father to Son and human beings to God is the Spirit that binds the Word to the human nature assumed by him. Barth writes:

It is this freedom of the Holy Spirit and in the Holy Spirit that is already involved in the incarnation of the Word of God, in the assumption of human nature by the Son of God, in which we have to recognize the real ground [*Realgrund*] of the freedom of the children of God, the real ground of all conception of revelation, all lordship of grace over man, the real ground of the Church. The very possibility of human nature's being adopted into unity with the Son of God is the Holy Ghost. Here, then, at this fontal point in revelation, the Word of God is not without the Spirit of God. And here already there is the togetherness of Spirit and Word. Through the Spirit it becomes really possible for the creature, for man, *to be there and to be free for God* [*daß der Mensch für Gott da ist und frei ist*]. Through the Spirit flesh, human nature, is assumed into unity with the Son of God. Through the Spirit this Man can be God's Son and at the same time the Second Adam and as such "the firstborn among many brethren" (Romans 8:29), the prototype [*der Prototyp*] of all who are set free for His sake and through faith in Him. As in Him human nature is made the bearer of revelation, so in us it is made the recipient of it, not by its own power, but by the power conferred on it by the Spirit, who according to 2 Corinthians 3:17 is Himself the Lord.¹⁵

As Barth describes it, the spiritual conception of Jesus requires us to look back to the identity of the Holy Spirit in eternity, and also to look forward to the way in which the Holy Spirit works in the human appropriation of revelation and reconciliation. While we shall attempt to exposit both directions in which the spiritual conception of Jesus points, we must note here that Barth identifies the action and presence of the Holy Spirit at the origin of the life of Jesus as bearing a profound congruity with the identity and work of the Holy Spirit overall. As Barth describes it, Christ's spiritual conception bears a

¹⁵ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 199. Emphasis added. Cf. Barth, *Credo*, 70.

prototypical function that helps us to understand the Spirit's work upon other human beings.

All this is naturally in view of the event in the existence of Jesus which radically precedes and is the primary realization [*primären Verwirklichung*] of every such event among men. The sign of this primary realization of grace is the Virgin birth of Christ especially in view of His conception by the Holy Spirit.¹⁶

Insofar as the incarnation, life and death of the Son of God is the event of grace, the virginal and spiritual conception of Jesus serve as a sign that orders the communication of grace by the power of the Holy Spirit to other human beings. That which happened in the life of Jesus by the Spirit is the prototype of an analogous event in the lives of other human beings. We shall investigate this further below.

We recall from our treatment of the *Göttingen Dogmatics* and *Die christliche Dogmatik* in Chapter Two that Barth explicated in detail the various aspects of the Spirit's work upon the human nature assumed by the Word. But unlike his procedure in those earlier treatments, Barth does not go into detail in the *CD* in expounding the protestant scholastic description of the Spirit's work in the conception of Jesus.¹⁷ This marks a minor but telling change in Barth's doctrine of the virgin birth. In the *CD*, Barth merely cites a quotation, as if by way of illustration, from the scholastic J. Gerhard that baldly states three aspects of the Spirit's work in the conception of Jesus: the *formatio*, *sanctificatio* and *assumptio* of the human nature of Christ. The reason for this shift in the *CD* is tied directly to Barth's understanding of the spiritual conception of Jesus as a sign. As a sign, the importance of the spiritual conception for Barth is not to be found in the

¹⁶ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 199. Riesenhuber perceptively and, for the most part, correctly develops the prototypical and paradigmatic aspect of Barth's treatment of the conception of Jesus by the Spirit. However, he makes the error of conflating the conception of Jesus by the Spirit with the role of Mary. For Barth, that which is prototypical and paradigmatic is *not* Mary herself, but rather the form of the *Spirit's work* in the life of Jesus Christ. The center, as always for Barth, is Jesus Christ, the elect Son of God. Riesenhuber's otherwise helpful treatment falters at this crucial point. See Riesenhuber, *Maria*, 57-63.

¹⁷ Barth, *GD*, 165-7.

details of *how* the conception occurred, but in that to which the sign *refers*. However, it is Barth's lack of development of the precise work of the Holy Spirit in the conception of Jesus that leads Thomas Smail to conclude that Barth

is interested in the *conceptus de Spiritu sancto* less for what it tells us about the constitution of Christ's person and the Trinitarian relationships in which he stands, than for what it tells us about how the human nature that he assumed became *capax Dei*, and how by analogy our human nature also is capable of coming into relationship with God. In other words, the virgin birth is of prime importance to Barth because he perceives in it the historical enactment of the central principles of his pneumatology.¹⁸

As we shall see below, however, Barth's understanding of the spiritual conception of Jesus is tied directly to who the Spirit is in eternity and, precisely because of this, the spiritual conception also allows us to understand the Spirit's work in regeneration. The reason that Barth does not exposit the scholastic schema for how the Spirit works on the human nature of Christ is because he is so cautious about taking away from the sheer miraculous nature of the event of the incarnation, or, for that matter, the regeneration of Christians. If the incarnation or regeneration could be reduced to a definable process, Barth believes that it could be mistakenly thought of as mastered through human reason or technique. This conviction appears to mute Barth's comments on the human experience of life in the Spirit, which we shall see particularly with regard to Mary in the following chapter and with Christian spirituality generally, as we shall explore in the conclusion.

Rather than following the protestant scholastics in delineating the various aspects of the work of the Holy Spirit on the flesh of Christ, Barth argues that the only way to understand the Spirit's work is through the analogy of faith. As we saw above, Barth lists

¹⁸ Thomas A. Smail, "The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit," in *Theology Beyond the Christendom: Essays on the Centenary of the Birth of Karl Barth May 10, 1886*, ed. John Thompson (Allison Park, PN: Pickwick, 1986), 94.

three analogous acts of the Holy Spirit to which the conception of Jesus might be profitably compared: revelation, reconciliation and redemption. In the conception of Jesus, as in the works of revelation, reconciliation and redemption, the Holy Spirit acts upon human nature to enable it to receive God himself. For Barth, we can only understand the spiritual by the spiritual, not by trying to map the work of the Spirit upon the biology of human reproduction, as did Aquinas and the protestant scholastics after him. The conception of Jesus Christ is a sign: it must be interpreted in relation to the divine actions to which it refers, not to human biology. As we proceed to fill out Barth's exposition of the conception of Jesus by the Spirit, we shall follow his direction to look back to who the Holy Spirit is as the Lord and to look forward to how the Holy Spirit works in salvation history. By doing so, the tantalizing suggestions that Barth has made here in *CD I/2* can be seen in their coherence with Barth's wider pneumatology.

4.3 The Holy Spirit: the Bond of Love

We have seen that when Barth exposit the spiritual conception of Jesus he directs his readers to the eternal identity of the Holy Spirit in the triune life of God, as well as the Spirit's work of regeneration in the life of Christians. In this section, we shall investigate the former—the role of the Holy Spirit in the immanent Trinity—in order to come to a fuller understanding of the importance of the Holy Spirit in the conception of Jesus. We shall see that Barth arrives at his conclusions about the eternal identity of the Holy Spirit through analysis of the Spirit's work in the economy of salvation. While Barth views the spiritual conception of Jesus as manifesting and exemplifying the identity and work of the Holy Spirit, it also causes Barth significant difficulty in his attempt to read the immanent Trinity off of the economic Trinity.

Our discussion of the identity of the Holy Spirit will focus on *CD* I/1, §12. In this section, Barth attempts to answer the question, “How do men come to say ‘Jesus is Lord?’” According to Barth, such a confession is actually impossible for human beings. To prove his point, Barth refers to various passages of Scripture to show us that human beings only receive the Word of God through the work of God himself.¹⁹ In Barth’s view, the New Testament depiction of the economy of salvation names the Holy Spirit as the one who enables human beings to receive revelation and establishes them in fellowship with God.²⁰ Barth writes:

The Spirit of God is God in His freedom to be present to the creature, and therefore to create this relation, and therefore to be the life of the creature. And God’s Spirit, the Holy Spirit, especially in revelation is God Himself to the extent that He cannot only come to man but also be in man, and thus open up man and make him capable and ready for Himself [*und so den Menschen für sich selbst öffnen und fähig machen*] and thus achieve His revelation in him.²¹

For Barth, the Holy Spirit is that mode of God’s being we know by virtue of the fact that human beings receive revelation. Apart from this work, revelation would either have no purchase within human life or would presuppose the deification of human beings alongside of God. Barth rejects both possibilities. The Holy Spirit allows human beings to participate in the revelation and reconciliation of God while also maintaining the proper distinction between God and human beings.²² There is, for Barth, a marked difference between the regenerated children of God and the one true Son of God. The

¹⁹ Barth lists Matthew 16:17; John 6:45, 65; 10:29; and especially John 1:12-13; 3:3. See Barth, *CD*, I/1, 449.

²⁰ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 450. Williams (“Barth on the Triune God,” 147-93) argues that by locating the doctrine of the Trinity within the doctrine of revelation, which presupposes a view of language as self-expression, Barth has inadvertently constructed a view of God as a modern subject. While this allows Barth to make sense of the relationship between the Father and the Son, it makes a third-party, the Holy Spirit, problematic. Williams suggests, however, that Barth attempts to nuance this in the later volumes of the *CD*.

²¹ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 450. Busch explains that, for Barth, a theology of revelation abstracted from the work of the Holy Spirit would become a metaphysics, the significance of which would ultimately be left to the decision of human beings. See Busch, *Great Passion*, 222.

²² Barth, *CD*, I/1, 462.

being of Christians as children of God is mediated by the eternal sonship of Jesus Christ, as the Holy Spirit frees human beings for the grace of the Son of God.²³ In this regard, Barth describes the sonship of Jesus Christ as the basis, ground, and “prototype” of the sonship of Christians.²⁴ As such, human beings must be “reborn” by the Spirit in order to be made children of God in direct correlation to the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who received his human origin from, and lives by the power of the Spirit. The naming of the Holy Spirit in revelation describes the being of Christians as entirely dependent upon and “enclosed” within the act of God.²⁵

After delineating the role of the Holy Spirit in the economy of God’s self-revelation as it is described in Scripture, Barth goes on to discuss the deity of the Holy Spirit under the heading “The Eternal Spirit.” Here Barth argues that what the Holy Spirit is in the act of God’s revelation, he is antecedently in himself. The Holy Spirit “does in time what He does eternally in God.”²⁶ This is the method that Barth has used throughout his exposition of the doctrine of the Trinity in *CD I/1* in which the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity are treated as distinct, but in inseparable correspondence. Central to Barth’s argument is the New Testament description of the Spirit as the Spirit of the Son; apart from this relationship the revelation of the Spirit could be viewed as carrying some independent content.²⁷ As we shall see, for Barth, the conception of Jesus by the Spirit plays a significant, though problematic, role in establishing the relationship between the

²³ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 457.

²⁴ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 458.

²⁵ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 462.

²⁶ Barth, *CD*, I.1, 471. Hunsinger writes: “The mediation of the Spirit thus moves in two directions at once: from the eternal Trinity through Jesus Christ to humankind, and from humankind through Jesus Christ to the eternal Trinity. It is a mediation of communion—of love and knowledge, and of knowledge in love—as the origin and goal of all things, made possible by the saving work of Christ.” George Hunsinger, “Mediator of Communion: Karl Barth’s Doctrine of the Holy Spirit,” in *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 179.

²⁷ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 452-3.

Spirit and the Son. According to him, the New Testament depicts the Spirit's work as appropriating the revelation of the Son in human life, and so their ontological relationship must reflect the union of their acts in history. As integral to God's act of revelation, the Holy Spirit must be viewed as in no way inferior to Jesus Christ and the Father.²⁸ The differentiation between the Spirit and the Son is also required in order that the objective reality of revelation and the subjective reality of revelation can be distinguished.²⁹

The main implication, for Barth, of the deity of the Holy Spirit is that there can be no question of human beings contributing to revelation from something within themselves.³⁰ This would be unacceptable, in his view, because it runs directly counter to the teaching of the New Testament and to Barth's conviction that God can only be known through God. The deity of the Holy Spirit radically limits the sort of participation that human beings can have in revelation and so secures revelation as an act of God himself.

Barth writes:

By the doctrine of the deity and autonomy of the Spirit's divine mode of being man is, as it were, challenged in his own house....The dogma of the Holy Spirit means recognition that in every respect man can be present at God's revelation only as a servant is present at his master's work, i.e., following, obeying, imitating and serving, and that this relation—as distinct from that of human servant and master—cannot be reversed in any way or at any point.³¹

It is this truth that is captured by the Nicene-Constantinople Creed's description of the Holy Spirit as "Lord" and that is so important for Barth's doctrine of the virgin birth and for his understanding of the Christian life. The identity of the Spirit as the Lord, as we saw above, sets the spiritual conception of Jesus apart from all pagan mythology and, as

²⁸ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 459-60.

²⁹ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 451.

³⁰ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 468.

³¹ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 468.

we shall see, orders Barth's conception of human agency as activated by and following upon divine grace.

Barth goes on to describe the relationship of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit with reference to the manner by which the Holy Spirit shares in the lordship of God. He explains that the Son and the Father exist in a relation of mutual reciprocity, "a being to and from and with one another." It is precisely the bond of this relationship that is the Holy Spirit.

The specific element in the divine mode of being of the Holy Spirit thus consists, paradoxically enough, in the fact that He is the common factor [*Gemeinsame*] in the mode of being of God the Father and that of God the Son. He is what is common to them, not in so far as they are the one God, but in so far as they are the Father and the Son....He is the common element [*Gemeinsame*], or, better, the fellowship [*Gemeinschaft*], the act of communion [*Gemeinsamseins*], of the Father and the Son. He is the act in which the Father is the Father of the Son or the Speaker of the Word and the Son is the Son of the Father or the Word of the Speaker.³²

In his discussion of the identity of the Holy Spirit Barth describes the Spirit as the common *relationship* of the Father and the Son, not as the common essence of the Father and the Son. In this regard, Barth cites Ephesians 4:3 and approvingly mentions Augustine, who described the Holy Spirit as the love or mutual gift—the *vinculum pacis*—between the Father and the Son.³³ As we shall see, this description of the Holy

³² Barth, *CD*, I/1, 469-70. For Barth, it is inappropriate to use the term "person" in relation to the Father and Son, but impossible in relation to the Holy Spirit because of the manner by which the Holy Spirit exists as God. Rather, with respect to their interrelation, Barth describes the Father, Son and Holy Spirit with the term "mode of being" (*Seinswissen*). Migliore suggests here that Barth mistakenly abandoned the use of the term person due to modernity's use of it when he could have critically "enlisted" it for constructive theological use. By failing to do so, Barth compromised the agency of the Spirit. See Daniel L. Migliore, "Vinculum Pacis: Karl Barths Theologie des Heiligen Geistes," *Evangelische Theologie* 60.2 (2000): 135-6.

³³ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 486-7; cf. *CD*, IV/2, 757. It is to be noted, however, that Barth does not hold to a twofold origin of the Holy Spirit; rather, there is a single origin, which is the relationship of the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father-and-Son in their mutual relation. See David Guretzki, *Karl Barth on the Filioque* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 127-8.

Spirit in the life of the Trinity is decisive for how Barth understands the Spirit's work of uniting the divine Son to human flesh and uniting Christians to Christ.

Barth devotes a significant amount of attention to the procession of the Spirit, especially the *filioque* clause, and it is here that he must deal explicitly with the spiritual conception of Jesus. Barth understands this element of the Creed to rule out any notion that the Holy Spirit could be a creature: "What proceeds from God can only be God once again."³⁴ Furthermore, the description of the Holy Spirit as proceeding from the Father and the Son indicates the difference between the Son and the Holy Spirit. This means that there are not two Sons in the triune God because the Son and the Holy Spirit relate to the Father in different ways, either as begotten or as proceeding from him.³⁵ In spite of the notorious history of the East-West schism, Barth accepts the *filioque* clause as a helpful clarification of the relationship between the Son and the Father.³⁶ The main reason that Barth gives for affirming the *filioque* clause is that it accords with his perception of the identity of the Holy Spirit as he has set it out thus far. It is a methodological principle for Barth that the work of the divine mode of being in the world must correspond to who God is in himself.³⁷ The fact that Scripture unequivocally names the Spirit as the Spirit of the Son and the Spirit of the Father is sufficient reason to tie this affirmation back to who

³⁴ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 473.

³⁵ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 474. Barth, like Augustine before him, believes that the precise difference between begetting and procession is beyond human expression. The different terms are used in order to acknowledge that a distinction between them exists in fact. To go any further would be to go beyond revelation. See Barth, *CD*, I/1, 475-6.

³⁶ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 477-8.

³⁷ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 479. Guretzki argues that Barth's doctrine of the *filioque* is derived exclusively from Barth's analysis of revelation and is not, as many interpreters of Barth have thought, an independent methodological principle. Guretzki has shown this by tracing what Barth believes is the root concern addressed by the *filioque* into his early dogmatic lectures and his commentary on the epistle to the Romans. According to Guretzki, Barth viewed the *filioque* as a helpful dogmatic description of the dialectical relationship between the Father and the Son revealed in Scripture. The Holy Spirit, who proceeds from their common mode of being, is the boundary and bond of their fellowship. See Guretzki, *Filioque*, 179-83; cf. Migliore, *Vinculum Pacis*, 134-5.

the Holy Spirit is in eternity.³⁸ The eastern rejection of the *filioque*, for Barth, is to be rejected itself because it ultimately amounts to speculation in that it refuses to maintain a link between the immanent and economic Trinity, thus leaving an unknown God behind the back of the God who reveals himself in revelation. Yet, for Barth, this is no mere theoretical defect. It has material significance because it leaves the eastern perspective with no ontological ground by which to maintain the human fellowship with God in God's fellowship within himself.³⁹ The *filioque* is thus the affirmation that the reception of revelation and reconciliation among human beings by the work of the Holy Spirit is grounded in the divine being itself. There is simply no opportunity for "slippage" in God's work of revelation because it is entirely consistent with who God is in himself. The *filioque* clause signifies, for Barth, that the love that is displayed to human beings in reconciliation is none other than the love that is shared between the Father and the Son.⁴⁰ When human beings encounter this Spirit, they encounter the Spirit that is the bond of love in God himself. This love is such that in its existence in eternity it forges a fellowship that maintains the distinctiveness of the other. As such, there is no collapsing of God into human beings or vice versa, just as there is no collapsing of the Father and the Son in their eternal relationship. This is not simply the supreme principle of

³⁸ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 480.

³⁹ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 480.

⁴⁰ *CD*, I/1, 483. Barth writes: "As He is the Father who begets the Son He brings forth the Spirit of love, for as He begets the Son, God already negates in Himself, from all eternity, in His absolute simplicity, all loneliness, self-containment, or self-isolation. Also and precisely in Himself, from eternity, in His absolute simplicity, God is oriented to the Other, does not will to be without the Other, will have Himself only as He has Himself with the Other and indeed in the Other. He is the Father of the Son in such a way that with the Son He brings forth the Spirit, love, and is in Himself the Spirit, love." Migliore (*Vinculum Pacis*, 132-52) argues that Barth's characterization of the Spirit as the bond of love or bond of peace causes ambiguity in the agency of the Holy Spirit. Rather than exercising an active agency, the Holy Spirit is portrayed as also purely passive, though sometimes Barth attributes the Holy Spirit more agency than his doctrinal construction of the Holy Spirit would allow. Cf. Williams, "Triune God," 169-71.

separateness in fellowship, but love which affirms the other in difference; God is oriented to the other eternally.⁴¹

Barth's affirmation of the *filioque* has significance for his understanding of the virgin birth because Barth believes that the spiritual conception of Jesus manifests the identity of the Spirit, and this includes his relationship to the Son. The Spirit, as the "bond and boundary" between the Father and the Son, is likewise the bond and boundary between the human and divine essence of Jesus. The conception of Jesus, however, is not without its problems for Barth's doctrine of the *filioque*.

Barth's affirmation of the *filioque* on the basis of his conviction that the immanent Trinity is irrevocably connected with the economic Trinity is both illustrated and problematized with his doctrine of the spiritual conception of Jesus. On the one hand, the spiritual conception of Jesus reveals in a particularly vivid fashion the intimate relationship between the incarnate Son and the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, at least on a surface reading, the biblical depiction of Christ's conception appears to work counter to Barth's affirmation of the *filioque*. If the economic Trinity is identical with the immanent Trinity, then does not the fact that Jesus owes his origin to the Holy Spirit necessitate a relationship in eternity in which the Holy Spirit is the origin of the Son? Thomas Smail, for example, holds that Barth is inconsistent for not reading back into the immanent Trinity the relationship between the Spirit and the Son as it is depicted in the conception of Jesus.⁴² To this objection Barth concedes that the New Testament description of the

⁴¹ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 484.

⁴² Smail, "Holy Spirit," 107-8. Fiddes ("Mary," 121) suggests that one might read back an eternal motherhood of God from the earthly motherhood of Mary, thus constructing a Barthian Mariology of sorts. Such a proposal, however, greatly transgresses Barth's clear fundamental distinction between the eternal triune God and the finite human creatures and leads, it would seem, to pantheism or panentheism. Barth's doctrine of the humanity of God can hardly be put to such use.

origin of Jesus Christ from the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35; Matthew 1:18, 20) is indeed just as clear as the New Testament passages that describe the sending of the Holy Spirit by Jesus, which the western church has used as the biblical ground for the *filioque*.⁴³ He draws a distinction, however, between the bringing forth of an essence *in its origin* and the bringing forth of an essence *through another, different essence* already in existence. Whereas the origin of the Holy Spirit in eternity is determined by the relationship between the Father and the Son, the human nature of Jesus is taken from Mary. In the conception of Jesus, the human nature of Jesus is the object of the Spirit's action, not the Word of God himself. For Barth, this differentiates the sending of the Spirit, in which Jesus acts directly upon the Spirit, from the conception of Jesus in the epistemological movement from the economy to the immanent Trinity. Barth writes:

The begetting and breathing are bringing forth from the essence of the Father, or of the Father and the Son, but not from another essence. But the bringing forth of the Holy Spirit described in the [the conception of Jesus] is always a bringing forth from some other essence whose existence is presupposed.⁴⁴

In order to describe this from another angle, Barth appeals to John 3, in which the birth of the Spirit is depicted as a new birth—a regeneration—accomplished by the divine Spirit, but performed upon a human being whose existence is presupposed. Similarly, at the baptism (Mark 1:9f.) and resurrection (Romans 1:3) of Jesus, Christ does not receive his being as the Son of God in his divine nature, but in these events he is named as the Son of God in his human nature.⁴⁵ The case is the same with the conception by the Spirit. Here the Holy Spirit is said to take human nature from Mary and bring it into unity with the Word of God in order that the Word becomes flesh. The Spirit's work on the flesh of

⁴³ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 485.

⁴⁴ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 485.

⁴⁵ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 486.

Jesus Christ is not determinative for the relationship of the Holy Spirit and the Son in eternity. However, the specific manner by which the Holy Spirit works on the human nature of Jesus Christ does have importance for the life of the children of God. Barth describes the manner by which the Holy Spirit works upon the human nature of the Son as a “prototype” of the work of the Spirit on other human beings in their regeneration through which they become children of God. Barth writes:

What is ascribed to the Holy Spirit in the birth of Christ is the assumption of human existence in the Virgin Mary into unity with God in the mode of being of the Logos. That this is possible, that this other, this being as man, this flesh, is *there for God*, for fellowship and even unity with God [*dieser Menschsein dieser Fleisch für Gott, für die Gemeinschaft ja Einheit mit Gott da ist*], that flesh can be the Word when the Word becomes flesh, is the work of the Holy Spirit in the birth of Christ. But the work of the Spirit is prototypical [*prototypisch*] of the work of the Spirit in the coming into being of the children of God [*im Werden der Kinder Gottes*]; in the same way, not directly but indirectly, *per adoptionem*, in faith in Christ, we become that which we are not by nature, namely, children of God. On the other hand, this work of the Spirit is not ectypal [*ectypisch*] of the work of the Spirit on the Son of God Himself. What the Son “owes” to the Spirit in revelation is His being as man, the possibility of the flesh existing for Him so that He, the Word, can become flesh.⁴⁶

We shall attempt to elucidate the manner by which the conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit functions as a prototype for the rebirth of Christians in the remainder of the chapter. Here, however, we simply intend to set out the relation of type and prototype. We emphasize here that this relationship is ultimately rooted in the very being of God the Holy Spirit, the bond of love between the Father and the Son. Just as the Holy Spirit maintains the unity and difference between the Father and the Son, so does the Holy Spirit work upon human nature to bring it into union with the Son, and so does the Holy Spirit work upon other human beings to bring them into fellowship with God. The knowledge of the Holy Spirit as the bond of love in the eternal Trinity is derived from the

⁴⁶ Barth, *CD*, I/1, 486.

work of the Spirit in the world. The conception of Jesus by the Spirit is an exemplary case of the Spirit's work, for Barth, because it reflects the unity of the Son and Spirit in eternity and also how the Spirit works on human flesh in the regeneration of Christians.

4.4 The Conception of Jesus and the Reception of Revelation

In the previous sections we saw indications that Barth viewed the conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit as a prototype for the rebirth of Christians. The prototypical event of Christ's conception is predicated upon the eternal relationship of the Holy Spirit to the Father and the Son as the bond of love. As we shall see, Barth develops the prototypical function of the conception of Jesus in several places in the *CD*. In this section, we shall examine Barth's description of the subjective reception of revelation as a miracle and mystery in correspondence to the miracle and mystery of Christmas—the virgin birth and the incarnation. Through attention to the “incarnational analogy,” which shapes Barth's understanding of the human reception of revelation, we shall be able to detect his use of the virgin birth in the life of Christians.⁴⁷ We shall see that when Barth describes the reception of revelation as a miracle, he refers back to his treatment of the virgin birth, in which he describes the miraculous origin of the human life of Jesus by the Spirit. This same Holy Spirit accomplishes a miracle in the life of Christians as they receive the Word of God.

⁴⁷ Hunsinger describes wonderfully the incarnational analogy as the “Chalcedonian pattern” by which to understand the relationship between divine and human agency. He writes: “The [Chalcedonian pattern] itself posits a relationship of asymmetry, intimacy, and integrity between God and the human being. It posits a fellowship of mutual self-giving, mediated in and by Jesus Christ. This fellowship occurs as an absolute miracle, because it subjects the human being to a kind of *Aufhebung*. The human being is affirmed in wholeness, cancelled in sin and mere finitude, and taken up into an inconceivable fellowship of participation in the eternal life of God. The fellowship therefore also occurs as an absolute miracle, because it draws the human being into an event that is unique in kind and that thus surpasses all understanding.... The miracle and mystery of double agency is thus understood to be patterned after the great miracle and mystery of the Incarnation, in which the former finds its basis, limit, and final hope.” Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 223; cf. Philip J. Rosato, *The Spirit as Lord: The Pneumatology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981), 68-9; Smail, “Holy Spirit,” 94-5, 101.

We shall focus our discussion on *CD I/2*, §16, “The Freedom of Man for God.” In paragraphs §13-15 of *CD I/2*, Barth devoted himself to describing the “objective” reality of revelation. In that section, Barth established that the reality and possibility of God’s act of revelation lay in the personal presence of God in the human flesh of Jesus Christ. It was as a capstone to that section that Barth described the virginal conception of Jesus by the Spirit as the miracle that marks the mystery of the incarnation. In the section with which we are presently occupied, Barth turns his attention to the “subjective reality” of revelation and the manner in which revelation can be acknowledged and received by human beings.⁴⁸

Barth begins his discussion of the subjective reception of revelation by alerting his readers to the fact that Scripture describes people who believe and obey the Word of God.⁴⁹ The content of Scripture is not God alone and in abstraction from human beings, but God in relation to human beings and human beings in relation to God. Scripture calls those who have believed and obeyed the Word the church. In the New Testament, the existence of the church—the body of Christ, which is Barth’s favourite ecclesiological metaphor—is described by Barth as derived solely from the incarnate Word. This has the following implications. First, the existence of the church is a “repetition” of the incarnation among human beings. Though “heterogenous” with the incarnation and in no sense to be understood as its continuation or extension, the church exists as the body of Christ in history.⁵⁰ Second, as the body of Christ and as the “repetition” of the incarnation, the existence of the church excludes any possible autonomy from Christ.

⁴⁸ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 204.

⁴⁹ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 206.

⁵⁰ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 215. For an excellent exposition of the Chalcedonian logic that orders the relationship between Christ and the church in the theology of Karl Barth, see Kimlyn Bender, *Karl Barth’s Christological Ecclesiology* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005).

Barth describes the existence of the church in relation to Christ as *anhypostatic*, existing in a manner similar to the existence of the human nature of Christ in relation to the Son.⁵¹ Third, the church is essentially communal because each member depends for their existence and on-going life on their union with Christ.⁵² Fourth and finally, just as the life of Jesus is both a visible and invisible reality, so the life of the church is invisible, in virtue of its divine election, but visible, in virtue of its taking shape in history.⁵³ Barth understands this exposition of the church to rule out any possibility that the church can be thought of as a production of human beings. Rather, the existence of the church is a mystery akin to the incarnation. The manner by which Barth describes the church in relation to the incarnation suggests that there will be a corresponding analogy between the church and the virgin birth. Barth draws out the correspondence by referring to the miracle of the human reception of revelation.

Barth asserts that the agent of the mystery of the church—that human beings receive the power to become children of God (John 1:12)—is none other than the mystery of Pentecost, who is the Holy Spirit.⁵⁴ Barth expositis this mystery by following two lines of thought. First, Barth asks how it is that revelation comes from Christ to human beings, and second, Barth asks how it is that human beings receive this revelation. The first question is that of the objective nature of the human reception of revelation. Revelation involves the use of signs by which revelation veils itself in order to unveil itself to the human creature.⁵⁵ The signs which Barth has in mind are particularly baptism, the Lord's

⁵¹ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 216.

⁵² Barth, *CD*, I/2, 217-8.

⁵³ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 219.

⁵⁴ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 221-2.

⁵⁵ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 223.

Supper, and the preaching of the Word, which were given once for all in the apostolate.⁵⁶ These creaturely signs, by virtue of the determination which they acquire from God, are pressed into instrumental service by which God testifies to himself.⁵⁷ Through these signs God works mediately by using creaturely reality to communicate himself. And yet, because it is God himself who works directly in these signs, God can be said to work immediately.⁵⁸

Barth's description of divine sign-giving for the human reception of revelation is complemented by his discussion of how it is that human beings actually receive the revelation of God in the signs. This is the second part of the subjective reality of revelation. According to Barth, human beings who have come to receive revelation through the divine sign-giving have done so by the work of the Holy Spirit. The naming of the Holy Spirit here denotes a mystery. Barth avers there can be no other explanation than the Holy Spirit for how the divine sign-giving can be made effectual in human life or we risk making revelation a possibility latent within the human being himself. According to Barth, human beings cannot be said to be God's "partner and workmate" [*Partner und Werkgenosse*] in revelation, nor is there anything implicit within human beings that would suggest that they could be free for the Word. On the contrary, human beings are activated in their belief by the power of the Spirit in a way that is in correspondence with the mystery of the incarnation and the miracle of the virgin birth. Barth writes:

The fact that man's existence is involved does not mean that we can ascribe to man or to these particular men, the role of autonomous partners or workmates with God operating in the work of revelation [*die Rolle selbständiger*

⁵⁶ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 228-32.

⁵⁷ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 224.

⁵⁸ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 227. As we shall see in our treatment of Christ's prophetic office in CD IV/3 later in this chapter, Barth will move away from this description of the creaturely mediation of divine revelation.

Gegenspieler Gottes, von Werkgenossen am Wirk der Offenbarung zu geschrieben werden solle]. Man's existence is involved only as the humanity of Christ is necessarily involved in the doctrine of the incarnation, the *virgo Maria* and the doctrine of the mystery of the incarnation.⁵⁹

Just as in the incarnation in which Mary was present to the sovereign action of grace apart from any merit or her dignity of her own, so all human beings are present in the work of the Holy Spirit for the reception of revelation. This is a mystery, before which the only suitable response is “a proper awe.”⁶⁰ Barth's use of “mystery” in this regard further develops the parallel between the incarnation and the reception of revelation by the Holy Spirit. As we shall see, the incarnation and the work of the Spirit correspond both materially and in form. Ultimately, this is because the subjective reality of revelation is never to be separated from its objective reality, for Barth, because of the eternal union between the Son and the Spirit.⁶¹

In order for Barth to explain the extent to which the Holy Spirit is the agent of the reception of revelation he appeals to “the outpouring of the Holy Spirit,” in which he describes how the Word is brought to human ears in such a way as to make it possible for God's revelation to be received in freedom.⁶² Barth argues that Jesus Christ creates hearers for himself by the Holy Spirit.⁶³ Again, this idea turns on the inseparable connection between the Son and the Spirit. Due to the Holy Spirit's relationship to the Son in eternity, there is a correspondence between their respective works in history. Barth writes:

It is Christ, the Word of God, brought to the hearing of man by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, who is man's possibility of being the recipient of divine

⁵⁹ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 235, cf. 207.

⁶⁰ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 232-3.

⁶¹ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 239.

⁶² Barth, *CD*, I/2, 243.

⁶³ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 248.

revelation. Therefore this receiving, this revealedness of God for us, is really itself revelation. In no less sense than the incarnation of the Word in Christ, it is the divine act of lordship, the *mystery* and the *miracle* of the existence of God among us, the triumph of free grace.⁶⁴

Based on our earlier investigation of Barth's view of the eternal identity of the Holy Spirit and his work in history, we should not be surprised that Barth describes the work of the Holy Spirit in Christians after the same manner as he described the incarnation of the Word in history, as a mystery and miracle.

Next, if the Holy Spirit is the ground of human freedom for God, then this excludes the possibility that human beings could be free for God in any other way. Barth describes the human incapacity for revelation as a "spiritual helplessness," the only solution to which is a "miracle."⁶⁵ This miracle is in correspondence to the objective possibility of revelation. From the perspective of the incarnation, particularly its form in the virgin birth, we see that human beings are dead in regard to their own possibility for God.⁶⁶ The freedom of human beings for God is grounded solely on the freedom of the Word of God for them. Barth refuses to offer any practical or theoretical explanation of this miracle since, as he perceives the matter, this would risk destroying the miracle by grounding it upon something other than the act of God itself.⁶⁷ The naming of the Holy Spirit in the human reception of revelation indicates, as it did in the spiritual conception

⁶⁴ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 249. Emphasis added.

⁶⁵ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 244.

⁶⁶ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 257.

⁶⁷ As Hunsinger explains: "[N]o phenomenological description, neutral in status, can meaningfully be made (according to the logic of Barth's position) of the human contribution to the event of double agency. For no special psychological, rational, or perhaps 'transcendental' condition, immanent within human nature, is necessarily presupposed in the event of fellowship by which God is known and loved. As far as knowing or loving God is concerned, any phenomenological description of the event would only bring results that are theologically uninformative. Humanity is simply presupposed in the event in the fullness of its humanity. Since the event is unique in kind, however, and therefore miraculous and mysterious, with the condition of its possibility wholly in God, no psychological, intellectual, or transcendental conditions accessible to neutral description would require special consideration, not if one is really interested in the event as it gives itself to faith and not perhaps to sight." Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 219.

of Jesus, that human nature is itself incapable of God, but is made capable by an act of God himself. This cannot, in Barth's view, be enriched through a description of internal human experience.

The way in which Barth describes the work of the Holy Spirit in the reception of revelation gives us some insight into how Barth conceives of human agency in relation to divine grace. The spiritual conception of Jesus helps to describe this event. Barth argues that in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the Word becomes the master of human beings. This means that our participation in revelation is a possibility given to us in our own identities; it is not to be construed as a "trance" or as a "possession," because the Holy Spirit works on the "whole" human being and not just on one part or in a vacuum.⁶⁸ As Barth warns, we must be on guard against the charge of Docetism even in the work of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁹ The miracle of the Holy Spirit must not be viewed as compromising in any way human essence and action, just as the Spirit's conception of Jesus did not compromise the veracity of Christ's human nature. In this regard, Barth applies his understanding of the conception of Jesus by the Spirit to the inspiration of Scripture later in the same volume. By doing so, Barth intends to affirm the sovereign work of God in the formation of Scripture and also to preserve the role of the human author. Barth writes:

But there can be no question of any ignoring or violating of their *auctoritas* and therefore of their humanity. Moreover what we experience elsewhere of the work of the Holy Spirit on man in general and on such witnesses in particular, and our recollection of the *conceptus de Spiritu sancto* in Christology, does not allow us to suppose that we have to understand what we are told here about the authors of the Holy Scriptures, as though they were not real *auctores*, as though in what they

⁶⁸ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 266. We shall see this emphasis that Barth places on God's work upon the "whole" human being several times in this chapter. It is integral to Barth's thought and originates from his days as a student of Wilhelm Hermann. For an excellent discussion of this element of Barth's theology, see Joseph L. Mangina, *Karl Barth on the Christian Life: The Practical Knowledge of God* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 11-45.

⁶⁹ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 269.

spoke or wrote they did not make full use of their human capacities throughout the whole range of what is contained in this idea and concept....That as such it requires a special function, was placed under the *auctoritas primaria*, the lordship of God, was surrounded and controlled and impelled by the Holy Spirit, and became an attitude of obedience in virtue of its direct relationship to divine revelation—that was their *theopneustia*.⁷⁰

The miracle of the reception of revelation does not destroy human identity or agency, but rather determines it in relation to the Word. That is to say, the Holy Spirit, in making human beings capable of revelation, establishes human beings as truly human in their relation to God. They are completely liberated from the responsibility and worries of their own cares and are oriented entirely by the direction given by their master.⁷¹ When human beings are acted upon by the work of the Spirit, they are to be understood after the spiritual conception of Jesus in which human nature is not set aside, but rather brought to its proper place in true fellowship with God. Though the appeal to the work of the Holy Spirit to describe the human reception of revelation safeguards Barth from any view of human cooperation with grace, it marks a tendency in his thought to a minimalist description of the human experience of the Spirit's work. The contours of the work of the Holy Spirit in revelation, which Barth has delineated here, are developed at length in his discussion of the Holy Spirit in the reception of reconciliation in which he continues to work with the spiritual conception of Jesus as the pattern for understanding Christian life.

4.5 The Conception of Jesus and the Reception of Reconciliation

In his doctrine of reconciliation, Barth continues to exposit the Christian life in correspondence to the pattern established in the spiritual conception of Jesus. The

⁷⁰ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 505; cf. Rosato, *Spirit as Lord*, 80; Klaas Runia, *Karl Barth's Doctrine of Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962), 137-68.

⁷¹ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 270-9.

spiritual conception of Jesus functions for Barth as the primal form by which to understand the contours of the work of the Holy Spirit upon human beings. By adhering to the image of the spiritual conception of Jesus, Barth is able to convey a particular vision of the relationship between the work of divine grace and the agency of human beings. The image of the spiritual conception of Jesus shows clearly that the human being is not destroyed in the act of grace, but rather is enlivened and enabled to do in its human creatureliness that which was out of the question for it before. We see these themes indicated already in the introduction to the doctrine of reconciliation in *CD IV/1*. Here Barth explains that the work of the Holy Spirit in reconciliation is grounded in the being and work of the incarnate Son of God and that the being and work of Jesus Christ, both in his historical life and in the apprehension of the grace of Jesus by Christians, must be understood as the work of the Holy Spirit. Barth explains: “The being and work of Jesus Christ in the form of the being and work of His Holy Spirit is therefore the original and prefigurative existence [*ur- und vorbildlich Existenz*] of Christianity and Christians.”⁷² As an aspect of his “prefigurative existence” Barth explains that the unique form of Christ’s birth provides the pattern for the work of the Spirit upon Christians.

The particular existence of the Son of God as man, and again the particular existence of this man as the Son of God, the existence of Jesus Christ as the Lord who becomes a servant and the servant who becomes Lord, His existence as the Guarantor of truth is itself ultimately grounded in the being and work of the Holy Spirit. He is *conceptus de Spiritu sancto*. And this is the distinctive mark of the existence of the men who perceive and accept and receive him as the Reconciler of the world and therefore as their Reconciler.⁷³

⁷² Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 149.

⁷³ Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 148.

Just as Jesus Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit and his human life empowered and made fruitful by this Spirit, so do human beings come to participate and apprehend the grace of Jesus Christ by the power of the same Spirit.

These themes extend into the heart of Barth's doctrine of reconciliation. In *CD* IV/2 § 64.4, Barth discusses "The Direction of the Son" and attempts to elucidate a way in which Jesus Christ is present for other human beings, bringing them into fellowship with the divine life.⁷⁴ Barth's conviction that Jesus Christ does, in fact, meet and determine human beings is ultimately based on his doctrine of election. The history of Jesus Christ is the history of all human beings because Jesus Christ is the representative of all human beings. Therefore all human life is determined by the life of Jesus Christ. Barth notes that this is the message of Christmas: that before human beings could accept or deny it, they were taken up in Jesus Christ in fellowship with God. Human beings partake of his obedience because he partook of our flesh.⁷⁵ According to Barth, human obedience and, ultimately, sanctification takes place in Jesus Christ and in him on behalf of all. The exaltation of the Son of Man includes the exaltation of all human beings.⁷⁶ Subsequently, the liberation of human beings from themselves requires that they come to see themselves in Jesus Christ, to say "yes" to God's "Yes" to them.⁷⁷ This, however, is impossible.⁷⁸ The mystery of the cross conceals the mystery of human life in Christ. And

⁷⁴ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 264.

⁷⁵ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 269-70.

⁷⁶ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 274. Mangina insightfully observes in his treatment of this section that a proper understanding of Barth's doctrine of the *pro me* and *pro nobis* of Christ's work requires "an unremitting attack on all 'spirituality.'" Barth's understanding of Christ's work requires that spirituality be stripped of all claims to insinuate oneself to God's grace, apart from grace. See Mangina, *Karl Barth on the Christian Life*, 59.

⁷⁷ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 272.

⁷⁸ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 285-6.

yet, it is only in the very death of Christ that we see—though we cannot possibly see on our own—the divine self-giving.⁷⁹

While this concealment of human life in Christ is final from our side, it is not final from the side of God. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is God's answer to the concealment of Christ's death.⁸⁰ The power by which Christ becomes manifest in his resurrection is the same power by which human beings come to see themselves in the life of Christ. Barth describes this power as the "power of the inconceivably transcendent transition," whereby the resurrected life of Jesus that manifests his true identity is made known in the life of human beings throughout the ages.⁸¹ The apprehension of reconciliation is aptly described by Barth as a "miracle and mystery" because in it, God acts in the lives of human beings in the same way as he did in the raising of Lazarus, the virgin birth of Jesus, and the empty tomb.⁸² The miracle consists of the resurrected life of Jesus Christ extending to human beings so that they begin to see and live according to Christ's life. The resurrection life of Christ does not destroy human life but gives it a new "determination" (*Bestimmung*).⁸³ In the New Testament, this power of transition is called the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the power of the resurrected Christ, his "stretched out arm" by which Christ is alive among human beings and makes them his witnesses.⁸⁴ The Spirit accomplishes the miracle of opening human beings to the resurrected Jesus.

⁷⁹ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 293-5.

⁸⁰ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 300.

⁸¹ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 307. For a comprehensive treatment of Barth's doctrine of the resurrection in *CD* IV that also addresses Rosato's criticism of Barth conflating the Spirit with the resurrected Christ, see R. Dale Dawson, *The Resurrection in Karl Barth* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2007).

⁸² Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 305, 308, 339-41.

⁸³ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 317-19.

⁸⁴ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 322-3. Barth's characterization of the Holy Spirit in his doctrine of reconciliation has received much criticism. The main line of this criticism is that by treating the Holy Spirit as the application of the work of Jesus to the life of the believer in the present, the Holy Spirit loses any distinctive place or function in the economy of salvation and also in the Trinity itself. The Holy Spirit

Barth argues that the Holy Spirit is distinct from all other spirits because it is the Spirit of Jesus Christ. A central feature of Barth's description of the Spirit's relationship to Christ is his use of the conception narrative in the New Testament. Here Barth shows that the human life of Jesus Christ originated with the work of the Spirit, which served as the original establishment of the arrangement that continued throughout Christ's life.

Jesus Christ is the man who lives by the Spirit. Unlike all other human witnesses, Jesus Christ takes his very origin from the Holy Spirit and so lives his entire life in this power.

Barth should be heard in his own words:

He is the Spirit of the Lord Jesus, i.e., because by Him and in the power which He gave Him the man Jesus was a servant who was also Lord, and therefore became and is and will be wholly by Him. He does not, therefore, need to receive Him [*Er braucht ihn also nicht erst besonders zu empfangen*]. He came into being as He became the One who receives and bears and brings Him [*Er wurde, indem er sein Empfänger, Träger und Bringer wurde*]. And He was this and continued to be and still is.... A good reason why the *conceptus de Spiritu sancto, natus ex Maria virgine* should not be regarded as a theologically irrelevant legend is that if we do this we obscure the important basic connection between Jesus Himself and the Spirit. Jesus is not a man who was subsequently gifted and impelled by the Spirit like others, like the prophets before Him by whom the Spirit also spoke (*qui loquutus est per prophetas*, Nic. Constant.), or His disciples after Him, or ourselves as Christians. He has the Spirit at first hand and from the very first. The Word became flesh (Jn 1:14), and therefore a man like the prophets and apostles, like ourselves. But because as a man He was not conceived of the flesh, but of the Spirit (Jn. 3:6), He at once became spirit in the flesh; a man who in the lowliness of the flesh, as from the very first He was on the way to His abasement in death,

becomes indistinguishable from Jesus Christ. See Robert W. Jenson, "You Wonder Where the Spirit Went," *Pro Ecclesia* 2.3 (Summer 1993), 296-304; Eugene F. Rogers, "The Eclipse of the Spirit in Karl Barth," in *Conversing with Barth*, ed. John C. McDowell and Mike Higon (Ashgate: Burlington, VT, 2004), 173-90; Travis Ables, "The Grammar of Pneumatology in Barth and Rahner: A Reconsideration," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11.2 (2009): 208-24. Hunsinger denies this interpretation of Barth's doctrine of a Holy Spirit and argues, instead, that the apparently unbalanced description of the Holy Spirit in the doctrine of reconciliation would be reversed dialectically in Barth's doctrine of redemption had Barth lived to write it. See Hunsinger, "Mediator of Communion," 178. There is evidence in Barth's writing for this when he sets out the possibility for a theology of the third article of the creed, where "even the christology which dominates everything [would] be illuminated on this basis (*conceptus de Spiritu sancto*)." See Karl Barth, "Concluding Unscientific Postscript on Schleiermacher," in *The Theology of Schleiermacher: Lectures at Göttingen, Winter Semester 1923/24* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI, 1982), 278.

lived also from the very first by the Spirit Himself creating and giving life by the Spirit.⁸⁵

Whereas we saw that the sign of the virgin birth expresses the judgment of God on human beings, the spiritual conception of Jesus is treated here as the first work of the Spirit upon the man Jesus, which results in his empowerment to live entirely by the Spirit. As Jesus is conceived by the Spirit, made known as the Son by the Spirit, so does he go to his death by the Spirit. The Spirit determines his entire human life as and because he is conceived by the Spirit. It is interesting that here Barth appears to allow the mode of the conception of Jesus to play a constitutive role in Christ's person and integral to his work. It is unclear how this fits with Barth's discussion of the sign quality of the conception of Jesus. As a sign, the spiritual conception of Jesus is understood as illuminating the mystery of the incarnation. Here, however, we see Barth using the spiritual conception of Jesus as a determinative element of Christ's life and ministry, a point that critics of Barth's doctrine of the Holy Spirit wished he would have developed.⁸⁶

The same Spirit by whom Jesus was conceived is sent by Jesus as the gift to Christians to make them witnesses.⁸⁷ The Holy Spirit is the power by which the resurrected Christ determines human life for exaltation in him. This involves the

⁸⁵ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 323-4. Translation altered. Cf. *KD*, IV/2, 362. A similar comment can be found in Barth's doctrine of creation, which we noticed briefly in the previous chapter, where Barth uses the conception of Jesus by the Spirit as the supreme example of humanity that lives by the Spirit. Barth writes: "The relationship of this man to the Holy Spirit is so close and special that He owes no more and no less than His existence itself and as such to the Holy Spirit." Barth, *CD*, III.2, 333.

⁸⁶ Developing the idea that the spiritual conception of Jesus actually makes a difference in the life of Jesus would have helped Barth avoid the charge that does not provide the Spirit a distinctive agency in relation to Christ. See, for example, Rosato, *Spirit as Lord*, 166, 177.

⁸⁷ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 325. Christians find themselves in a position where they both stand as an anticipation and bear a mission in relation to God's work in the wider world. The underlying theological structure that supports the church's "typological existence" in history is Barth's dual conviction that all of history is oriented and determined by the man Jesus and that the goal of history involves the drawing in of human beings to fellowship with Christ. Cf. Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 336-7

liberation of human beings to recognize the concealed Christ to freely follow after his direction.⁸⁸ The Holy Spirit tells Christians who they are in Jesus Christ and the corresponding freedom that this entails; he writes upon their hearts the command of God. Barth describes the outworking of the relationship between Christ and Christians by the Spirit as “a representation, reflection and correspondence [*Darstellung, Abbildung und Entsprechung*]” of who the Holy Spirit is in relationship to the Son and Father.⁸⁹ The work of the Holy Spirit in history in this regard is not arbitrary, but rather manifests an inner material connection between the being of God in himself and the work of God in the world.⁹⁰ This work of the Holy Spirit in the life of Jesus in history directs us back to God himself and helps us to understand the mystery of human conversion.⁹¹ Barth depicts the suitability of the work of the Holy Spirit in the transition between Christ and Christians according to the fellowship between the Father and the Son, in which Christ and Christians are not merged together but brought together in free unity and fellowship.

The Father and the Son are not merely alongside one another in a kind of neutrality [*irgendeinen auch nur neutralen*] or even hostility. They are with one another in love. And because they are with one another in a love which is divine love the one does not merge [*verschwinden sich*] into the other nor can the one or the other be alone [*bleiben sich*] or turn again to [*wenden sich gegen*] the other.⁹²

The work of the Holy Spirit unites Christ to Christians, human flesh to the divine Word, and the Father to the Son, and does so without collapsing one into the other. The work of

⁸⁸ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 359, 362.

⁸⁹ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 346.

⁹⁰ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 338-9.

⁹¹ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 345.

⁹² Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 344. Along these lines, Guretzki describes Barth's understanding of the Holy Spirit in the Godhead as the bond and boundary between the Father and the Son. See Guretzki, *Filioque*, 175-6. The Spirit's work of maintaining a unity in difference between God and creation takes place first and foremost in election, in which the Spirit has the “resolve” [*Beschluß*] to maintain undisturbed the unity of the Father and the Son in the covenant with human beings. See Barth, *CD*, II/2, 101-2; cf. Migliore, “*Vinculum Pacis*,” 140.

the Holy Spirit in history, particularly in the conception of Jesus, then, stands as a consistent expression of the identity of the Holy Spirit in the divine life.

Later in this same volume Barth provides further exposition of the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of Christians, as understood through the conception of Jesus. In the short section, “The Awakening to Conversion,” Barth outlines the work of the Holy Spirit as a miracle and the mystery within the life of the Christian that elicits their moral action. Again, we do well to note the resonances between Barth’s language of mystery and miracle here in the work of the Holy Spirit and the language of his discussion of the incarnation and virgin birth. We will briefly survey Barth’s discussion of this in order to grasp further his view of human agency in relation to divine grace as it is patterned on the spiritual conception of Jesus.

Barth describes how human beings exist in the “sleep of death” of the broken covenant and constantly need to be reawakened.⁹³ This awakening is the “miracle and mystery” of the Holy Spirit by which human beings are enabled to lift themselves up to live in proper correspondence to the grace shown them in Christ.⁹⁴ Barth makes a direct link between the Spirit’s work that awakens human beings from the sleep of death and the Spirit’s work in the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is because, as Barth describes it, the work of the Holy Spirit proceeds from the resurrected Christ. Barth writes: “[The Spirit’s work of awakening] is a subordinate moment in the act of majesty in which the Word became flesh and Jesus Christ rose again from the dead. On this aspect—its true and proper aspect—it is a mystery and a miracle.”⁹⁵ What Barth says about the relationship between the work of the Spirit in the conception of Jesus and in his

⁹³ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 554-5.

⁹⁴ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 553.

⁹⁵ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 557.

resurrection is somewhat ambiguous, however. Without a doubt, it is the resurrection that is paramount for Barth's understanding of the Holy Spirit, and yet Barth makes significant use of the conception of Jesus in elucidating the Spirit's work upon human beings. Though the resurrection is given priority, it overlaps with the spiritual conception in its function of unveiling the identity of Christ. This may be related to Barth's discussion of the relationship between the virgin birth and the empty tomb in CD I/2, in which the two signs mark the disclosure of revelation in their own way.⁹⁶

Barth is diligent to describe this awakening work of the Holy Spirit as one in which human beings, who were formerly incapable, are made capable of exercising their own agency. The work of the Holy Spirit in this regard does not set aside human capability and action, but rather elicits them so that human beings can serve in the power of the Holy Spirit.

We are thus forced to say that this awakening is both wholly creaturely and wholly divine. Yet the initial shock [*Anstoß*] comes from God. Thus there can be no question of a co-ordination between two comparable elements, but only of the absolute primacy of the divine over the creaturely. The creaturely is made serviceable [*dienstbar*] to the divine and does actually serve it. It is used by God as His organ or instrument. Its creatureliness is not impaired [*seine Kreatürlichkeit enzubüren*], but it is given by God a special function or character. Being qualified and claimed [*qualifiziert und herangezungen wird*] by God for co-operation [*Mitwirkung*], it co-operates in such a way that the whole is still an action which is specifically divine.⁹⁷

As Barth is so careful to make clear, the work of the Holy Spirit does not do away with the creature but rather “jolts” the creature and enables it to perform its proper action in

⁹⁶ See Barth, CD, I/2, 183.

⁹⁷ Barth, CD, IV/2, 557. The emphasis on the work of the Spirit as the “stretched out arm” of Christ is intended to *include* the human being as an active participant in reconciliation accomplished in Christ. This point is missed by many of Barth's interpreters, such as Fiddes, “Mary in the theology of Karl Barth,” 117-8, because they fail to see that, for Barth, human action is not separate from divine action and that Barth does indeed leave room for human cooperation with divine grace, but not when this is understood in a synergistic fashion. Human action is included and elicited by divine action, as is made abundantly clear in Barth's description earlier in this volume of the relation between divinity and humanity in Jesus Christ.

fellowship with God. Barth even dares to go so far as to describe this work as “cooperation,” something he generally avoided doing in the first volumes of the *CD* and which is crucial for Barth’s understanding of Mary, as we shall see in the following chapter. Importantly, however, Barth leaves little doubt that the cooperation he envisions is one that is itself wrought by God. Though this work involves the human being, it has its reality based in the reality of God himself.⁹⁸ Proper human moral agency is *enhypostatic*—it exists in the existence of the grace of God. This event of awakening does not mean the obliteration of the human being, but rather their rousing, their renewal, their improvement. In the same section Barth describes this as a “compulsion” by the Holy Spirit whereby the human being is brought to the ability to engage in his freedom. This compulsion, however, is not of the abstract demonic sort. Rather, “it is the compulsion of a permission and ability which have been granted. It is that of the free man who as such can only exercise his freedom. The omnipotence of God creates and effects in the man awakened to conversion a true ability.”⁹⁹ When viewed from the perspective of the spiritual conception of Jesus, we note again how the human nature of Jesus is prepared and made ready by the Spirit to respond in proper human action to the grace of union with the Son. The incarnation, accomplished through the Spirit, provides the lens by which to interpret human conversion.

⁹⁸ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 558. John Webster describes the revolutionary character of Barth’s understanding of human freedom developed in this section: “[F]reedom is not—as it has come to be in modernity—a free-standing, quasi-absolute reality which both characterizes and validates the unique dignity of the human person. Rather, freedom is consent to a given order of reality which encloses human history, in an order which is at one and the same time a loving summons to joyful action in accordance with itself, and a judgment against our attempts to be ourselves by somehow escaping from or suspending its givenness. Freedom is the real possibility given to me by necessity.” John Webster, *Barth’s Moral Theology Human Action in Barth’s Thought* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI: 1998), 112; cf. Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 206. Archibald Spencer has furthered and deepened Webster’s seminal work by examining Barth’s renovation of the conception of human agency and anthropology in his ethical writings prior to the *CD*. See Archibald James Spencer, *Clearing a Space for Human Action: Ethical Ontology in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Peter Lang: New York, 2003).

⁹⁹ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 578.

The conversion of the human being to God is described by Barth as taking place in strict correspondence with the movement of God towards human beings.¹⁰⁰ What is so crucial to Barth is that God's action precedes the action of the converted. This dynamic has its antecedent and origin in the life of Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ the conversion of the human being "originally takes place, that God is for man (*vere Deus*), and man is for God (*vere homo*)."¹⁰¹ Here we remember Barth's description earlier in the volume and discussed in our previous chapter about the relationship between the divine and human life in Jesus Christ and the correspondence of the human life to that of the divine. By Jesus Christ, in whom God is for human being and human being is for God, the Holy Spirit is sent to awaken human beings to this same freedom and fellowship with the covenant God. Yet this conversion is originally and fully an event in Jesus Christ himself. That which takes place in the life of Jesus is given to other human beings by the power of his Spirit. Barth writes:

But everything is simple, true and clear when these statements are referred directly to Jesus Christ, and only indirectly, as fulfilled and effectively realized in Him for us, to ourselves....It is in His conversion that we are engaged. It is in His birth, from above, the mystery and miracle of Christmas, that we are born again. It is in His baptism in Jordan that we are baptized with the Holy Ghost and with fire. It is His death on the cross that we are dead as old man, and in His resurrection in the garden of Joseph of Arimathea that we are risen as new man.¹⁰²

The life of Jesus Christ is the principal origin in which the fulfilled covenant and the exaltation of the human being take place. From this place human beings also partake of the fulfilled covenant by the work of the Spirit who stands at the origin of Christ's human life. The specific events of Christ's life provide a basis and pattern whereby the analogous events take place in the life of Christians.

¹⁰⁰ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 579.

¹⁰¹ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 582.

¹⁰² Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 583.

4.6 The Conception of Jesus and Christian Vocation

As has been made clear, Barth described the work of the Holy Spirit in the conception of Jesus as the prototypical event that manifests the pattern of the Spirit's work on human beings in the reception of revelation and reconciliation. Barth's use of this pattern brings with it a certain view of human agency in relationship to divine grace, one in which human action is enlivened and elicited by the grace of the Spirit. In the third part-volume of the doctrine of reconciliation, the manner in which the spiritual conception of Jesus functions as a pattern for Barth's idea of the Christian life comes to a climax. Here, Barth discusses the problem of Christ's prophetic office: the disclosing of the revelation and reconciliation of Jesus Christ to human beings from the perspective of the unity of Christ's person.¹⁰³ For Barth, the resurrected life of Jesus is the shining of the light of his life as it discloses itself in the world.¹⁰⁴ The church's "Yes and Amen" to the shining of this light is the locus and mode of the church's vocation.¹⁰⁵ In *CD IV/3.2* §71, Barth carries out an exposition of the vocation of human beings within the context of Christ's prophetic office and his presence by the Spirit. It is here that we see how Barth explicitly implements the conception of Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit within his understanding of this aspect of the Christian life.

¹⁰³ Barth, *CD*, IV/3.1, 8-9. Webster explains: "To speak of Jesus as prophet is to speak of him as the immediate agent of the knowledge of himself: he is, literally, self-proclaiming." Webster, *Barth*, 131. Webster explains that Barth's presentation of the prophetic office of Christ is his powerful critique of theological existentialism, which attempts to bridge the distance between the historical life of Christ and the believer through supplemental cognitive, interpretive or spiritual acts. See Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology*, 128.

¹⁰⁴ Barth, *CD*, IV/3.1, 86. Webster notes how this is a subtle change in Barth's doctrine of revelation that seems to minimize, if not do away altogether with, the role of creaturely mediation—the giving of signs. Barth now understands that Jesus Christ is not the first in a line of sacraments but the *only* sacrament. This has implications for his understanding of the role of signs in revelation; no longer do they mediate revelation but now they only attest it. See Webster, *Ethics of Reconciliation*, 128; cf. 118-32.

¹⁰⁵ Barth, *CD*, IV/3.1, 312, 356; cf. Webster, *Barth*, 136.

At its most basic level, Christian vocation consists in the fact that human beings are called by the Word to allow his light to shine in, on and through them in the service of the prophecy of Jesus Christ.¹⁰⁶ The light of Christ comes to human beings in the power of the Holy Spirit who coexists and is inter-related with Jesus Christ. As the Holy Spirit causes human beings to realize their situation in the light in which they stand, this is the event of vocation.¹⁰⁷ While the light came to shine in Israel and ultimately and decisively in the life of Jesus Christ, it continues to shine in history by the presence of Jesus Christ through his Spirit. This requires that we understand vocation as a process in which the Spirit works in history to call people into the shining of that light. However, there should be no such thing as an attempt to develop some manner of spiritual process to account for what happens in this encounter, such as an *ordo salutis* so important to Pietism.

According to Barth, systematizing vocation into a definable process abstracts it from the person of Jesus Christ who calls. It is far more sound to speak of it as a “totality and [a] unity” that refrains from abstracting from the person and work of Jesus.¹⁰⁸ By this, Barth means that the whole human being is claimed and totally altered, making the human being truly a Christian.¹⁰⁹ When a human being meets Jesus Christ as the living one, it is like “lightning striking and splitting the tree.”¹¹⁰ Barth describes this occurrence of the illumination of the light of Christ as effecting a “new creation.” Barth’s aversion to describing the event of the Spirit’s work on human beings is something we have seen

¹⁰⁶ Barth, *CD*, IV/3.2, 482.

¹⁰⁷ Barth, *CD*, IV/3.2, 489, 491-2.

¹⁰⁸ Barth, *CD*, IV/3.2, 507. For a comprehensive study of Barth’s view of pietism, see Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth & the Pietists: The Young Karl Barth’s Critique of Pietism & Its Response*, trans. Daniel Bloesch (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

¹⁰⁹ Barth, *CD*, IV/3.2, 508-9.

¹¹⁰ Barth, *CD*, IV/3.2, 505.

often in this chapter and it is related directly to his use of the spiritual conception as a pattern for the Spirit's work.

In a crucial section for Barth's understanding of vocation, Barth discusses the "goal of vocation," where he examines the meaning, purpose and *telos* of vocation. As such, this section forms the "general foundation" for the remainder of Barth's discussion of vocation.¹¹¹ Importantly for our purpose, Barth describes vocation as a mystery that is related directly to the mystery of incarnation. Moreover, the mystery of vocation is marked with the miracle of calling that is related to the virgin birth. It is worth quoting Barth at length here:

The mystery of vocation, of the fact that there takes place this calling of man within human time in history, is very great. In its own manner and place it is no less than the Christmas mystery of the birth of the eternal Word of God in the flesh in which it has its *primary basis* [*ersten Grund*]. And the miracle which denotes this mystery, i.e., the miracle of calling, of its possibility, of the way which God takes with man when He causes his calling to take place, is also great. In its own manner and place it is no less than the Christmas miracle of the birth of Jesus Christ of the Virgin Mary in which it has its *pattern* [*im welchem es vorgebildet ist*]. Those to whom Jesus Christ in calling them gives the freedom...to become the children of God, so that His call does not return empty but reaches its goal, are not those who are born of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God (Jn. 1:12-13). When we put our question, we do not violate either the mystery or the miracle of vocation....We are concerned with a lofty event, yet not with one which is without meaning and purpose, but with one which is controlled by an intrinsically clear *ratio* [*einer sich klaren ratio*], like the primary event of Christmas. Our question concerning its *telos* is not then unanswerable.¹¹²

Barth envisions a description of Christian vocation interpreted through the lens of the incarnation. This is because, for Barth, the work of Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit in the life of human beings to make them Christians is ultimately determined by the event of the incarnation in which the Holy Spirit unites the divine Word to human flesh.

¹¹¹ Barth, *CD*, IV/3.2, 520-1.

¹¹² Barth, *CD*, IV/3.2, 521; cf. Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 188.

The incarnation and the miracle of the virgin birth by the Holy Spirit play a prototypical role in the life of Christian existence. In both cases human existence is acted upon by God the Holy Spirit to unite it to the life of the divine Word. The form by which this takes place is analogous in both instances because the one—the incarnation—determines the other—Christian vocation. Barth's use of John 1:12-13 is particularly illuminating. Just as Christ himself was conceived and borne by the power of the Holy Spirit, so are Christians begotten of God the Holy Spirit to take up their new vocation.¹¹³ In order to elucidate Barth's meaning, we shall outline the way in which the conception of Jesus and the incarnation shape Barth's understanding of the work of the Spirit in the life of Christians. As we exposit briefly how Barth describes Christian vocation, we shall see how it is that the spiritual conception of Jesus helps him to develop his idea of human agency.

According to Barth, the goal of the vocation of human beings is nothing other than that they become Christians.¹¹⁴ Christians are, by definition, those who are

¹¹³ In *The Christian Life*, Barth writes: "We may rightly compare John 1:13 here. The children of God are children of men like all others, but as the children of God they are not born in the same way as they and all others are as the children of men. They are born directly of God, independently of what they are on the basis of their human origin." Karl Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics IV/4 Lecture Fragments*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grande Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 73. These references to John 1:12-13 are particularly interesting in light of Barth's lectures on John, given in 1926 and 1933, where he argues against any suggested reference to the virgin birth in this passage. Though at that time Barth refused to admit an explicit or implicit reference to the virgin birth in this text, he does develop his exegetical understanding of the Christians as "born of God" in a way that is parallel to his exposition of the virgin birth in the *CD*. By stating that Christians are "born of God" and not of the "will of the flesh," Barth believes that John is explicitly ruling out the contribution of men in the regeneration. See Karl Barth, *Witness to the Word: A Commentary on John 1*, ed. Walter Fürst, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 68-84. Clearly, by the time Barth wrote *CD IV/3*, he was much more comfortable with the analogy between the spiritual conception of Jesus and the spiritual regeneration of Christians. The exegetical relationship between John 1:12-13 and the virgin birth is still supported by a minority of scholars. See John W. Pryor, "Of the Virgin Birth or the birth of Christians: the text of John 1:13 once more," *Novum testamentum* 27.4 (1985): 296-318; Torrance, "The Doctrine of the Virgin Birth," 8-15.

¹¹⁴ Barth, *CD*, IV/3.2, 521.

determined by their knowledge of Christ.¹¹⁵ Christians, however, do not become so out of continuity with their normal situation, i.e., their culture or something immanent within themselves. Rather, Christians become Christians because they are called by Jesus.¹¹⁶ They are brought to be Christians by the act of God upon them. This act is not one in which Christ violently compels them. Rather, the power of the Word by the Holy Spirit liberates human beings to be Christians, to take up their true vocation and freely exercise their faith and obedience.¹¹⁷ We might recall here Barth's discussion of the human nature of Jesus Christ in relationship to the divine Son, in which Christ's human nature is determined by the divine life freely and voluntarily to correspond to the person of the Son of God. Furthermore, Barth insists that the vocation of the Christian does not obliterate the humanity of the one being called but ensures their full participation in human life.¹¹⁸ In the same way as the Word took real human existence from his mother, though his human origin is not to be explained by his connection with human flesh, so do Christians remain human, though their Christian existence cannot be explained by recourse to their human existence.

[Christians] exist in particular proximity to Him and therefore in analogy [*in einder besonderen Nähe zu ihm und vermöge dieser Nähe in Analogie*] to what He is. He is originally—not merely in the council of God but in the eternal being of God, and then in time, in the flesh and within the world in virtue of the council of God—that which men become as they are called to be Christians. That is to say, He is originally the Son of God. And in analogy and correspondence [*in Analogie, in Entsprechung*], which means with real similarity for all the dissimilarity, they may become sons of God....They may become and thus be what He is originally and does not have to become....If only in analogy to the existence of Jesus Christ, yet very really in this analogy they, too, as children of God exist in repetition, confirmation and revelation [*Widerholung, Bestätigung*]

¹¹⁵ Barth, *CD*, IV/3.2, 526.

¹¹⁶ Barth, *CD*, IV/3.2, 528.

¹¹⁷ Barth, *CD*, IV/3.2, 529.

¹¹⁸ Barth, *CD*, IV/3.2, 530-1.

und Offenbarung] not only of the manner [*Art*] but also of the will and act of God as the One from whom they derive.¹¹⁹

The distinction of Christians from other human beings lies precisely in the fact that Christians are called to be sons of God so as to be determined entirely by the Son of God. Once again, Barth's comments about Christian existence are shown to stand in close analogy to Barth's Christology in so far as Christ's distinctiveness among human beings was found in his complete correspondence to the will of God in virtue of his unique existence as the Son of God.

To what is it that Jesus Christ calls? Barth's answer to this is that Christ calls human beings to discipleship.¹²⁰ Discipleship embraces the whole of the human being's life because discipleship is nothing less than the recognition of Christ's right of lordship. This implies that the structure of the fellowship between Jesus Christ and those he calls to himself is one of "super- and sub-ordination." This ordered relationship is one that takes place in the freedom elicited by the grace of Jesus Christ given to human beings.

It is the power of the Word of Jesus Christ which impresses upon man His right of lordship, the right of the owner to his property, awakening and impelling to a spontaneous recognition and acceptance of this right [*ihn dazu erweckt und in Bewegung setzt, dieses Herrenrecht von sich aus zu anerkennen*], in which he gives himself to the discipleship of Jesus Christ, becoming obedient in his freedom and free in his obedience.... His control, as that of the owner over his possession, becomes the most truly distinctive feature of this man, the center and basis of his human existence, the axiom of his freest thinking and utterance, the origin of his freest volition and action, in short the principle of his spontaneous being [*Prinzip seines spontanen Daseins*].¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Barth, *CD*, IV/3.2, 532-3. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to bring and hold together Christians with Christ without intermingling, confounding, changing or merging them with one another but "to coordinate them, to make them parallel, to bring them into harmony and therefore bind them into a true unity." Barth, *CD*, IV/3.2, 761; cf. Migliore, "*Vinculum Pacis*," 146-50.

¹²⁰ Barth, *CD*, IV/3.2, 535.

¹²¹ Barth, *CD*, IV/3.2, 537-8.

Standing behind Barth's discussion of this matter is the relationship between the human and divine existence of Jesus Christ, namely the initiating free grace of the Son eliciting the free human response of gratitude in the human nature. Once again we see how Barth has structured Christian vocation on the framework he originally set out in his discussion of the relationship between the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ. As the virginal conception of Jesus by the Spirit was the sign for the mystery of the incarnation, so it describes the contours of the Spirit-wrought fellowship between Christ and Christians.

In the ordered fellowship between Christ and the Christian, Barth insists that there can be no collapsing or mixing of the two. In good Chalcedonian fashion, Barth writes that "In their fellowship both become and are generally what they are, not confounding or exchanging [*ohne Vermischung oder Vertauschung*] their functions and roles nor losing their totally dissimilar persons."¹²² For Barth, the Christian and Christ, as they live out their fellowship in history, fulfill their proper functions of disciple and teacher, servant and master. That is to say, the attachment and coordination that takes place between the Christian and Christ in the fellowship of vocation is best understood in the sense of the term "union." This term does not imply the "dissolution [*Aufgehen*]" or "disappearance [*Verschwinden*]" or the "identification [*Identifikation*]" of either the Christian or Christ, but their "conjunction [*Verbindung*] in which each has his own independence, uniqueness and activity [*Selbständigkeit, Eigenart und Eigentätigkeit*]."¹²³ This theme of union with Christ is the climax of Barth's doctrine of vocation. In this union Christ works freely by the power of the Holy Spirit to elicit the free obedience of his creatures in order that Christ not be alone. In this work of Christ there is no room for any *corredemptor* or

¹²² Barth, *CD*, IV/3.2, 539.

¹²³ Barth, *CD*, IV/3.2, 540.

corredemtrix. As Barth writes: “There is, of course, no one, apostle, saint or the Virgin, who can contribute in the very slightest to what is accomplished for all by the one Jesus Christ in His life and death.”¹²⁴ The *ratio* of the miracle and mystery of Christmas orders this relationship of union between Christ and the Christian. In this union the Christian exists *enhypostatically* in the existence of Christ. That is, it is in Christ’s initiative and commanding that the Christian has his own faith and obedience drawn out in freedom.¹²⁵ Christ has united himself with Christians and so Christians are able freely to unite themselves with Christ. Indeed, it is imperative that Christians unite themselves with Christ and do so consistently; otherwise the grace of Christ could be misunderstood to be domination and puppeteering. On the contrary, as Christ does not wish to be alone but to exist in fellowship, Christ unites human beings with himself by the Holy Spirit, such that they are born again from above by his presence and action in their lives and are continuously nourished by him.¹²⁶ It is this Christian existence that is ordered by the mystery and miracle of Christmas.

Barth explains that in this union there is a mutual determination of the Christian by Christ and the Christian for Christ. That Christ is in the Christian means that

Christ speaks, acts and rules—and this is the grace of His calling of this man—as the Lord of his thinking, speech and action. He takes possession of his free human heart. He rules and controls in the obedience of his free reason [*freien Vernunft*] (2 Cor. 10:5). As a divine person it is very possible for Him to do this in the unrestricted sovereignty proper to Himself and yet in such a way that there can be no question whatever of any competition [*ein Konkurrieren*] between His person and that of the Christian, whether in the attempt of the latter to control His person, or conversely in its suppression or extinction by His person.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Barth, *CD*, IV/3.2, 542.

¹²⁵ Barth, *CD*, IV/3.2, 545.

¹²⁶ Barth, *CD*, IV/3.2, 542.

¹²⁷ Barth, *CD*, IV/3.2, 547.

Here we see that in the relationship between Christ and the Christian, Barth relies on an understanding of the divine person of the Son to explain how it could be that Christ can live within a Christian without obliterating the person of the Christian. In a way ordered entirely by the analogy of the human and divine natures in Christ, the divine person exists in relation to the human being in such a way that the human being is totally ordered by the divine person and is enlivened by him. In union with Christ, human beings are “awakened...to genuine humanity.”¹²⁸ This is explained in Barth’s statement about the union of the Christian with Christ. In addition to Christ living in the Christian, Barth emphasizes that the Christian also lives in Christ. This means that the Christian’s “own thinking, speech and action has its ruling and determinative principle—and here it is the work of his gratitude corresponding to grace—in the speech, action and rule of Christ.”¹²⁹ That is to say, in the free exercise of the Christian’s heart, reason and act there is “agreement” with the being and action of Christ himself. Here we can note again the ordering of Christian vocation to Barth’s understanding of the incarnation and the spiritual conception. In this case, Barth’s understanding of the communication of operations stands at the forefront. Just as the divine person of the Son has elected to live in the flesh and so has determined himself for this existence, and just as the human nature of Jesus Christ is totally determined by the person of the Son and exists in gratitude corresponding to the grace given it, so does Christ relate to Christians.

¹²⁸ Barth, *CD*, IV/3.2, 548. Webster notes how, at least in his intention, Barth’s doctrines of the prophetic work of Christ and the action of the Holy Spirit were to describe the restoration of genuine human being before God: “In effect, Barth’s protest against creaturely mediation is in important respects a protest in favor of creation, ensuring that creaturely agents are not compelled by grace but enabled by grace to be themselves.” Webster, *Barth*, 139.

¹²⁹ Barth, *CD*, IV/3.2, 548.

As we have seen, Barth depicts Christian vocation according to the doctrine of the incarnation. The reason why this is so is because in Jesus Christ we see how God works once and for all in human being and existence. God does not work differently when the work that he accomplished in Jesus Christ shines in the rest of the world and so illuminates and awakens human beings to follow God in Christ. The being of a Christian is to be confessed in faith because it stands in relationship with and is ordered analogously to the mystery of God in Christ, the great act of God in which is accomplished revelation and reconciliation. The virgin birth functions here as an ordering paradigm, in its intimate connection with the great ordering paradigm of the incarnation, by which the process of becoming Christian is understood.¹³⁰ That Barth adheres to this paradigm shows that he understands the incarnation, and so the virgin birth, as the single point of God's revelation and reconciliation that radiates out into the world by the Holy Spirit, making Christians who are witnesses of this event.

4.7 The Conception of Jesus and Christian Baptism

The trajectory of Barth's description of the application of the spiritual conception of Jesus to the Christian is carried out further in the last published part-volume of the *CD*: the fragment on baptism.¹³¹ Barth divides this part-volume into two main sections. In the first section Barth discusses "Baptism with the Holy Spirit" and in the second and larger part he discusses "Baptism with Water." Baptism with the Holy Spirit consists of the divinely-wrought conversion or change in human beings to live faithfully to God.¹³² Distinct from this, though strictly correlated to it, baptism with water consists of the first

¹³⁰ Barth, *CD*, IV/3.2, 554.

¹³¹ The baptismal fragment was intended to function as a transitional piece that would establish the movement from the work of reconciliation accomplished by Christ and received by Christians in the power of the Holy Spirit to the ethics of reconciliation. It was published posthumously as *The Christian Life*.

¹³² Barth, *CD*, IV/4, 31.

step of Christian life that is impelled by Christ's work of divine conversion.¹³³ For our purposes in this section, it is crucial for us to see how Barth describes this divinely-wrought conversion and its attendant and elicited human action with language drawn from Christ's conception and birth.

It is particularly the first section, the discussion of baptism with the Holy Spirit, which concerns us here. Barth is insistent throughout this section that the foundation and basis of the Christian life is an event which is accomplished solely by God but which also takes place truly within human beings so that the event becomes their conversion and their decision and desire for faithfulness to God. As we have become accustomed to expect, Barth attempts to describe, but never to explain, this divine possibility that does not exclude human agency by resorting to the language of Christmas; the fact that a human being can be made faithful to God is a "mystery" and a "miracle."¹³⁴ What is particularly mysterious and miraculous is the fact that in this event the human being himself is enabled to be an acting subject along with God.¹³⁵ Whereas other theologies have ascribed this change to powers immanent within the human being as they are activated or superannuated by God, Barth insists upon the utter impossibility of human beings directing even their God-given powers to faithfulness with God. It is a sheer and utter mystery and miracle that human beings could voluntarily choose that which God in his grace has already chosen for them.¹³⁶ The New Testament refers to this event through several metaphors. First, there is the biblical language of the Christian having put on a

¹³³ Barth, *CD*, IV/4, 41. The most important analysis and criticism of Barth's doctrine of baptism in *CD* IV/4 is Eberhard Jüngel's seminal essay, "Karl Barths Lehre von der Taufe: Ein Hinweis auf ihre Probleme," in *Barth-Studien, Ökumenische Theologie*, Vol. 9 (Zürich, Cologne: Benzinger Verlag; Gütersloh: Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1982), 246-90.

¹³⁴ Barth, *CD*, IV/4, 3, 17.

¹³⁵ Barth, *CD*, IV/4, 5.

¹³⁶ Barth, *CD*, IV/4, 6.

new garment (Colossians 3:10; Ephesians 4:24). Second, there is the notion of receiving a new heart that fulfills God's law (Romans 2:14-15; Ezekiel 11:19f.; 36:26f.). Third and finally, there is the language of a new or second generation or birth (John 1:13; 3:6; 1 Peter 1:23). In this last metaphor, Barth emphasizes the radical "mystery and miracle of sonship."¹³⁷ This motif is particularly important for our purposes, as we shall see shortly.

Essential background for understanding what Barth intends in his articulation of conversion by the work of Christ is found in his doctrine of eternal election. Barth argues that the change or conversion that is the beginning of Christian life is applicable to all human beings precisely because it first took place in Jesus Christ himself. This is why Christ's baptism was so important, for in it Christ began the life of repentance on our behalf.¹³⁸ It is because of Christ's representative status that he is the one in whom divine conversion was first wrought and wrought for all. It is left to the Christian to receive this divine conversion and this occurs only through the power of Christ's Spirit. What is essential to notice, however, is that the biblical metaphors which described conversion—such as a new garment, receiving a new heart, or being born again—have their basic, foundational and effective location in the life of Jesus himself. Barth writes: "It, the history of Jesus Christ, is the point of convergence at which everything figurative in the New Testament here converges, but in its apex is already more than figurative. It is the reality of the new beginning which is at stake in all of them."¹³⁹ While this is true of all of the metaphors for conversion that Barth has described, it is particularly interesting for our

¹³⁷ Barth, *CD*, IV/4, 9.

¹³⁸ Barth, *CD*, IV/4, 13.

¹³⁹ Barth, *CD*, IV/4, 14. Translation altered. Cf. *KD*, IV/4, 15. In *The Christian Life*, 74, Barth writes the following: "In the illuminating and awakening of man to an act of recognition of the history of Jesus Christ which controls and determines their own history, people become the children of God, recognizing that his birth, his ministry in word and work, and his death, since he rose again in lives, *all* took place for *them*, so that their own history is anticipated in this history, is enclosed by it, is oriented to it, and has its *telos* in it."

purposes that Barth makes special note of the rebirth of Christians. Taking his point of departure from the New Testament's explicit connection between the biblical metaphor of putting on the new man or new garment and its basis in Christ's resurrection by the Spirit, Barth argues that the rebirth of Christians is rooted in the birth of Jesus Christ. Barth exclaims, "It is true exegesis, not eisegesis, to say that the nativity of Christ is the nativity of the Christian man; Christmas Day is the birthday of every Christian."¹⁴⁰ This analogy between the birth of Christ and the birth of Christians extends to both form and content. That is, just as Jesus Christ was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, so also are Christians regenerated by the power of the Holy Spirit. Just as Mary was drawn to exercise her faith by the prior blessing of grace bestowed upon her, and just as the human nature of Jesus Christ is activated by the grace of the Word toward it as it is prepared by the Holy Spirit, so Christians receive activation to live the faithful Christian life on their own volition only through the action of God's Son acting in his Spirit. Thus, when Barth speaks of the mystery and miracle of the basis of the Christian life—that human beings are enabled voluntarily to exercise faith and faithfulness—he is referring to the life of Jesus Christ, particularly to the content and form of the incarnation. There is no Christian life apart from its actualization in the life of Christ.¹⁴¹

There is in Barth's doctrine of the baptism of the Holy Spirit reference to the work of the Spirit in which human beings are enabled to offer faithfulness and faith to God himself. The agent whereby this act of the human being takes place is first Jesus Christ and it is made contemporary by the Spirit to be worked out in the life of other human beings. In this work there is no conflict of human agency with divine agency but

¹⁴⁰ Barth, *CD*, IV/4, 15. Translation altered. Cf. *KD*, IV/4, 16.

¹⁴¹ Barth, *CD*, IV/4, 17.

rather the agency of God enables and elicits the free agency of the human being.¹⁴² Barth writes:

The point is that here, as everywhere, the omnicausality [*Allwirksamkeit*] of God must not be construed as His sole causality. The divine change [*göttliche Wendung*] in whose accomplishment a man becomes a Christian is an event of true intercourse [*echten Verkehrs*] between God and man. If it undoubtedly has its origin in God's initiative, no less indisputably man is not ignored or passed over [*ignoriert und übergangen*] in it. He is taken seriously as an independent creature of God [*eigenständige Geschöpf Gottes*]. He is not run down or overpowered, but set on his own feet. He is not incapacitated, but addressed as an adult and treated as an adult [*nicht entmündigt, sondern mündig gesprochen auch als mündig behandelt*]. The history [*Geschichte*] of Jesus Christ, then, does not destroy a man's own life-history [*Lebensgeschichte*]. In virtue of it this history becomes a new history, that it is still his own new life-history [*Lebensgeschichte*].¹⁴³

For Barth, the way in which the history of Jesus Christ becomes the history of the Christian is by the resurrection, in which the earthly history of Jesus Christ is shown to be a once for all history present to all times and significant for all history.¹⁴⁴ The way in which the resurrection life of Jesus Christ becomes the renewing of life in the human being is the work of the Holy Spirit. This work is what makes a human being “free, able, willing and ready [*ermöglicht, erlaubt und gebietet*]” to give the event of the renewal of the human being in Jesus Christ a place in their own life history.¹⁴⁵ The Holy Spirit works in such a way that the human being is empowered and liberated for a response to God's grace, rather than subdued and compelled by it.¹⁴⁶ The structure of this relationship

¹⁴² Barth, *CD*, IV/4, 22.

¹⁴³ Barth, *CD*, IV/4, 22-3. Translation slightly altered. Cf. *KD*, IV/4, 25. This picture of the human being standing on his own feet reflects in vivid manner Barth's understanding of anthropology. Webster writes: “Once human reality is understood as essentially that which God constitutes in Jesus, and once life in grace is seen as originally and properly human (not as an accidental modification of some larger category of human being), then human freedom is no longer a sphere from which we may observe God's command and choose to obey or disobey. ‘Freedom’ is allegiance to what by the Holy Spirit the human person inescapably *is*. It is in this precise sense that the Christian life involves the Christian in ‘a walking genuinely on his own feet as he is beset by God.’” Webster, *Ethics of Reconciliation*, 143-3.

¹⁴⁴ Barth, *CD*, IV/4, 24-6.

¹⁴⁵ Barth, *CD*, IV/4, 26.

¹⁴⁶ Barth, *CD*, IV/4, 27.

between divine freedom and human freedom for God elicited by grace is exemplified in the human nature of Jesus Christ and, as we shall see, in the figure of Mary. The enabling of the human being for God does not involve, Barth insists, a repudiation, a disintegration or a usurpation of the human being and their capabilities, but rather the turning of these capabilities towards faithfulness to God. The Christian life is one in which grace is received and affirmed in the life of the believer as the believer exercises his own will.¹⁴⁷ This internalization or appropriation of the life of Jesus Christ in the life of the believer is ordered first and foremost by the work and relationship of the Holy Spirit with Jesus Christ. Barth makes reference to this, particularly to Christ's conception and birth by the Spirit, as well as his baptism and resurrection by the same Spirit.¹⁴⁸ Just as the Holy Spirit conceived, empowered and resurrected Jesus of Nazareth for his work and obedience before the Father, so does this Spirit work in the life of the believer, in strict analogy with his work in Jesus Christ. This relationship of the work of the Spirit in the life of Christ and in the life of Christians is used by Barth to elucidate his understanding of baptism with the Spirit and water. The two are distinct but correlated to one another in a way that places the work of God in a prior and normative position in relationship to the consequent agreement of human beings. Water baptism follows Spirit baptism. There can be no

¹⁴⁷ Barth, *CD*, IV/4, 27-8. John Yocum *Ecclesial Mediation in Karl Barth* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004) has convincingly shown that Barth has significantly altered his view of the relationship between the divine and human agency, particularly in the question of ecclesial mediation, from his earlier discussion of the sacraments in *CD* 1/2 to his discussion of baptism in *CD* IV/4. By the later volumes of the *CD*, Yocum argues, Barth has lost a notion of the "communion of action, in which visible actions and material substances are used by God as promised means of grace" (xii), that is, of a conception of divine action working itself out in the end through human action. This change, Yocum believes, significantly compromises the doctrine of revelation, particularly preaching, that Barth developed in the early volumes.

¹⁴⁸ Barth, *CD*, IV/4, 29-30.

reversal of this relationship, lest water baptism and the human act be mistakenly thought to precede the work of grace of the Holy Spirit.¹⁴⁹

4.8 Conclusion

In the preceding chapter we have examined Barth's exposition and use of the conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit. We have seen that Barth viewed the spiritual conception as a supremely appropriate and fitting occurrence in the life of Jesus. Through analysis of the work of the Spirit in the conception of Jesus we are able to understand something of the Holy Spirit's eternal identity in relationship to the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit exists eternally as the bond of love between the Father and the Son, uniting them together and preserving their distinction. As the agent of the eternal distinction-in-unity within God himself, the Spirit is also the agent of the unity and distinction of the Word of God and human flesh. The unique relationship between Jesus and the Holy Spirit, as it is established and exemplified in Christ's conception, displays the distinctiveness of Christ in relation to all other prophets and apostles of God, upon whom the Spirit comes later in their lives. Due to Christ's representative status as the eternally elect of God and to the agency of the Holy Spirit, human beings become Christians in analogy to the prototypical work of the Holy Spirit in the conception of Jesus. Barth treats the conception of Jesus by the Spirit as a pattern by which the "miracle" of Christian life can be interpreted and understood. This use of the spiritual conception to elucidate the Christian life contributes to the way in which Barth presents his idea of human agency in relationship to divine grace. Just as Jesus of Nazareth is supremely human in his union with the Word by the Spirit, in Barth's understanding, so are Christians activated and enabled to proper moral action by the same Spirit. As this

¹⁴⁹ Barth, *CD*, IV/4, 32, 34-5, 42-3; cf. Webster, *Ethics of Reconciliation*, 153.

takes place, the Holy Spirit acts as only God can: in supreme freedom despite all human finitude and sin. Thus, it is a true miracle and mystery that human beings become Christians. The incapacity of human beings for God is overcome by the work of the sovereign Spirit, who conceives fellowship with Christ in them, and who does this without also dissolving their human nature or agency. As and because the Holy Spirit establishes the bond of fellowship between the Word of God and the human nature of Jesus, so does the Holy Spirit liberate human beings to become Christians through the determination of human will and agency. Barth's use of the spiritual conception of Jesus preserves the mystery of God's freedom in Christian regeneration and life. It also seeks to affirm and illustrate the posture proper to human beings before God's grace. However, Barth's particular use of the pattern of the spiritual conception tends to mute interest in describing the Christian's experience of the Holy Spirit. While this is evidenced in Barth's refusal to describe the shape of Christian experience—such as through an *ordo salutis*—this is illustrated particularly clearly in his treatment of Mary, as we shall see in the following chapter.

Chapter Five: There for God: Mary in the Theology of Karl Barth

5.1 Introduction

In the previous three chapters we have attempted to show how Barth came to understand the doctrine of Christ's virgin birth as a fitting sign of the mystery of the incarnation. We have attempted to delineate how Barth articulated this fit in our studies of his Christology and pneumatology. In this chapter we shall examine the role of Mary in Barth's theology. Attention to Mary helps us to understand Barth's interpretation of the virgin birth because in Mary we can see the act of God's revelation and reconciliation from the perspective of its impact upon humanity. How Barth describes Mary gives us an important clue to how he conceives of Christian life generally. This investigation will require us to examine aspects of Barth's interaction with Roman Catholicism. After all, it was an early charge brought against Barth's theology—and one that has continued to the present—that his affirmation of the virgin birth placed him on the trajectory of Catholic Mariology.

¹ As we shall see, Barth evaluates Catholic Mariology by the criterion of its fittingness with the person and work of Christ. This same criterion was at work, as we saw, in Barth's evaluation of the virgin birth. In spite of Barth's radical critique of Roman Catholic Mariology, however, he did not abandon the figure of Mary. Rather, Barth interprets Mary as the prototypical instance of the radiation of the life of Jesus into the life of believers by the Holy Spirit. Mary's posture, her "readiness" (*Bereitshaft*) for God to work, is the posture of all Christians as they constantly stand before God's grace.²

¹ See, for example, Barth, *CD*, I/1, xiii; cf. Pannenberg, *Jesus*, 144, 147-8.

² Riesenhuber is correct to note that though Mary has a role only on the periphery of Barth's theology, she points toward the centre. The statements about Mary "are meaningful as an historical

5.2 Barth's Critique of Mariology

In this section we shall examine Barth's critique of Catholic Mariology. When set against this backdrop, Barth's interpretation of Mary reveals its distinctiveness. As we shall see, Catholic Mariology represents, for Barth, a great misunderstanding of the proper relationship between God's grace and human beings. Furthermore, Barth accepts the virgin birth by the same criterion by which he rejects Mariology: its fit with the mystery of the incarnation. The virgin birth accords with his understanding of who Christ is, but Mariology does not. Understanding why he rejected the latter will help us to understand more fully his reasoning behind accepting the former.

It has often been noted that Barth does not fall into the all too common misconception among Protestants that Roman Catholicism exalts Mary to the status of some kind of quasi-divine goddess.³ Both for Barth and for Roman Catholicism, Mary is important precisely because she is and remains a *human* creature. Several Catholic theologians have found Barth to be a helpful dialogue partner because he attempts to address Catholic Mariology on its own ground. On the other hand, however, Riesenhuber has correctly pointed out that Barth does not carefully scrutinize official Mariological statements made by the Roman Catholic Church, but rather treats the whole of Mariology as symbol of what he believes are broader and more devastating errors inherent in

milestone in the development of Barth's theological thinking and, further, in a systematic way as a hint of the center of Barth's view of Christianity." Riesenhuber, *Maria*, 14.

³ See, for example, Louth, *Mary*, 12; Fiddes, "Mary in the theology of Karl Barth," 111-2.

Catholic theology.⁴ Due to this habit in his polemics, especially during the time of the writing of the early volumes of the *CD*, Barth never gets around to drawing out the specific connections between Mariology and other doctrines as they are actually set out in Catholic teaching. For this reason his objections lack specificity in proportion to the importance he attaches to Mariology in Catholic thought.

The earliest discussions of Mary in Barth's published work occur in the 1920s in his lecture "The Word of God and the Task of the Ministry" (1922) and his essay "Schleiermacher's Celebration of Christmas" (1924).⁵ In the first piece, Barth simply mentions Mary and her "May it be" as an illustration of idealist mysticism. Just as Mary empties herself in order to receive the blessing announced by the angel, so, Barth explains, idealist mysticism requires the death of the individual—the overcoming of oneself—in order to encounter the divine Other.⁶ While critical of mysticism in general, Barth maintains that there is something to be preserved for Reformed theology even here, namely that God is indeed other than human beings and not an element latent within them. In the second piece, Barth makes note of how Schleiermacher treats the image of Christ and Mary in the infancy narratives as an expression of "elevated humanity" evoked by the image of mother and child.⁷ Barth views this sentimentality as evidence that Schleiermacher's view of Mary falls to the Feuerbachian critique of theology as

⁴ Riesenhuber, *Maria*, 31-7. Barth's exposition of Roman Catholic Mariology and his corresponding critique is based on what appears to be a relatively slim selection of Catholic authors. Barth makes notable use of M. Scheeben, F. Diekamp, B. Bartmann, R. and R. Grosche. Barth's later writing in the *CD*, particularly near the end of his life, demonstrates a more extensive familiarity with Roman Catholic documents. As we shall see, however, the substance of Barth's critique does not change.

⁵ Karl Barth, "The Word of God and the Task of the Ministry," *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1978), 181-217; "Schleiermacher's Celebration of Christmas," in *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings 1920-1928*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith (London: SCM Press, 1962), 136-58.

⁶ Barth, "The Task of the Ministry," 203.

⁷ Barth, "Schleiermacher's," 145-6; cf. Riesenhuber, *Maria*, 39.

projected anthropology. Just as Christ is ultimately lost in Schleiermacher's naturalization of the incarnation, so the real Mary is lost in his anthropological interpretation. In both of these early references to Mary, Barth is aiming to describe properly the relationship between Christ and other human beings. This concern continues to drive his critique of Mariology in the *CD*.

Barth's most notable and extended criticism of Mariology takes place in his exposition of the applicability of the term *Theotokos* to Mary in *CD I/2*. This is a suitable place from which to begin an examination of Barth's Mariology because the title *Theotokos* has consistently been used as the beginning point for Mariological doctrine in the Roman Catholic Church even in the modern era.⁸ In Barth's extended exposition of John 1:14, which forms the structure and substance of his description of revelation, he affirms *Theotokos* as a helpful and necessary title that serves "a very instructive" Christological purpose.⁹ According to Barth, the term indicates two main things. First, *Theotokos* vividly affirms that the Word became flesh by underscoring that Jesus Christ belongs to humanity in virtue of the fact that he has a human mother. Second, the term *Theotokos* makes it clear that the one born of Mary was none other than God's Son. Barth believes that this is the patristic and classical use of the term and that it has biblical warrant, particularly since Mary is addressed as the "Mother of the Lord" in Luke 1:31f., 35. Given its biblical legitimacy and its proper theological purpose, Barth believes that

⁸ Lawrence S. Cunningham, "The Virgin Mary," in *From Trent to Vatican II*, ed. Raymond F. Bulman and Frederick J. Parrella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 179.

⁹ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 138. In light of Calvin's silence on the term in his *Institutes*, "It is not too much of a stretch to say that Barth's reappropriation of *Theotokos* represents the *Aufhebung* of modern Reformed Christology." Perry, "Little Mary," 50

Theotokos is “sensible, permissible and necessary” as an “auxiliary Christological proposition [*Hilfsatz*].”¹⁰

Barth, however, accuses Roman Catholicism of overloading *Theotokos* by making it the “basis of an independent Mariology,” which thus obscures revealed truth in both form and content.¹¹ In Barth’s view, there was a tendency to treat Mary independently of Christ already in the second century. He expresses some disapproval over the parallel between Mary and Eve forged by Irenaeus, arguing that if the parallel is to be maintained, then it must also be said that Eve is never treated without Adam, just as Mary is never treated in isolation from Jesus.¹² However, it was particularly after the fourth century that Barth believes the title of *Theotokos*, which began as an “annexe to Christology,” became a proposition upon which to base a Mariology independent of Christ. The development of dogmas concerning the Mother of God began with *virginitas et postpartum* (649 CE), followed by the Immaculate Conception (1854 CE), her freedom from sin, and finally culminating in her physical assumption to heaven (1950 CE).¹³ In our first chapter, we saw how Thomas Aquinas argued that Mary received the special dignity she did in Catholic thought because of her proximity to the incarnate Word. Barth rejects this sort of thinking because he does not see any theologically sound way in which the glory of

¹⁰ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 138; cf. Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 71. Strümke is mistaken to describe the virgin birth as a Christological *Hilfsatz*—a statement whose primary legitimacy lies solely in its ability to clarify Christological dogma—when, in fact, it is the term *Theotokos* that Barth takes to fulfill this function. See Strümke, “Jungfrauengeburt,” 430.

¹¹ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 139.

¹² Barth, *CD*, I/2, 141.

¹³ For Barth’s criticism of the doctrine of the assumption of Mary, see *CD*, III/2, 638.

Interestingly, Barth does not comment on Mary’s virginity *in partu*. It would seem to be unlikely that Barth would accept this doctrine because it was not clearly taught in the New Testament descriptions of the birth of Jesus and because Barth puts little stock in the specific wording of Isaiah 7:14. Classically, the Isaiah passage was used to support the doctrine of Mary’s virginity *in partu* because it states that a virgin would both conceive and give birth. The *Protoevangelium of James* certainly influenced this idea. The notion of Mary’s *in partu* virginity may even be echoed in the Apostles’ Creed. Barth was certainly not averse to the miraculous, but, of course, limits himself to the canonical Scriptures in his exposition of these miracles.

Christ can redound to another. In view of his survey of the history of the development of Mariology, Barth writes that “Mariology is a growth [*Wucherung*], i.e., a diseased construct of theological thought. Growths must be cut out [*Wucherungen müssen abgeschnitten werden*].”¹⁴ As such a growth, Roman Catholic Mariology betrays itself as an “arbitrary innovation [*willkürliche Neuerung*]” in the theology of Scripture and the early church.¹⁵

Barth’s main problem with Mariology is simply that in it Mary is treated in relative independence from Christ. While never completely severed from Christ, Mary has come to have her *own* special dignity, merit and ministry. In contrast with the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon, and particularly the New Testament, according to Barth, Roman Catholic Mariology fails to use the term *Theotokos* as an *exclusively* Christological title. Barth writes:

Every word that makes her person the object of special attention, which ascribes to her what is even a relatively independent part in the drama of salvation, *is an attack upon the miracle of revelation*, because it is, after all, an attempt to illumine and to substantiate this miracle from the side of man or of his receptivity.¹⁶

In this passage Barth explicitly views Mariology as an attack upon the *miracle* of revelation, which immediately reminds us of our earlier discussion of Barth’s exposition of the virgin birth. The miracle that marks the mystery of revelation—the virgin birth—

¹⁴ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 139. Translation mine. Cf. *KD*, I/2, 153.

¹⁵ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 143. Riesenhuber is not quite correct to state that, for Barth, “Catholic Mariology is to be measured by the standard of the Bible, which is received by the church but not at the disposal of the church.” Riesenhuber, *Maria*, 18. He corrects himself somewhat later when he writes: “The real verdict with respect to Mariology is for Barth not so very much its tension with individual passages of the Bible as its fundamental opposition to the basic biblical truth of the necessary dogmatic statement of Christianity.” Riesenhuber, *Maria*, 21. Certainly, biblical exegesis and church tradition figure into Barth’s critique of Mariology, but, as we shall see, the primary criterion by which Barth rejects Catholic Mariology is in its inconsistency—its lack of appropriate “fit”—with the central mystery of Christian revelation and reconciliation. Riesenhuber seems to tint Barth’s position by interpreting it in a schema in which Bible and Church function as competing sources of revelation, rather than as witnesses to the one revelation of Jesus Christ.

¹⁶ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 140. Emphasis added.

attests to the sole work of God in his self-revelation, and thus excludes any notion of synergy between God and human beings. Mariology obscures the clarity of this miraculous sign by treating Mary as somehow deserving of the grace bestowed upon her.

Barth goes so far as to charge that Mariology is a falsification of Christian truth. His words are harsh: “[W]here Mary is ‘venerated,’ there the Church of Christ is not.”¹⁷ He believes that Mariology “disclosed the one heresy of the Roman Catholic Church which explains all the rest.”¹⁸ The issue of Mariology brings to the forefront that for which Barth has criticized Roman Catholicism and will continue to throughout the *CD*, namely that in Mariology human beings are shown to cooperate in their own redemption, the very point that the virgin birth was intended to guard against. Barth writes:

The “Mother of God” of Roman Catholic Marian dogma is quite simply the principle, model and epitome [*das Prinzip, das Urbild und der Inbegriff*] of the human creature cooperating servant-like [*dienend mitwirkenden*] (*ministerialiter*) in its own redemption on the basis of prevenient grace, and to that extent the principle, model and epitome [*das Prinzip, das Urbild und der Inbegriff*] of the Church.¹⁹

In Roman Catholic Mariology, according to Barth, Mary is portrayed as the ideal creature, as the bride who desires to be receptive to the bridegroom. It is this idea of a pure desire inherent in Mary, with which she cooperates with God’s grace through her *fiat mihi*, that Barth sees as characteristic of Roman Catholic theology as a whole and to which he reacts. For Barth, such cooperation of the creature with God implies an *analogia entis*, an “incarnational cosmos” and a general openness inherent in creation for the creator.²⁰

¹⁷ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 143.

¹⁸ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 143.

¹⁹ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 143. Translation slightly altered. Cf. *KD*, I/2, 157.

²⁰ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 144.

All this is what Mariology means. For it is to the creature creatively co-operating [*schöpferisch mitwerkenden*] in the work of God that there really applies the irresistible ascription to Mary of that dignity, of those privileges, of those assertions about her *co-operatio* in our salvation, which involve a relative rivalry [*Konkurrenz*] with Christ.²¹

The Roman Catholic error in Mariology, in Barth's opinion, extends to ecclesiology because of an assumed interpenetration between Mary's motherhood and the motherhood of the church.²² Barth believes that the Catholic Church views itself as mediating, like Mary, Christ to Christians. As such, the Catholic Church, like Mariology, comes to impinge upon the sole mediatorship of Christ by acting as a first point of contact that receives and directs the grace of Christ to Christians. As Barth says:

Like Mary (and like the pardoned human creature in general) the Church also possesses a *relatively independent* place and function in the redemptive process. It, too, lies with Christ, in the infinite distance, it is true, between the creature and the Creator, yet in such a way that not only is it born of Christ but, particularly in the eucharistic center of its life, Christ is also born of it. Not only does it need Christ, but in all seriousness *Christ also needs it*.²³

²¹ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 145.

²² The typology between the mother of Jesus, mother of the church and the church as the mother of believers extends at least as far back as Ambrose, was made popular as we saw with Augustine, and played a significant role in the ecclesiology and Mariology of Vatican II. *Lumen Gentium* describes the pivotal role of Mary in regard to the church as follows: "For in the mystery of the Church, which is itself rightly called mother and virgin, the Blessed Virgin stands out in eminent and singular fashion as exemplar both of virgin and mother. By her belief and obedience, not knowing man but overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, as the new Eve she brought forth on earth the very Son of the Father, showing an undefiled faith, not in the word of the ancient serpent, but in that of God's messenger. The Son whom she brought forth is He whom God placed as the first-born among many brethren, namely the faithful, in whose birth and education she cooperates with a maternal love." Pope Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium* (1964), VIII, 63; cf. 60-5, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html (accessed May 19, 2010).

²³ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 146. Emphasis added. Barth argues that it is Roman Catholicism's Mariology that is a primary means by which Catholics have affirmed the sole light and prophetic office of Christ but have at the same time obscured it through a "system of evasion." This has occurred through the setting up of Mariology and the teaching of the church as somewhat independent of the light of Christ. See *CD*, IV/1, 88.

In Barth's thought, the Protestant church must continue to protest against such notions of "reciprocity [*Reziprozität*] and mutual efficacy [*Wechselwirkung*]," lest faith become treated as an act of cooperation, rather than as the renouncing of all such cooperation.²⁴

As we have seen, Barth treated the Roman doctrine of Mary as revelatory of the quintessential problem in Roman Catholic thought. In contrast to Barth's emphasis on the actuality of grace and the act of God himself, in which human beings are reconciled to God by God alone, Roman Catholicism appears to divide the one, unified grace of God into graces that can be abstracted from Christ and distributed through various means. It is here that Barth believes that Roman Catholics have diverged "hopelessly" from the fundamental conviction of evangelical faith.²⁵ Barth believes this to be especially so given the watershed act of Rome in 1950, in which Pope Pius XII, in his Apostolic Constitution, *Munificentissimus Deus*, invoked the dogma of papal infallibility (*ex cathedra*) to proclaim Mary's Assumption as dogma.²⁶ Barth viewed such Mariological doctrine to betray a dualism in God's grace. He points to the Catholic distinction between internal and external grace, actual and habitual grace, operative and cooperative grace, sufficient and efficient grace, and of course, supernatural and natural grace as evidence of this long-standing dualism.²⁷ Such distinctions, in Barth's opinion, are compromises to and abstractions from the one grace of God mediated to human beings solely in Jesus Christ and his Spirit. Though Barth acknowledges that Roman Catholicism also affirms the unity of God's grace, he accuses it of not making use of this central conviction. Instead, Barth accuses Roman Catholics of treating the grace of God in Jesus Christ as

²⁴ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 146.

²⁵ Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 84.

²⁶ See *Munificentissimus Deus*, in *Our Lady Papal Teachings* ed., Benedictine Monks of Solesmes (Boston, MA: Daughters of St. Paul, 1961), 44.

²⁷ Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 84-7.

merely preparatory for that which really interests them, namely the more subjective descriptions of grace in the life of the believer. In effect, Roman Catholics have set up a system of “fatal references,” in which Mary is ultimately favoured over her son.²⁸ In Catholic theology, Barth believes that Mary is seen as the picture of the divinely prepared and gifted human being who is fit for her own dignity and who comes to represent in herself the subjective reception of grace. Barth rejects this portrait of Mary and what he believes is the “cleft” or “rift” made in the one grace of God that she represents.

Underlying Barth’s assessment of Roman Catholic Mariology, then, is his accusation that Catholicism has a conception of grace that has been abstracted from and stands alongside Jesus Christ himself. As such, Barth believes they have compromised the central truth of the New Testament.²⁹ Evangelical theology, by contrast, insists at every point that the subjective side of grace is determined and ordered entirely by the objective side.

According to Barth, in Evangelical theology the human being is simply and only a recipient, one who begs and reaches out in poverty for the one grace of God in Jesus Christ. Central to Barth’s conviction is the idea that the unified grace of God has an objective and subjective aspect, namely that the one grace of God not only comes to human beings but also creates its own reception within them.³⁰ For Barth, the grace of

²⁸ Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 87.

²⁹ By focusing solely on Barth’s critique of Mariology as it is set out in *CD* I/2, O’Meara misses Barth’s more subtle and precise critique of the Catholic doctrine of grace and its expression in Mariology given in *CD* IV/1. See O’Meara, *Mary in Protestant and Catholic Theology*, 217-23. This gives O’Meara a false sense of confidence that the Catholic-Protestant divide can be easily bridged with more attention to Barth’s theology. The problem that Barth has with Mariology in *CD* IV is that it displays the division of the indivisible grace of Christ and it is for this reason that he cannot accept a notion of prevenient grace, as O’Meara suggests.

³⁰ Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 87-8. While Yocum does not provide an extended discussion of Mary, several of the themes that he develops in relation to ecclesial mediation have a relevance to our discussion of Mary. In particular, in Barth’s criticism of the Roman Catholic tendency to divide the grace of Jesus Christ, we might perceive the basis for Yocum’s thoroughly developed observation that in the latter volumes of the *CD*, Barth tends to divide sharply divine action from human action (*Ecclesial Mediation*, 97-170). On this account, human action is confined entirely to a sphere of its own that follows *after* divine grace. If this is

Christ is identical with Christ himself; it is *actual* in Christ and cannot be separated from him.

Further insight can be gathered on Barth's view of Mariology from his treatment of Vatican II found in *Ad limina apostolorum*. Of particular importance is "A Letter about Mariology."³¹ In this short document Barth responds to a lecture on Mariology given by Peter Lengsfeld.³² He addressed Lengsfeld's work as part of his preparation for his trip to Rome in 1966. Barth denounces the basic presupposition of constructing a Mariology as an independent doctrinal work. Here he repeats his earlier conviction that the title *Theotokos* was originally only intended as an "aid in expressing Christology" and is not to be used as the basis upon which to construct a "grotesque" Mariology.³³ The claim is repeated that the Roman Catholic Church erred in its attribution of special dignities to Mary, even though those dignities were said to be really about the praise of her son. Barth argues that this "dignifying" of Mary actually "deprived this handmaid of her best possession," which he viewed as her lowliness.³⁴ In Barth's understanding, the history of the development of Mariology involves a retrospective justification of the

true, then Barth's criticism of the Roman Catholic division of grace is his perception of a transgression of this sharp distinction. However, earlier in the *CD*, Barth himself held to a "communion of action," in which divine action work through human action, such as in the sacraments, and also a doctrine of *concursus* in his doctrine of providence (*CD*, III/3, 90-154, 239-88), which, if Barth held to it consistently, might not have required him to critique Mariology so harshly.

³¹ Karl Barth, *Ad Limina Apostolorum: An Appraisal of Vatican II*, trans. Keith R. Crim (Richmond: John Knox, 1968), 57-62. For an account of Barth's questions posed on his trip to Rome and a Catholic response, see Philip J. Rosato, "Ad Limina Apostolorum in retrospect: the reaction of Karl Barth to Vatican II," in *Karl Barth: Centenary Essays*, ed. S. W. Sykes (CUP: Cambridge, 1989), 87-114.

³² Unnamed in the English translation of the letter published in *Ad limina apostolorum*, Lengsfeld was first introduced to Barth by Hans Küng and delivered a lecture in Küng's seminar, which was well-received by many of Barth's colleagues at Basel, but which was criticized by some in the Catholic Church due to statements he made on the question of the virgin birth. See Karl Barth, "Brief 91," in *Offene Briefe 1945-1968*, ed. Diether Koch (Theologischer Verlag: Zürich, 1984), 524.

³³ Barth, *Ad Limina Apostolorum*, 60. In a letter to Oscar Cullmann, Barth remarked, "I had said to Balthasar some years ago that I could have no objection in principle to a statue of Mary if, instead of on the altar, it were put on a level with the congregation and had its face turned toward the altar." Barth, "Letter 123," *Letters: 1961-1968*, 135.

³⁴ Barth, *Ad Limina Apostolorum*, 61.

arbitrary innovations of the teaching office of the church. The problem with this approach is that it has no proper basis, and thus, no inner “necessity” requiring its development.³⁵

When we read Barth’s critique of Mariology on the basis of its lack of necessity in light of Barth’s discussion of the virgin birth, we begin to come to a better understanding of why he affirms the virgin birth but rejects Mariology. On the one hand, the virgin birth bears an inner necessity because of its clear biblical attestation and, according to Barth, its consistency and congruity—its fitness—with the main matter of theology, namely the person and work of Jesus Christ. Mariology, on the other hand, lacks both the clear biblical attestation and, especially, an inner necessity, such that it runs in *competition* with the main matter of theology.³⁶

In his reflections on the second Vatican Council near the end of his life, Barth makes note of his regret that Marian dogma, “with its uncanny relationship to the essence and function of the Church,” is still being affirmed by the Catholic Church.³⁷ He expresses his thinly-veiled frustration that there does not appear to be any hint of even a partial revocation of Mariological dogma and suggests that the pronouncements of papal

³⁵ Barth, *Ad Limina Apostolorum*, 61.

³⁶ Barth’s final word to Lengsfeld about Mariology appears to suggest that Barth has eased the severity of his earlier criticism of Roman Catholicism. Whereas earlier Barth was adamant that the Roman Catholic Church and its Mariology were based on a fatal error, in this document Barth would appear to separate the essence of the Roman Catholic Church from its Mariology. Barth writes: “The Catholic Church does not stand or fall (thank God) on its Mariology.” Barth, *Ad Limina Apostolorum*, 62. Riesenhuber has hope that the supposed convergence between Barthian and Roman Catholic doctrines of justification, which he believes has been established by the studies of Küng (1957) and von Balthasar (1951), might also lead to an agreement on Mariology. Riesenhuber suggests that such a convergence may already be underway, signalled by the shift he detects in Barth’s criticism of Mariology in the later volumes of the *CD*—from a “heresy” to an “excess” (a “too much” [*Zu viel*]). See Reisenhuber, *Maria*, 31-7. In regard to Barth’s supposed softening on Mariology in the latter volumes of the *CD*, we point out that Barth’s criticism of Mariology and Roman Catholicism remained consistent in his response to Vatican II, *Ad Limina Apostolorum*. Furthermore, though Barth did seem hopeful, but still cautious, with regard to the theology of Küng and von Balthasar (see *CD IV/1*, 768), his misgivings over the official statements of the Catholic Church, even those of Vatican II, were just as strong at the end of his life as they were at the beginning. See *Ad Limina Apostolorum*, 20-40.

³⁷ Barth, *Ad Limina Apostolorum*, 71.

infallibility by the first Vatican Council and the affirmation of the Immaculate Conception of Mary as dogma in 1854 are the unfortunate obstacles that must be dealt with before a positive change can take place. In spite of these obstacles, Barth himself gestured toward a possible way of revising the current Mariological landscape within Roman Catholicism. In 1962, during the second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII included St. Joseph in the *Communicantes* prayer of the Canon of the Roman Mass by means of a *Motu Proprio* (by his own accord).³⁸ This move signalled to supporters the vindication of centuries of Catholic piety which viewed Joseph as holding a special place in Scripture and God's ongoing work in the world. "Josephologist" Francis Filas, who was known to Barth, explains that on the basis of the glory of Jesus Christ, which redounds to his Mother, Joseph, too, should receive the dignity suited to his office through marriage and fatherhood.³⁹ Filas points out that Joseph stands in proximity to Jesus, second only to Mary, and that Joseph's particular service to God involved his selfless love for Mary and Jesus shown through his protection and guardianship of them. Joseph's patronage of the holy family in Nazareth would reflect, according to Filas, Joseph's patronage to the church in all ages.⁴⁰ While many Protestants and some Catholics were indeed critical of the inclusion of St. Joseph on the grounds that it further reinforced the veneration of the saints, Karl Barth thought differently. In a letter to Oscar Cullmann in 1962, Barth expressed his musings about Joseph.

What has been decided about St. Joseph greatly pleased me. Is not the relationship between Joseph and Jesus Christ ("foster-father") a much more exact model for the church than Mary's relationship is? (cf. Pius IX *Quemadmodum Deus*, 8 Dec.

³⁸ Francis Filas, *St. Joseph After Vatican II: Conciliar Implications Regarding St. Joseph and His Inclusion in the Roman Canon* (Alba House: Staten Island, NY, 1966), 25, 130; cf. Stephen Benko, *Protestants, Catholics, and Mary* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1968), 109-28.

³⁹ Filas, *Joseph*, 59-60.

⁴⁰ Filas, *Joseph*, 79-97.

1870). A Jesuit, Fr. L. Filas, whom I met in Chicago, gave me instant approval in this. Some mariological ideas would then, of course, require modification.⁴¹

To a colleague in the Netherlands in 1963, Barth wrote:

What will you say when I tell you I am one of the few Protestants who was not annoyed by the insertion of St. Joseph into the canon of the mass? I find this biblical figure, movingly obedient and ministering, much more suited to be the protector (and exemplar!) of the church than Mary, with whose function that of the church is not to be compared. I cannot assume John XXIII had this in mind with his move toward a Joseph theology. But is it not permissible and perhaps even obligatory to think further in this direction and then perhaps reach further clarifications about ecclesiology as well?⁴²

Some of these ideas were mentioned to the Pope on his visit to Rome. Barth's rather humorous account is as follows:

The Pope had heard that I prefer Joseph, the foster father of Jesus, as the prototype of the nature and function of the church, to the "handmaiden of the Lord" who was subsequently elevated to the position of Queen of Heaven. He assured me he would pray for me, that in my advanced age I would be given deeper insight into this problem.⁴³

Barth held to his view on Joseph at least until March, 1967, with no sign of it abating.⁴⁴

It is quite interesting that the theologians who have sought convergence between Barth and the Roman Catholic Church on the topic of Mariology have neglected to take up Barth's own proposal.⁴⁵ Barth's support of the inclusion of St. Joseph into the Mass stemmed from his opposition to Roman Catholic Mariology and its implicit ecclesiology. Barth refused to accept that the church should be governed by the figure of the Mother of

⁴¹ Barth, "Letter 62," *Letters: 1961-1968*, 76. When writing to Hans Küng around the same time, Barth writes: "Do you know I am one of the few Protestants who was not annoyed but pleased that Joseph has been put in the canon of the mass. His function as foster-father of Christ makes him a much more appropriate patron of the church than the *Theotokos*, who is usually mentioned in this connection." Barth, "Letter 69," 84.

⁴² Barth, "Letter 80," *Letters: 1961-1968*, 94.

⁴³ Barth, *Ad Limina Apostolorum*, 15.

⁴⁴ See Barth, "Letter 247," in *Letters: 1961-1968*, 245.

⁴⁵ Fiddes does mention Barth's preference for Joseph but immediately adds that it is "rather odd even in Barth's own terms." He then jettisons Barth's comments on Joseph and proceeds to offer his own version of a Barthian Mariology. See Fiddes, "Mary in the Theology of Karl Barth," 122.

God, such that the church is understood actually to give birth to Christ in the world as Mary gave birth to Jesus. Such a view, for Barth, allotted to the church, as well as to Mary, an innate capacity that qualified it for mutual cooperation with God and implied a division of God's grace. The figure of Joseph cannot be so construed. Joseph clearly has no capacity for God, but rather is elected to serve Christ in the world as his guardian. Understood this way, Joseph becomes an excellent metaphor for Barth's view of the church. Barth writes:

Though I am very averse to the development of "Mariology," I am very inclined to "Josephology," because in my eyes Joseph has played a role with respect to Christ which the church should adopt. I know that the Roman Church prefers to compare its role with the glorious role of Mary. It brings the Christian message to the world in the same way in which Mary has given us Christ. But the comparison deceives. The church cannot give birth to the Redeemer; but it can and must serve him with humble and discrete enthusiasm. And that was exactly the role that Joseph played, who always held himself in the background and left all fame to Jesus. Exactly that should be the role of the church, if we want the world to rediscover the glory of the Word of God.⁴⁶

Barth finds the papal pronouncement about Joseph significant because the biblical figure of Joseph is important in his relationship to Jesus in the peculiarity of his "constant and unambiguous role" as "witness." This, Barth believed, suggests a possible chastening of Catholic Mariology and ecclesiology. Barth explains:

What is the Church if this witness [Joseph] is her "protector," as he has been named for a long time past? Certainly she is then not the image of a gleaming Mother of God and Queen of Heaven but instead the image of that altogether human "guardian father" who is easily overlooked because his relationship to the chief character is precisely that of a servant.⁴⁷

Because Joseph has been received into the Mass, there is provided an image of the church that is far less apt to be inflated than that of Mary, the Mother of God. Joseph can only be

⁴⁶ Karl Barth, "Über die Annäherung der Kirchen: Ein Gespräch zwischen Karl Barth und Tanneguy de Quénétain," *Junge Kirche: protestantische Monatshefte* 24 (1963): 309.

⁴⁷ Barth, *Ad Limina Apostolorum*, 72.

a servant of his adopted son. Mariology, then, may perhaps learn from Josephology about its proper limit and function. In short, Barth attempted to point to a way in which Roman Catholic Mariology might be revised from within. Mary and Joseph have the same theological status, in Barth's opinion: both are witnesses. They are properly conceived as witnesses, however, in different ways. Mary, as we shall see, witnesses as an object of grace gifted to receive Christ and serve him as his mother. Joseph witnesses as an object of grace through his election to serve as guardian. Holding both witnesses together limits them from being inflated beyond their proper scope.⁴⁸

In summary, Barth's criticism of Roman Catholic Mariology consists of his rejection of any notion of creation having some inherent and independent predisposition toward divine revelation. Barth detects in Roman Catholic Mariology just this sort of predisposition, such that Mary could be viewed as somehow meritorious for her agreement—her *fiat mihi*—in the face of God's revelation to her. This merit is interpreted in Catholic Mariology, according to Barth, as cooperation with grace. Barth is adamant that there can be no such cooperation with grace on the part of creation, in its own inherent capacity. Such an idea, in Barth's estimation, suggests that the one grace of God in Christ can be abstracted from Christ himself, divided and then possessed by the creature. It is this idea of grace that is idealized in the Catholic portrait of Mary and that

⁴⁸ Bender writes: "But could there not be a place for both Joseph and Mary? For Barth, the central task of the church is witness, pointing to the complete and perfect work of God to which the church adds nothing. As its representative, Joseph can simply point to Christ in the manger, just as John the Baptist points to Christ on the cross in Grünewald's depiction of the crucifixion, an image beloved to Barth. Nevertheless, Mary's presence in the Christmas story points to another truth of God's salvation. This divine visitation, this perfect and complete work of singular and uncompromised grace, is an action that God chooses to bring about through a human partner. And this suggests a real, though radically chastened, form of mediation. In the end, it is questionable whether a choice can be made between such witness and mediation. Are not both needed to qualify each other and together point to a deeper and inexpressible reality, the one protecting against a synergistic understanding of grace, as the other protects against a monistic one? Both Joseph and Mary were present at the manger, and both testified to the mystery and miracle of Christmas." Bender, *Christological Ecclesiology*, 282-3.

Barth believes has come to characterize the Catholic view of the church, and ultimately the entire Catholic view of creation. The Catholic Mary is, for Barth, the symbolic portrayal of the philosophical concept of the *analogia entis*. As we shall see below, and as we indicated in the previous chapters, Barth believes that there is a proper way to discuss creaturely cooperation with divine grace, but only if it is made explicit that such cooperation takes place on the *sole* basis of the one, *unified* grace of God in Christ. Mary comes to represent, for Barth, just this sort of cooperation.

5.3 Mary in Scripture

Barth's treatment of Mary is not limited to his critique of Rome. As was hinted at in the previous section, Barth does believe there is a positive role that Mary plays in Scripture and Christian thought.⁴⁹ In his exposition of *The Great Promise*—the informal Advent lectures Barth offered his students in 1934 that we examined briefly in our third chapter—Barth lays the exegetical groundwork for what he believes is a New Testament corrective to Roman Catholic Mariology. In the literature written on Barth's treatment of Mary and Mariology, only two authors make use of Barth's explicit exegesis of the first chapter of Luke.⁵⁰ This is unfortunate because in *The Great Promise* we see two crucial things. First, Barth sets out his alternative interpretation of the central biblical text from which Catholic Mariology has been drawn. Second, Barth delineates a typological reading of Mary and the church, which runs very close to the typological connection he criticized in his rejection of Mariology.

⁴⁹ Tait writes: "Barth's criticism of Catholic Mariology is not innocuous or qualified. It is very real, and it is pungent. But, and here is a significant factor, he has so much more to say about Mary in a helpful and positive way that his negative utterances must be transcended if a full appreciation of his position is to be gained." Tait, "Karl Barth and the Virgin Mary," 409.

⁵⁰ Perry, "Mary," 58-62; Tait, "Virgin Mary," 406-25.

We shall recall that Barth interprets the story of the annunciation to Mary in comparison with the narrative of the annunciation given to Zechariah. In this comparison Mary is set up as an image of faithful Christian belief, whereas Zechariah is viewed as a picture of human unbelief judged by God.⁵¹ Barth argues that the figure of Mary serves an exemplary function, though her place in the history of salvation is entirely unique.⁵² She occupies the position of the last witness of the Old Testament and the first witness of the New. This significance, however, does not attribute to her any special honour or dignity because it is established completely by God's election itself. Unlike the Mary of Roman Catholic dogma, whom he accuses as having been raised to a "second center" in competition to Christ, the biblical Mary's unique status is attributed solely to God's freedom.⁵³ Precisely because of her election, Mary is to be understood as a representative of humanity before the grace of God.

For *particularly* Mary, *particularly* as forming the extreme end in the line of those who have received the promise and wait for the Lord, is characterized unmistakably as a human, as a person who is opposite to God, who is in need of grace and receives grace. Particularly with her even if what has been promised to her is surely unique, it becomes unequivocally clear that to receive such a promise means to be *human*. And this implies to have *faith* and totally *depend* on faith, to think in faith, to act in faith. If anyone belongs to us, totally to us, in the depth of human need and promise, it is particularly Mary who is visited by the angel of God and called to occupy such an extraordinary position as she does. Particularly this extraordinary position shows and proves again unequivocally that there is nothing superhuman, no human suitability for God, no qualification for mediatorship. There is only the grace of God which attends to man. If Mary with her whole person is a testimony for the extraordinary dimension of God, it is to be said that this extraordinary dimension is God's *mercy* which concerns itself with man. Can such a figure meet with worse misunderstanding than that which has happened to her in the Catholic Church?⁵⁴

⁵¹ Barth, *Great Promise*, 16, 25-6.

⁵² Barth, *Great Promise*, 18-9.

⁵³ Barth, *Great Promise*, 19.

⁵⁴ Barth, *Great Promise*, 19-20. Emphasis in original.

Mary stands as the representative human being, elect of God, to witness the in-breaking of God. As such, she represents humanity itself. What is done in her is unique, but shares the form of the reception of revelation among all Christians. Roman Catholic Mariology, according to Barth, obscures this point by glorifying the object of grace, as though she were deserving of the grace she received. Even Mary's humility, her lowliness, is not her virtue or piety, but her actual situation before God. That is, Mary is not a paragon of humbleness, but an example of God directing himself freely in grace to those who are in fact in a state of humility and lowliness. "When we perceive in Mary this ultimate humility, we must make it quite clear that she has not made herself humble, she *is* humble. It is not a device of self-abasement which matters here, but bowing down before God and his word."⁵⁵

When Barth treats the Annunciation scene itself, these themes are repeated. The angel declares, "Hail, O favoured one, the Lord is with you!" (verse 28). Barth understands this greeting according to Luther's translation (*Du Holdselige!*), in which God's favour upon Mary is itself the blessing. This decisively takes any notion of prior merit or virtue out of Mary's hands and focuses the attention on the God who blesses.⁵⁶ Barth does not give any credence to the notion that the address to Mary as the "favoured one" (Luke 1:30) can be viewed as anything other than God's grace.⁵⁷ That Mary is told by the angel that she has found favour with God does not imply that she had previously sought it. In the Old Testament, finding favour is never the result of human endeavour, but is always the matter of the good shepherd finding the lost sheep.⁵⁸ Mary is singled out

⁵⁵ Barth, *Great Promise*, 25. Emphasis mine.

⁵⁶ Barth, *Great Promise*, 22.

⁵⁷ Barth, *Great Promise*, 26.

⁵⁸ Barth, *Great Promise*, 26.

among human beings by God's grace in which a real relation has been established with her from the side of God and in this greeting we see what is true about the church as a whole. By calling Mary "favoured one," Barth believes that the Bible is implying the doctrine of justification, and in the phrase, "the Lord is with thee," sanctification. Thus, in the greeting of the angel, Mary becomes a type of the church in which the people of God are elected, justified and sanctified, even called to a particular work, all in grace.⁵⁹ The Annunciation acknowledges that Mary is blessed, not because of her virtue or piety, but precisely because the angel has been commanded to make an announcement to her.⁶⁰ The Lord is with Mary because of the grace of election, and not because of something inherent in Mary herself. Nevertheless, Barth continues to underscore that because God is with her, he truly works within her and in her freedom. By her election and God's address, Mary *herself* is blessed. The grace of God does not work to overpower Mary, but to establish her as a human being before God, free and responsible.⁶¹

Mary's response to the Annunciation, "How can this be, since I have no husband" (Luke 1:34), is treated as exemplary for the wonder and awe of the human being before grace. Mary's question strikes at the very centre of God's work proclaimed in the Gospel, and for this reason Mary occupies a representative position in the expectant community. Using quite astounding language given his polemic against Roman Catholicism, Barth writes:

Mary with this question stands representatively at the head of the whole Advent community and of the whole Church. This is *the* great question which we have to ask. We do *not* know how this is to come about. As soon as we abstract the fact *that* it happens, we can only ask, *how* shall it happen? And this we cannot answer. The question regarding the possibility, the practicality of God's revelation is an

⁵⁹ Barth, *Great Promise*, 23.

⁶⁰ Barth, *Great Promise*, 22.

⁶¹ Barth, *Great Promise*, 23.

unanswered question. It can only be answered from the other side: the *angel* speaks with Mary. He does not speak to her of a husband; but into the midst of her life, into the life of this simple little maiden, is placed what is wholly other, the incomprehensibility of God.⁶²

The question of Mary is the question of the church, which she asks before all else, and this places her at the representative head of the entire Christian community. It is the question of the entire church because it expresses the truth that human beings can only be objects of sovereign grace. Similarly, Mary's response to the answer of the angel is the only one possible for the church: "Let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

What God's omnipotence really is, we only notice when we do as Mary does, when we grant, concede, agree: "Let it be to me according to your word!" With this we acknowledge that what God has said will be carried out. Thus Mary finally simply merges into the general story of the Advent. It is *believing* man who acknowledges this. But in this general Advent story of Mary, the Christmas story already lightens up as her particular story.⁶³

Mary is shown to be an example of proper Christian life because of her appropriate posture before grace and in obedience, the posture of faith and gratitude elicited by God's grace itself.

Further clarity regarding Barth's understanding of Mary is found in his exposition of the encounter between Mary and Elizabeth. Both Mary and Elizabeth are treated by Scripture simply as "recipients of the promise."⁶⁴ As such, Barth treats them both as types of the church. He describes both women as insignificant in themselves, unknown, and feeble in the face of the problems which beset humankind. And yet, their relationship to

⁶² Barth, *Great Promise*, 32. Emphasis in original. Wonder and astonishment before the *Novum* of the act of God is supremely appropriate, for Barth, and forms an important element in his spirituality—an "existential"—which corresponds to his actualism. See Mangina, *Karl Barth on the Christian Life*, 132.

⁶³ Barth, *Great Promise*, 34. Emphasis in original. Mary's *fiat mihi* and her praise in the Magnificat illustrate the "yes" of creation to the "Yes" of God. See Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, 100. Webster describes Barth's view of gratitude and responsible service as not simply self-positing or absolute, but a real spontaneity on the part of the human being in relation to the one truly spontaneous act of the self-positing God himself. See Webster, *Barth*, 104.

⁶⁴ Barth, *Great Promise*, 37.

one another is constituted, not in their feebleness, but in the unity and mutual recognition of their received promise. This relationship between Elizabeth and Mary is a pattern that describes the constitution of the church as it stands under the promise of God.

That is what belonging together and being together means in the *Church*. The Church is wherever two people—and that now it does not matter at all what kind of people they are—where insignificant people, two simple women, thus belong together and are together in the hope given to them through the word of God and spoken in their hearts. In this hope there is the presence of what is hope for.⁶⁵

Mary and Elizabeth together are thus understood as a type of the church, and this extends all the way to their pregnancies. Just as the church holds the promise of God, so do these two women hold in their own bodies the object of God's promise. The image of the pregnant women depicts the fellowship of those who stand together as those who have received the promise that is already present in their midst.

The answer is that where there are such people who have received the promise, such a Mary and such an Elizabeth, where the *Church* is, there is what is called pregnancy in physical life, there is expectancy and the presence of what is expected; there is not only a knowledge of grace, but there is grace itself. Where the Church is, there is he in the midst of them, there is he who is the hope of the Church, without whom there would be no Church, as little as the world which God has created from nothing.⁶⁶

The actual words which Elizabeth directs to Mary, which have had such an illustrious history, are interpreted by Barth in a way that conforms to his understanding of grace. Elizabeth's "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb," is a form of witness, not to Mary, but to Jesus Christ. Barth explains: "Mary is blessed among women, because the fruit of her womb is blessed."⁶⁷ Barth devotes little time to the exposition of these words at this point, though he will take them up later, in the *CD*. He refuses to see in Elizabeth's declaration to Mary any sort of independent

⁶⁵ Barth, *Great Promise*, 38. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁶ Barth, *Great Promise*, 39. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁷ Barth, *Great Promise*, 41.

significance and so he understands Elizabeth's words as a repetition of what all Christians everywhere must repeat to one another: you are blessed because God has blessed you in Christ.

The *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55) is particularly important for Barth in his understanding of Mary's significance, as it was for Luther, whose "perfectly correct exegesis" clearly influenced Barth's own exposition.⁶⁸ The *Magnificat* is viewed by Barth to be Mary's response to Elizabeth's declaration of her blessedness in Luke 1:45. As such, and because of Mary's typological role as a pattern of the church, the *Magnificat* is to be read as a supremely appropriate song of praise elicited by God's grace. Barth writes:

Where Christ is, there is the Church. This Elizabeth has articulated. And now Mary *answers in the name of the Church*, now in Mary herself the Church speaks and says what is to be said where this happening applies to Christmas and Advent, where this secret truth holds, the truth of the presence of Jesus Christ and his messenger. Where this holds, there all men must say together what the song of praise of Mary says, there every individual in this Church must say just this for his own person and his own life.⁶⁹

Barth reads Mary's words in the *Magnificat* as appropriate words of the church. The basis for this identity between Mary and the church is founded upon the presence of the infant Jesus in the body of Mary and the accompanying promise made to her. The infant Jesus in the womb of his mother is the picture of the church's life which lives in fulfillment of the promise given to her. "As Mary and Elizabeth lived in the promise, so do we with them, and for this reason we also live in fulfillment. This seems to me to be the meaning of this song of praise; the Church speaks the words with Mary, no, in Mary."⁷⁰ The

⁶⁸ See Barth, *CD*, I/2, 140.

⁶⁹ Barth, *Great Promise*, 43. Emphasis in original.

⁷⁰ Barth, *Great Promise*, 54.

church can therefore sing the song of Mary with her because she is the picture of the church having received the promise and waiting for its consummation. Barth writes:

We speak of Mary, but we also speak of the Church at the same time, and we speak of ourselves too....We are called upon to take our stand next to Mary and to see that this rejoicing and this extolling of the soul can and may be any moment of our rejoicing.⁷¹

Barth emphasizes the place of rejoicing and praise in the *Magnificat* as the proper and appropriate, indeed the only, human response to grace.

In Luke 1:46-7, Mary explains how her “soul magnifies the Lord” and how her “spirit rejoices in God.” This magnifying and rejoicing form the essence of proper human action in relation to grace, which, as we have seen, is emphasized so strongly in *CD*. What is so crucial to Barth is that Mary’s magnification is not latent within her as though it were at her disposal, but rather must follow the grace of God as it is enabled by that grace. As such, praise and rejoicing always and only follow upon a miracle. Barth writes:

However, if it is true that we may speak in the Church like Mary, we cannot do this without reviewing the pure work of God that happens to us, a work that we cannot comprehend and in which we do not recognize ourselves. It is a word of the *virgin* Mary who has become a mother not in the way in which a maiden usually becomes a mother, but through the Holy Spirit, through the miracle. Thus it is always a miracle when God, as he does in the holy Scripture, concerns himself with man and when man can say: “My soul magnifies the Lord!” It is always a reflection of the virgin birth which then falls into our life, not less miraculous than was the immaculate conception (sic): a work of Jesus Christ, a work of God and not a work of man.... And when we ask what this extolling of God consists of in our life, then under the guidance of the Holy Scripture we must say: It is something quite simple, something quite insignificant looking and yet infinite, to be understood only as a miracle. It is simply this: that in our short existence throughout the days and years and decades during which our life is given to us, throughout the worries and problems and struggles of our lives, we are again and again at every step called upon to let God *be* the Lord.⁷²

⁷¹ Barth, *Great Promise*, 48.

⁷² Barth, *Great Promise*, 44-5. Emphasis in original. Webster writes: “‘Gratitude’ and ‘responsibility’ serve Barth’s purpose here because both can be described as genuine human undertakings, without attributing to the absolute or unoriginated spontaneity. They are neither purely self-originating activities, nor do they proceed in an autonomous way; yet they remain modes of action in which human

This “letting God be the Lord” is, for Barth, a central aspect of his understanding of Christian life. It consists of a life lived in response to God’s grace and command at each moment.

The precedence of grace must be clearly underscored, as Barth believes it is in the *Magnificat*. Mary’s rejoicing, her example, is directed to God her Saviour (Luke 1:47). By identifying her Saviour, Mary acknowledges the grace that has been bestowed upon her. This grace, Barth insists, is seen clearly in Luke 1:48. The reason Barth gives for why it is that Mary’s soul can magnify the Lord is because the Lord has regarded her humble state. God’s regard for Mary occurs apart from any cooperation with grace. Barth writes:

This does not happen because of some independent, self-made elevation of soul, but because he, the Lord, has *regarded little* Mary, because he, the Lord, has *regarded* his *poor* Church. Look at little Mary, look at the poor Church; there is no reason for elation and joy. But contemplate him to whom both Mary and the poor Church look, then you understand it. What has happened? He has regarded the *low estate* of his handmaiden.⁷³

According to Barth, the regard of God for the humble, for the poor, is the basic condition that elicits the human response of rejoicing and praise. Incidentally, though not unexpectedly, Barth mentions the mystery of the virgin birth here because in the virgin

beings project themselves. All that Barth seeks to deny, therefore, is that only acts which are completely self-generated acts can properly be called modes of human self-realization. Thus he proposes that “the being of man [is] his act in gratitude.” Webster, *Barth*, 103. These themes are helpfully elucidated in Mangina’s treatment of Barth’s view of the affections in the Christian life. See Mangina, *Karl Barth on the Christian Life*, 123-59.

⁷³ Barth, *Great Promise*, 46-7. Emphasis in original. Tait misunderstands Barth’s interpretation of Mary’s humility when he explains that Barth believes Mary is humble because she bows low before God and his Word. For Barth, Mary’s humility is a fact of her existence, not a matter of her virtue. She is humble by circumstance, not by choice. See Tait, “Virgin Mary,” 412.

birth, as in grace, God acts unilaterally to “regard” his people.⁷⁴ Mary is the elected human object upon whom that miracle is wrought.

Barth emphasizes the word “mercy” in Luke 1:50. Once again, he draws a parallel between Mary and the church which allows those in the church to pray the prayer of Mary. The basis of that analogy is the grace of God. “In the Church one knows that this [mercy] is not merited, that God does not owe us anything, not even that he regard us.”⁷⁵ Clearly Mary has not merited the mercy bestowed upon her, and it is this that makes her such an appropriate figure for the church. In fact, Barth underscores the point that if Mary is understood to have merited the mercy shown to her in being blessed by God, then she is no longer one in need of mercy and, following from that, no longer suitable as a model for the church.⁷⁶ Barth points to the reference to the “arm of the Lord” (Luke 1:51) in the *Magnificat* in order to illustrate the unilateral action of God’s grace upon Mary, and so, upon the church. “Where the Church is, where a Mary and Elizabeth are, where the Saviour has come and with him also John, there one knows that ‘He has shown strength with his arm.’”⁷⁷ It is with this arm that God works without the aid of his creatures.

Barth completes his exposition of the *Magnificat* with reference to Mary’s acknowledgment of the grace of God to Israel (Luke 1:54-55). Through this, Barth makes clear that in his estimation Mary continues to stand alongside the rest of the people of God, as one of them, and not apart from them. That is to say, Mary remains a part of Advent, in the expectation of the fulfillment, not as a cooperator in God’s own work.⁷⁸ Thus, the *Magnificat* is, in Barth’s opinion, an expression of the church because the one

⁷⁴ Barth, *Great Promise*, 47.

⁷⁵ Barth, *Great Promise*, 49.

⁷⁶ Barth, *Great Promise*, 50.

⁷⁷ Barth, *Great Promise*, 51.

⁷⁸ Barth, *Great Promise*, 54.

to whom it was originally ascribed maintains before God's grace a posture which is proper to the church. Mary is the elect object of grace upon whom a miracle is wrought, an aspect of which is the gratitude and praise elicited from her.

Mary's unique particularity, her reception of Jesus Christ within herself, which is unrepeatable in the way it occurred to Mary, is viewed by Barth as a type of how all Christians everywhere receive the grace of God within themselves. This grace does not incapacitate them or overrun them, but rather places them in the proper posture for authentic human action. Following Mary's *Magnificat*, Barth shows how the proper form and content of this human action expresses itself in worship and gratitude. There is no room for a Mariology in Barth's exegesis because setting Mary up as someone especially dignified and privileged would be to remove from her any typological significance. She would be glorified *out* of solidarity with the church. Barth believes that his typology of Mary and the church does not amount to Mariology because he does not treat Mary herself as the basis of the typology. Rather, it is God's free work upon Mary that establishes the connection between her and the church: both are objects of God's electing grace. Barth even includes Elizabeth in his typological reading and this underscores, for Barth, that Mary is not exalted above other human beings in her representative status. Mary is not dignified by any grace but the grace of Christ, which establishes her as a type of all Christians.

5.4 Mary as There for God

When Barth discusses Mary in the *CD*, we see the themes that he drew from his exegesis of Luke 1 repeated and expanded, creating a portrait of Mary that directly

challenges Catholic Mariology, as he describes it.⁷⁹ Here again, Barth depicts Mary as the picture of human incapability for God who must always depend upon the grace of God in Christ to work and elicit from her the praise and worship due to him. In addition to reinforcing these ideas, Barth refers to Mary at key points in the *CD* in order to buttress his view of divine grace and human agency against that of Rome. Barth echoes his exposition of Luke 1 and again affirms Mary, alongside John the Baptist, to be the “personal climax [*Spitze*]” of the Old Testament and the “first man [*Mensch*]” of the New Testament. Mary’s significance is found in her location in Scripture and, particularly, her relation to the advent of Christ. In her relation to Christ, she represents “man to whom the miracle of revelation happens.”⁸⁰ Her role is a typological one in which she “can only represent man (both Old Testament and New Testament man alike) in his reception of God.”⁸¹ According to Barth, her typological role in the reception of Jesus Christ plays an important part in the New Testament because she indicates that human beings can bring nothing to revelation and reconciliation. Human beings stand as objects of divine grace. Barth writes: “In her very lack of emphasis, in the infinite significance of her reserve, just because she is only important as the one who receives and is blessed, the figure of Mary is an indispensable factor in Bible proclamation.”⁸²

⁷⁹ Perry is correct when he writes: “When it comes to Mary in the *Church Dogmatics*, something is there beyond polemics, something in need of exposure, analysis, and even extension.” Perry, “Little Mary,” 48. As we shall see, Barth regularly repeats himself in his use of Mary in the *CD*. Nevertheless, charting the most important references to Mary in the *CD* proves its worth because it reveals the consistency of Barth’s thinking on this topic throughout his career and clearly delineates his position for ecumenical discussions, in which the differences between Barth and Rome are often considered to be merely cosmetic.

⁸⁰ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 140.

⁸¹ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 140.

⁸² Barth, *CD*, I/2, 140. Emphasis added.

As we have seen, Barth emphasize at great length that human beings are really present in revelation and reconciliation, but not in a way that supplements God's work.⁸³

As we saw in Chapter 3, Mary's virginity has an important place in the birth of Christ because it shows the utter impotence and incapacity of human beings for God apart from God's miraculous work. Barth writes:

The virginity of Mary in the birth of the Lord is the denial, not of man and the presence of God, but of any possibility [*Möglichkeit*], attribute [*Eignung*] or capacity [*Fähigkeit*] in him for God. If he has this possibility [*Möglichkeit*]⁸⁴—and Mary clearly has it— it means strictly and exclusively that he acquires it [*er sie bekommt*], that it is laid upon him [*sie ihm beigelegt wird*]. In this possibility of his for God he can as little understand himself as Mary in the story of the Annunciation could understand herself as the future mother of the Messiah. Only with her *Ecce ancilla Domini* can he understand himself as what, in a way inconceivable to himself, he has actually become before God and by God [*vor Gott und von Gott her faktisch geworden ist*].⁸⁴

Barth's language in this context echoes his discussion of human agency later on in the *CD*, as we have seen. As a human being, Mary is truly present at the incarnation, indispensably so, and her contribution is one that is preceded by and elicited by the miracle of grace wrought upon her. In Mary, human beings are “there for God [*da sein für Gott*], if God on His part wishes to act on man and with man.”⁸⁵ In Mary, human nature is present in revelation as “non-willing, non-achieving, non-creative, non-sovereign man, only in the form of man who can merely receive, merely be ready, merely let something be done to and with himself.”⁸⁶ Her virginity, the sign of her incapacity,

⁸³ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 186.

⁸⁴ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 188. Translation slightly altered. Cf. *KD*, I/2, 206. Tait writes: “Mary was not chosen on the basis of her virginity or her femininity, but in her femininity to be an example of what man can be and do when God concerns himself with him.... Barth is quite clear that there is no issue of merit here, no issue of woman being any holier than man, or of her being given special privileges. The real issue is that God regards man in his weakness and humility, and the weaker creature, the servant (handmaid), responds to God.” Tait, “Virgin Mary,” 418.

⁸⁵ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 195.

⁸⁶ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 191. Strümke interprets Barth's understanding of Mary to exemplify a pure passivity, understood as sheer inertness or inactivity. See Strümke, “Jungfrauengeburt,” 436. Migliore

underscores that there is no possibility for God latent in her. Rather, this possibility is given to her by the work of God. Mary's involvement in the incarnation simply consists in her being the object of God's work. Barth writes:

Of course, man is involved, not as God's fellow-worker [*Werkgenosse*], not in his independence [*in seiner Eigenständigkeit*], not with control [*mitverfügend*] over what is to happen, but only—and even that because God has already given himself to him [*weil Gott sich ihm schon geschenkt hat*—in his readiness [*Bereitschaft*] for God.⁸⁷

Barth's use of the language of readiness is particularly interesting given his critique of Mariology. On the one hand, Barth argues that Mary's readiness is not to be understood as constituting a contact between God and human beings. On the other hand, Barth seems to argue here that it is precisely Mary's readiness, her virginity, which is the appropriate object for God to work upon in order to show the freedom of his grace. Her readiness is not a virtue, but the bare fact of her existence as God's chosen. God makes his own possibility, and this possibility is well displayed in his election of a virgin woman to bear the Christ-child.

As we saw earlier in our third chapter, Barth believes that there is nothing inherent in women that make them suitable for God's work over and above men, but rather that it is appropriate for God to have worked the incarnation through a woman

writes that "Mary is seen by Barth as the purely receptive participant in God's salvific action." Daniel L. Migliore, "Mary: A Reformed Theological Perspective," *Theology Today* 56.3 (October, 1999): 349. This is far from Barth's intention, however. Barth has a doctrine of passivity that involves action in the world; the human being is actively pliable before God, as is evidenced in their invocation of God, and their waiting and readiness for God's summons.

⁸⁷ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 192. Translation slightly altered. Cf. *KD*, I/2, 210. John Webster's description of Barth's reversal of modernity's view of the human person sits well with the conception of human agency that Barth seems to be working with in this section. For Barth, the human being exists in a moral ontology shaped by God's election and covenant. As such, the human being does not find their moral agency in isolation from the will of their creator, but within his action. "To exist as a moral being is to exist in a given shape, to act *within certain limits*. Those limits are not a set of arbitrarily imposed barriers, closing off what are, in fact, genuine human possibilities. Rather, they are the *form* within which and as which the human moral agent may exist, and outside which it is not meaningful to speak of good human conduct at all. Being a human moral agent means existing in this way, not as a hindrance to liberty, but as the shape in which human life is itself." Webster, *Ethics of Reconciliation*, 55.

because of the symbolism tied to women and men in salvation history. The suitability of Mary for the incarnation is that the virgin woman allows for human being to be present physically but without any hint of human capacity for God. This is different from what Barth perceives to be true about Roman Catholic Mariology in that, for Barth, there is no sense in which the human creature, even the virgin human creature, bears some inherent openness before God. Quite the opposite, in fact. Virginity, as we will recall, means for Barth incapacity and impotence. Thus, Barth can describe Mary as ready for God, and suitably so, without also positing that her readiness is something she bears as merit before God. Pannenberg's criticism that Barth has placed himself on the path to Roman Catholic Mariology thus has no traction here.⁸⁸ Far from attributing to the Virgin Mary a particular merit—her virginity, her femininity or humility—Barth argues that Mary's suitability to be the Mother of God is found solely in that her *lack* of merit displays the power and grace of God. Barth writes:

[I]t is only on the ground of an act of divine justification and sanctification that human nature (at this very point, too) will participate in that fellowship [*allein jener Gemeinschaft teilhaftig wird*]. It is not, then, as if at this point a door is opened which can lead to Mariology and thus to a doctrine of the goodness of the creature and its capacity for God, to a doctrine of the independent holiness of the Church. This only can and must be said here: in the form of this act of divine justification and sanctification, and so in the mystery of the divine mercy, human nature (apart from sinful human history and in spite of the corruption proper to human nature itself) is made worthy to be a partaker of the divine nature by grace and by a miracle of grace.⁸⁹

Mary is, quite simply, the object upon whom God works, but as God does so, Mary is made capable of participating in God's work of revelation and redemption. It is God the

⁸⁸ Pannenberg, *Jesus*, 147-8.

⁸⁹ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 196. Translation slightly altered. Cf. *KD*, I/2, 214.

Holy Spirit who creates the possibility, power and capacity which would otherwise be impossible in Mary, but really becomes possible in her.⁹⁰

Barth's description of Mary's "readiness" for God can be clarified through attention to his writings about the "Readiness of God" and the "Readiness of man" in *CD* II/1. In this volume Barth sets forth his understanding of the knowability of God in contrast to natural theology, which posits some manner of accessibility to God from the part of humankind. Barth argues that God is only knowable to human beings by an act of God's self-revelation. This self-revelation is grounded in God's triune knowledge of himself.⁹¹ The corresponding readiness on the part of human beings for God, then, must be readiness for God's *grace*.⁹² It is out of the question, for Barth, that human beings could access this divine knowledge of God in their sin, by which they constantly deceive themselves and domesticate the grace of God into that which they can master and manipulate.⁹³ Rather, it is always a miracle that human beings come to know God, that they can be ready and receptive for his grace.⁹⁴ But how does this take place in the life of sinful human beings? Barth answers this question, unsurprisingly, by directing attention to Jesus Christ.⁹⁵ In Jesus Christ, the Son who knows the Father and is known by the Father takes up the existence of sinful human beings and constitutes the knowledge of God among them.⁹⁶ In the flesh, the Son does away with the enmity between God and human beings on the cross, thus revealing human beings as the sinners they are and, by

⁹⁰ Barth, *CD*, I/2, 199, 201.

⁹¹ Barth, *CD*, II/1, 67.

⁹² Barth, *CD*, II/1, 129.

⁹³ Barth, *CD*, II/1, 130-42.

⁹⁴ Barth, *CD*, II/1, 128-9; cf. 65-6.

⁹⁵ Barth, *CD*, II/1, 150.

⁹⁶ Barth, *CD*, II/1, 151.

the resurrection, revealing the God who has forgiven them.⁹⁷ With the knowledge of God established objectively among human beings in Jesus Christ, what remains is for this knowledge to be extended to other human beings. This occurs by the Spirit of Christ who does not create new knowledge of God, but rather “confirms” and “repeats” the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ in other human beings.⁹⁸ This extension of the knowledge established in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit is described by Barth as the life of faith, in which human beings believe in Christ as the one who, as the mediator between God and human beings, gives the truth.⁹⁹ Jesus Christ is the readiness of God for human beings and the readiness of human beings for God. In Christ, the readiness of God for human beings precedes and establishes the readiness of human beings for God.

Where does this leave us with regard to Mary? Barth understands Mary to be the sign of readiness for God. What makes Mary suitable to be the sign of readiness for God is how clearly she is physically incapable of accomplishing what God has elected her to do. That she actually does conceive Jesus Christ confirms that she has been made ready by the Holy Spirit for God; her readiness for God is the readiness that the Holy Spirit establishes in her. Indeed, her readiness by the Holy Spirit is confirmed in her faith, as it is expressed in the *Magnificat*. It is clearly a miracle, of which the virgin birth is paradigmatic, that anyone is ready for God. Barth’s emphasis on the sheer miraculous nature of Mary’s readiness for God keeps him from attempting to describe the subjective life of Mary, apart from noting the awe and wonder that the angel’s message evoked in her. To attempt to delineate Mary’s subjective experience or the dynamics of the miracle

⁹⁷ Barth, *CD*, II/1, 152-3.

⁹⁸ Barth, *CD*, II/1, 156-7, 60.

⁹⁹ Barth, *CD*, II/1, 159.

of her faith would risk naturalizing the miracle into a psychological state to be mastered by thought and manipulated by technique.

Though Barth's comments about Mary are sparse in the middle volumes of the *CD*, Mary does come to play a significant role in volume four, even though there is no focused discussion of Mary in *CD IV* to the extent and of the calibre as that which took place in *CD I/2*. On the other hand, Barth intended the whole of *CD IV/2* to be read as his indirect counter to Roman Catholic Mariology. In the preface to this volume, he writes:

The content of this book might well be regarded as an attempted Evangelical answer to the Marian dogma of Romanism—both old and new. I have nowhere mentioned this, let alone attacked it directly. But I have in fact shown that it is made superfluous by the “Exaltation of the Son of Man” and its anthropological implications. I can hardly expect that my Roman Catholic readers—to whom I turn more and more in the *Church Dogmatics*—will accept this, but I am confident that they will at least see that there is a positive reason for my Evangelical rejection. The fact that the man Jesus is the whole basis and power and guarantee of our exaltation means that there can be no place for any other in this function, not even for the mother of Jesus. I have not made this particular delimitation in the text, but I hope that in relation to Roman Catholic theology some contribution has been made to an understanding of what is there called “sanctifying grace.”¹⁰⁰

Thus, the broader contours of Barth's treatment of the humanity of Jesus Christ and his doctrine of sanctification, particularly the fact that Jesus Christ himself is the sanctification of human beings, is Barth's answer to Roman Catholic Mariology. Barth believes that his Christological doctrine of sanctification renders Mariology superfluous. Jesus Christ, who is revelation and reconciliation objectively, creates his own subjective reception within human beings. For Barth, as we have seen, the subjective reception of revelation and the corresponding human action of obedience and fellowship depend on a moment by moment *act* of Jesus Christ himself. Only as Jesus *acts* is the human being

¹⁰⁰ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, ix-x.

enabled to act in obedient response.¹⁰¹ This gracious action of God and the elicited action of the human being occur on a moment-by-moment basis and never become an inherent possibility at the disposal of the human being. As such, any mediator is ruled out that would seek to establish the reception of God's grace in created human life. This reception of revelation was accomplished objectively in the sinful human flesh of Jesus Christ as it is repeatedly and constantly made receptive and obedient to the Son of God.¹⁰²

Barth comments in this volume about the proper role of Mary in the life of Jesus and in salvation history. These comments stand in strict continuity with his earlier critique of Mariology and biblical exegesis of the figure of Mary. For example, in the context of Barth establishing that humanity has no right to boast of Jesus Christ as though it has produced him out of one of its inherent possibilities. Barth argues that humanity was only "there" in Mary and in the nation of Israel, both of which were elected by grace.

[Humankind] was only there when He became—in the form of the people Israel, which was itself elected without its own co-operation or merit, and concretely in the form of Mary, who concludes the history of this people. It was not, however, Israel or Mary who acted, but God—acting towards Israel, and finally (in fulfillment of the promise given with its election) towards Mary. In all these forms man was and is only admitted and adopted into unity with the Son of God....Mankind, Israel and Mary were there already. It was from within the existent world—how else could He be one of us?—that the Son assumed humanity. But is not this difference overshadowed by the fact that the world was

¹⁰¹ This has important implications for the Barth's conception of the Christian life. Barth rejects any notion in which human beings can be thought to increase in their own inward righteousness. On the contrary, Barth treats "progress" in the Christian life under the categories of "repetition" and "perseverance" in which the Christian is impelled to turn continually, moment by moment, to God in dependence for their own obedience. See Neder, *Participation in Christ*, 26-8.

¹⁰² In contrast to what Barth believes is the division of the grace of God in Jesus Christ that occurs in Roman Catholic theology, Barth proposes a unified doctrine of grace in which the grace of God in Jesus Christ comes to include other human beings. This unified doctrine of grace requires Barth to also formulate an appropriate anthropology whereby human beings can participate in the grace of Jesus Christ. Neder writes: "The teleological power of *de jure* participation in Christ yields not only an alternative to the Roman Catholic understanding of grace, but an alternative anthropology as well. Human 'being' is not the possession of self-contained individuals free to accept or reject God's grace. Rather, human being is enacted in response to God's grace. In this act, the individual whom Jesus Christ has established as a freely acting subject in him embraces this identity and becomes in herself who she is in him." Neder, *Participation*, 51.

sold to sin and death, that it was a lost world, the world of Adam? The chosen people Israel, and Mary too, belonged to this world. What room does this leave for any co-operation [*Mitwirkung*] of the creature in this work? Even the *fiat mihi* of Mary is preceded by the resolve and promise of God. It confirmed [*bestätigte*] His work, but did not add anything at all to it. It confirmed [*bestätigte*] the election of Israel and Mary, but it did not give it either its truth or power. In what could and can all the participation [*Beteiligung*] of man in this work of God, the becoming and being of the Son of God as the Son of Man, consist, but in the fact that in good or evil (and more in evil than in good) he is its object and lets it happen [*er es sich gefallen läßt*]? As well for him if lets it happen [*er es sich gefallen läßt*]! But there can be no question whatever of man—adamic man—providing a point of contact [*Anknüpfungspunkt*].¹⁰³

In this extended quotation, Mary is understood as the elect of God, chosen for the purpose of being adopted by the Word in Jesus Christ. Once again, we see Mary's representative status as she stands at the end of the nation of Israel, itself the elect and representative nation, to be acted upon by God's work. The point of the election of Israel and Mary is, as Barth describes it, the "preparation" of human essence by God to be assumed by the Word.¹⁰⁴ Mary represents elect humanity prepared for the Word. Barth underscores in this section the impossibility of cooperation with God on the part of Mary, and emphasizes rather that the person of Mary is brought in as the object of God's work, although she herself "lets it happen." As she lets it happen, we see that Mary's agency is activated by God's grace of election and this is her "confirmation" of the grace of God. Human beings—represented in Mary—do not cooperate with the grace of God but simply confirm their reception of it. Mary's confirmation of the Word is her acceptance of it with gratitude.

¹⁰³ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 45. Translation slightly altered. Cf. *KD*, IV/2, 48. Webster succinctly demonstrates how Barth's entire theory of human moral action is summed up with the term "answer." "The metaphor of 'answer' catches exactly what Barth wants to say about human morality: it is finite, brought into being by an external summons, and yet as such a real, reciprocal act. In effect, the model of summons and answer rules out both abstract divine monergism and pure human autonomy. More concretely, the human response is a matter of a proper correspondence or conformity between our life-act and the divine action from which it derives." Webster, *Ethics of Reconciliation*, 57. As such, Mary expresses for Barth human moral action at its best, second only to the humanity of Christ.

¹⁰⁴ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 48.

Barth refers in *CD IV/2* to the blessedness of the Mary also in an excursus on the Beatitudes. Here he provides an important insight into his reading of the biblical narrative of Mary in contrast to that of Roman Catholicism. The context of the section involves Barth in describing how it is that those described as blessed in the Beatitudes ought to be considered to be so. It is of the utmost importance for Barth that the New Testament nearly always refers the pronouncement of blessing to Jesus Christ himself. Only Jesus Christ can speak the Beatitudes because only in Jesus Christ has the kingdom come near. The apparent exception to the universal referral of blessing to Jesus is found in Luke 1 in which Elizabeth calls Mary blessed (Luke 1:45). In this instance it is Elizabeth, not Jesus, who pronounces the blessing. Barth is careful to note, however, that even in this case, Mary does not call herself blessed.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, in Barth's reading of the passage, Elizabeth is not actually *pronouncing* the blessing, but only referring to the fact that Mary is blessed by Christ in virtue of the kingdom of God being present to her. In order to make this clear, Barth proposes that Luke 1:45 ought to be translated in a way consistent with the Beatitudes. Whereas some translations read as follows, "And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord," Barth insists that the translation should be governed by the form of the Beatitudes: "Blessed is she that believed: for...there shall be a performance...of those things which were told her from the Lord."¹⁰⁶ Barth's intention with this translation is to secure the notion that Mary is not blessed because of her belief in the angel's message, but because in her belief the kingdom of God has quite literally drawn near in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Mary's

¹⁰⁵ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 189.

¹⁰⁶ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 189. Barth's suggestion is similar to the translation of the *Luther-Übersetzung*. "Und selig bist du, die du geglaubt hast! Denn es wird vollendet werden, was dir gesagt ist von dem Herrn." ("And blessed are you who have believed! For it will be fulfilled what has been said to you by the Lord.")

fiat mihi is her faith in the presence of Christ, the grace of God to her, the kingdom come near. As Barth writes: “It is obvious that she is blessed in the light of her faith, yet not because of her faith, but because of *what* was told by the Lord and *what* she believed, and in relation to its accomplishment.”¹⁰⁷ Barth is convinced that Mary is blessed not because of anything inherent in her but because of the kingdom of God come near to her. Yet this blessing does not leave Mary unaffected. It elicits her faith and praise. This is confirmed for Barth through Luke 11:27f., in which Jesus explicitly denounces the notion that his mother is blessed apart from her faith. Barth explains:

For those who are pronounced blessed it is indeed a matter of their own being, but primarily it is a matter either of the fact that their own being is lit up in a new way [*ganz neu beleuchtet*] by the kingdom of God which has come near to them in Jesus or of the fact that it is ordered by this in a new and very definite manner. Either way, it is quite astounding. Jesus, the kingdom of God, indicates and explains and interprets their being and determines and directs and characterizes it. And it is in this fact—this illumination or impression—that they are blessed in spite of all appearances to the contrary.¹⁰⁸

It is Jesus Christ and his presence to the individual that is the blessing. Mary believes because she is blessed with Christ’s presence; those who are blessed are invited to believe. The Beatitudes do not summon a person to pursue the earthly circumstances described in them, such as being poor or persecuted, but rather describe how such circumstances are determined in relation to Jesus Christ and his kingdom.¹⁰⁹ Here again, we see that Mary is exemplary for Christian life in so far as what occurred to her and in her is the pattern for all other Christians.

In Barth’s discussion of Christian vocation in *CD* IV/3 he uses the figure of Mary as an important example in his description of Christian witness, which is the form of

¹⁰⁷ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 189. Emphasis mine.

¹⁰⁸ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 189.

¹⁰⁹ Barth, *CD*, IV/2, 190.

Christian vocation. Central to Barth's argument in *CD* IV/3 is the notion that the New Testament uses the terms servant (*diakonos*) and slave (*doulos*) to describe Christians as called into Christ's service to be his witnesses. At a pivotal point, Barth mentions Mary as a central figure in whom the New Testament's servant language is concentrated. Barth dismisses as utterly untenable any idea that Mary's conversation with the angel Gabriel or her title of *Theotokos* could be construed as a basis for her exaltation to the side of Christ. Barth notes that she acknowledges herself to be but a "handmaid" of the Lord. This term handmaid (*doulē*) is crucial to Barth and his understanding of the New Testament's focus on Christian vocation. According to Barth, it is precisely in Mary's life as a handmaid to the Lord, in response to the grace that has been given to her, that we find Mary's significance for Christians. This importance lies decisively in the fact that she does what all other Christians ought to do, namely, to receive the grace of their vocation with gratitude and service. Barth writes:

The present context, which only very arbitrarily can be made the basis of a whole Mariology, neither commands nor permits us to see in Mary more or other than a model and example [*Urbild und Exemplar*] for all Christians called and ordained to faith and therefore to obedience and service, for a Christianity which unequivocally serves its Lord, and therefore neither directly nor indirectly reigns with Him, but works together [*zusammenwirkenden*] with Him only in the form of its service. In contrast, it is only by ignoring the true Mary that there has arisen the possibility and actuality of Mariology.¹¹⁰

Mary is thus construed by Barth to be the ideal Christian and one who has taken up her vocation in the way which all Christians ought, to be handmaid of the Lord. Indeed, it is

¹¹⁰ Barth, *CD*, IV/3.2, 603. Hunsinger explains: "Barth does not deny that human freedom 'cooperates' with divine grace. He denies that this cooperation in any way effects salvation. Although grace makes human freedom possible as a mode of acting (*modus agenda*), that freedom is always a gift. It is always imparted to faith in the mode of receiving salvation (*modus participandi*), and bearing witness to it (*modus testificandi*), never in the mode of effecting it (*modus efficiendi*). It is imparted by the Spirit's miraculous operation, human freedom is always the consequence of salvation, never its cause, and therefore in its correspondence to grace always Eucharistic (*modus gratandi et laudandi*)." Hunsinger, "Mediator of Communion," 185.

Mary's exemplary life of service that Christians ought to emulate in their participation in the kingdom of God through union with Christ. Barth wants to deny any notion that would suggest that human beings can add something to the prophetic work of Christ. While Barth does use the term "cooperation" on occasion, he greatly prefers the term "ministry" or "service" because cooperation is subject to much misunderstanding.¹¹¹ Christians do not mediate Christ to the world, but simply stand by in service to him. Barth describes Christians as more like altar boys than priests in the great service of God in Christ.¹¹² For Barth, the only legitimate priest is Jesus Christ himself and the only service that can be rendered him is that which he gives. Where does this leave the status of human beings in Christ's service, then? Barth writes:

There can be no server at the side of this Priest. There is no place for any other alongside the One who works here. There is no place for the work of any other, however generous or modest. "Be it unto me according to thy word," says Mary (Lk. 1:38), and it is only in her willingness and readiness [*Willigkeit und Bereitschaft*] to accept what is told her by the angel that she is the handmaid of the Lord and may describe herself as such....In Christ's action for the world in the Christian as fully completed in His passion, he can participate only passively [*nur passiv*], in pure faith in Him, love for Him and hope in Him, without making even the slightest or most incidental contribution.¹¹³

For Barth, Christian existence consists in service to the divine Word. Mary exemplifies such service in her willingness and readiness to be a part of Christ's work in the way that

¹¹¹ Wolf Krötke has masterfully expounded Barth's view of human participation in the divine work through the category of "Partnership." He shows that this theme animates the breadth of the *CD* and orders how Barth understands the divine-human relationship in covenant. Our exposition of Mary, particularly of her "cooperation," accords well with Krötke's treatment of the broader contours of the *CD*. Krötke argues that the inherently relational God shows himself to be the partner of humankind by electing it for fellowship, entering into covenant and calling it to his service. The form of this partnership is the only one possible: human beings are activated to fulfill freely the command of God and live as covenant partners only as their action has been preceded by the divine act. See Wolf Krötke, "Gott und Mensch als 'Partner': Zur Bedeutung einer zentralen Kategorie in Karl Barths *Kirchlicher Dogmatik*," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 83.6 (1986): 158-75.

¹¹² Barth, *CD*, IV/3.2, 602.

¹¹³ Barth, *CD*, IV/3.2, 605. Reisenhuber writes: "The highest participation of the human being in the work of God lies there in the purest, gracious, and at the same time freely accepted, objectivity [*Gegenständlichkeit*] or receptivity." Reisenhuber, *Maria*, 57-8; cf. 59-60.

Christ has commanded her. She does not contribute anything to the work of Christ, but rather she is taken up in the work and used as Christ's own self-testimony that takes place in and through her.¹¹⁴

Barth's portrait of Mary is nicely summed up in the posthumously published lecture fragment, *The Christian Life*. In *The Christian Life*, Barth develops further his understanding of the ethics of reconciliation through attention to the Lord's Prayer. For Barth, prayer to God the Father constitutes what it means to live by grace. Invocation is, thus, the essence of Christian obedience.¹¹⁵ Only in invocation is God recognized and treated in accordance with the grace which he has given to human beings. It is because God has lavished his grace upon human beings in Jesus Christ that Christians are called and enabled by the Holy Spirit to invoke God as their Father. Invocation consists first and foremost of thanksgiving and praise.¹¹⁶ And yet, Barth is quick to remind his readers that the possibility for a human response of thanksgiving and praise is always a mystery and miracle of God himself in the Holy Spirit.¹¹⁷ When Barth is describing this dynamic of the miraculous grace of God bestowed upon human beings so that they respond with thanksgiving and praise, he directs his readers to the words of Mary.

¹¹⁴ Riesenhuber writes: "The event between the angel and Mary is not only one among many instances of grace [*Begnadung*] to human beings, but rather *the original instance* on which everything hangs, because every connection of the human being with God leads only over Christ.... With Mary the creature is regarded by God in grace, so that creation can say its own 'yes' to God in Mary's 'yes.' Mary's 'yes' is depicted for that reason as representative for collective humanity." Riesenhuber, *Maria*, 60-1. Emphasis mine. Mary's supposed "distinguished position" [*ausgezeichneten Stellung*] leads Riesenhuber to conclude that Barth leaves open a way to develop a Mariology based upon her role as the "archetype of humanity." Riesenhuber, *Maria*, 62. This interpretation neglects entirely the Christological center of Barth's thought, in which it is the elect and representative human being, Jesus, who says "yes" to God in his union with the Son of God, and does so to establish the possibility of such a "yes" in all of creation. By making this error Riesenhuber gives Mary a special status in Barth's thought that she does not have. Mary does indeed fulfill a paradigmatic function, but solely as one human being who has been awakened and empowered by the Holy Spirit to receive Christ. She is only paradigmatic because of the *form* of the work of Christ's Spirit upon her.

¹¹⁵ Barth, *Christian Life*, 44.

¹¹⁶ Barth, *Christian Life*, 86-7.

¹¹⁷ Barth, *Christian Life*, 89.

The result [of the work of the Holy Spirit], then, is the same as in the *Magnificat*: “My spirit...rejoices in God my Savior” (Luke 1:47). In this is the mystery of the invocation of God the Father by man as his children. This, then, is the mystery of the essential and basic act of Christian obedience which controls and determines everything: the mystery of the Christian life.¹¹⁸

Mary is, for Barth, a picture of what Christian existence looks like in response to the grace of God in Jesus Christ as it is evoked by the Holy Spirit. Her words in the *Magnificat* are the words of the whole church as it participates in fellowship with God in an appropriate manner: thanksgiving and praise.

5.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen how Barth interprets the biblical figure of Mary and Roman Catholic Mariology in light of his broader discussion of the doctrine of the virgin birth. For Barth, the virgin birth “fits” with the central matter of revelation, while Mariology does not. However, Barth is quite close to Roman Catholic Mariology and, indeed, maintains several of the fundamental convictions treasured also by Rome.¹¹⁹ First, we have seen the degree to which Barth wants to understand Mary as a human creature. As such, Mary is the climax of elect Israel and, thus, representative of all human flesh. Second, Barth reads the biblical narrative that involves Mary with an eye to her prototypical function in Scripture. This function is found in the form of the work of God’s grace upon Mary and the response of obedience and praise that it elicits in her. As

¹¹⁸ Barth, *Christian Life*, 91.

¹¹⁹ Louth believes that there is room in Barth’s theology to develop a Mariology that views Mary as fellow contemplator of God who is able to help the church in virtue of her exemplary reception of God’s grace on the basis of grace. See Louth, *Mary and the Mystery of the Incarnation*, 16-8. Fiddes and Dawe argue one could, in consistency with Barth’s theology, view Mary as eternal mother of God on the basis of the eternal election of Jesus Christ and, as such, the mother of the church who sets the pattern for the reception of revelation by fallen human flesh. See Fiddes, “Mary in the Theology of Karl Barth,” 120-4; Dawe, “The Virgin Mary,” 134-6. These proposals are flawed as consistent extrapolations of Barth’s theology because they are each predicated on the notion that God’s grace comes to dwell within a human being as something of which the human being can make better or worse use. For Barth, however, grace is a moment by moment bestowing of God’s self in the person of Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit into human life for which the human being can only be grateful. Even the genuine human act elicited by this grace must be attributed to God’s grace at every moment.

one in whom the “miracle and mystery” of revelation and reconciliation take place—quite literally in her flesh—Mary is activated to proper Christian obedience and faith. The dynamics of this event in the life of Mary, wrought by the Spirit of Christ, are normative for all Christians, thus making the event that occurred in the life of Mary an image by which Christians can come to understand themselves and their Christian existence. Third, though he articulates several caveats, Barth affirms that Mary actively participates with God in the economy of salvation. For both Barth and Rome, this participation is genuine human action that is elicited by grace.¹²⁰ The sticking point, however, for Barth, between his position and that of Rome has to do with the nature of the human relation to grace. For Barth, grace is identical with Jesus Christ and effective only in him. As such, it is indivisible and no human being can in any way be thought to possess grace. Rather, human beings are always at every moment dependent upon Christ to act and establish fellowship and human obedience. Catholic Mariology, on the other hand, according to Barth, abstracts grace from Christ as though it were something to be dispensed to the human subject and left for them to use. Thus, because Mary has received grace so well and has put it to such good use, she is worthy of a special honour and dignity alongside of Christ. Barth, however, will not honour her as different from any other human being because all human beings constantly need Jesus Christ to act in them to elicit their

¹²⁰ Tait writes: “Does not response and trust and service on Mary’s part mean, in some sense, cooperation? In this regard, then, a question is raised that others have raised about Barth’s theology in general. He quite legitimately wants to make it plain that in the relationship between God and man, God works everything and the creature can add nothing to it. But if revelation and reconciliation require for their completion man’s acknowledgment and acceptance, and if the latter are given freely and responsibly, then does not the creature cooperate at least to this extent, even though, admittedly, such cooperation is itself the work of God’s grace?” Tait, “Virgin Mary,” 423. The answer to this is, yes, Barth does admit to a true and real cooperation on the part of Mary on the basis of divine grace. To use some of the language we explored in our previous chapter, Mary is enabled to engage in proper human action through grace. She has become a “history” and not merely a “state” by the action of the Spirit of Jesus upon her, drawing her out of her own capabilities and possibilities and given new capacities for her ministry as a witness of Christ.

corresponding human acts that confirm grace. Along this line, Barth preferred Joseph as a complementary image of the church because he was elected to serve Christ in such a way that sharply disallows any idea of a prior merit that earned his service. The image of Joseph helps to make clear the way in which Mary can be thought to be a type of the church. Mary and Joseph are on the same plane though their witness takes place in different ways; both are what they are in the economy of salvation because they depend at each moment on the grace of God in Jesus Christ. When rightly understood, Mary can be viewed as the sign of the human reception of revelation that insures that the incarnation truly includes humanity in the work of God's grace.

Conclusion

In the preceding study, we have examined how Barth interprets the doctrine of the virgin birth as a fitting sign at the origin of Christ's human life that expresses the dialectical "Yes" and "No" of God's grace and judgment upon humanity, the form of which is repeated subsequently in the life of every Christian, beginning first with Mary. After surveying the manner in which the doctrine of the virgin birth was construed by various figures in the classical and modern tradition of the West, we saw how Barth's own thought on the virgin birth developed through his career. Though he originally understood the virgin birth to play a decisive role in the incarnation by allowing the humanity of Jesus Christ to exist *enhypostatically* in relation to the person of the Son, through his exegesis of the first chapter of Luke, he came to view the virgin birth as a sign. The sign of the virgin birth bore an epistemological function that alerted believers to the meaning of Christ's person and work, rather than an ontological function that constituted the identity and work of Christ. Even after this change in his interpretation of the doctrine, Barth continued to interpret the sign of the virgin birth within the set of themes bequeathed to him by the Augustinian tradition. He understood the removal of the man at the conception of Jesus to signify God's gracious judgment upon sinful humanity as it was represented in the figure of Adam. With the willing and sovereign action of Adam and his line removed from the origin of Christ's human life, Barth believed that Jesus Christ is shown to be determined entirely by his heavenly Father. Barth, however, does not understand the virgin birth to have removed Jesus Christ from the contagion of sin, as did the classical Augustinian tradition before him. For Barth, sin is essentially a responsible act and can in no way be treated as a contagious disease, over which human

beings have no control or for which they have no responsibility. Barth's Christ exists in fallen human flesh under the judgment of God, but in this flesh Christ obeys his Father at every turn. Further, Barth finds illustrated in the conception of Jesus by the Spirit the proper relationship of human beings to the action of God, which stands in stark contrast to the posture of human beings who follow in the footsteps of Adam. Though human beings are utterly incapable of the revelation and reconciliation of God, the Holy Spirit makes them capable. The work of the Holy Spirit in history, both in uniting human beings to the person of the divine Son and in bringing other human beings into communion with God, is an outworking of the eternal role of the Holy Spirit who is the bond of love between the Father and the Son. Just as the Holy Spirit unites Father to Son in such a way that does not dissolve the distinction between them, so does this same Spirit unite human nature to God while maintaining their distinctiveness. Finally, in our discussion of Barth's view of Mary we saw how he treated her as a type of all Christians in virtue of her inability to conceive Christ and in the capacity miraculously bestowed upon her by the Holy Spirit. Mary is, for Barth, a vivid image of the church in its proper posture toward the sovereign God. She merely receives, offers praise and gives thanks for that which God has wrought in her. As such, according to Barth, any notion that would suggest that Mary is due some special honour on the basis of merit, in the end, removes Mary from solidarity with the church.

Barth's distinctive contribution to the history of the interpretation of the virgin birth becomes especially vivid when viewed in the light of the broader tradition of which he is a part. As we have noted throughout this thesis, Barth remains within the Augustinian heritage that understood the virgin birth in relation to the doctrine of original

sin. However, whereas Augustine interpreted the virgin birth to function as a way to preserve Christ from the tainting effects of concupiscence and original sin, Barth viewed the virgin birth as a symbolic portrayal of the futility of all human willing, acting and striving for the grace of God. In both cases, human sinfulness is tied to sexual intercourse, but Augustine's construal of the virgin birth plays a decisive role in his understanding of Christ's person and work, whereas Barth's does not. Instead, Barth's interpretation of the virgin birth places the emphasis more on human inability and sinfulness, rather than on who Christ is or what he has done. This is a clear development from the Augustinian tradition and is directly related to the problems with it that were drawn out principally by Schleiermacher. Barth shares with the modern critics of the Augustinian tradition of the virgin birth a deep concern for personal responsibility and a vastly different understanding of the nature of human sexuality. As the moderns critics saw it, sin cannot be something over which human beings have no control and therefore no responsibility, nor can sin be tied directly to a human action—sexual intercourse—integral to the goodness of creation. Barth accepts these central concerns of the modern critics of the virgin birth and revises his interpretation of the doctrine with them in mind. Nevertheless, Barth certainly does distinguish himself from other modern treatments of the virgin birth. He places little stock in the findings of European historical-critical biblical scholarship, which had long since discredited the historical veracity of the infancy narratives and had come to understand them as the fruit of a primitive mythical imagination. Barth evaluates the virgin birth, not according to the canons of modern historiography, but according to the theological appropriateness of the doctrine in its relation to the incarnation. By focusing on the theological fit of the virgin birth with the

broader themes of the Christian faith, Barth implements a different theological discourse than that of the moderns, a discourse in which the historical veracity of the virgin birth is marginalized to the periphery of the realm of theological inquiry.

Both Barth's affinity with the classical tradition and his similarity to the moderns depends on his doctrine of the sign. Interpreting the virgin birth as a sign enabled Barth to bypass the criticism of the Augustinian tradition offered by Schleiermacher and his followers and it also afforded Barth the ability to suspend historical judgment upon the virgin birth, allowing him to interpret it according to its theological fittingness. Barth's use of the category of the sign to interpret the virgin birth leaves us with certain questions, however. First, does Barth's use of the category of the sign suggest a lack of clarity in his conception of the status of historical events in God's revelation, and ultimately the life of Christ itself? On the one hand, Barth affirms and makes extensive theological use of the events in the life of Jesus, such as the virgin birth. On the other hand, these events do not appear to bear decisive theological weight for Barth. The sign of the virgin birth does not ultimately contribute anything of substantial significance to the identity and work of Jesus Christ itself. Rather, the virgin birth simply illustrates and underscores that which Barth has determined to be theologically true through other means. This leaves us with the question of whether or not the virgin birth is finally a necessary doctrine, as Barth insists it is. Would Barth be willing, in principle, to jettison the virgin birth in favour of a different presentation of the origin of Christ's human life that perhaps fits better with his image of Christ?

Second, attention to Barth's discussion of the fittingness of the virgin birth leaves us with questions. In particular, what are the precise criteria by which a doctrine's

fittingness ought to be judged? For example, we saw how Aquinas accepted the so-called merits of Mary on the basis of their theological fit with his view of Christ's person and work. Barth criticized this Mariological tradition for its lack of biblical support, but particularly because it dangerously infringed upon the honour of Christ. Yet what differentiates Aquinas' use of fittingness from that of Barth? That is to say, just as Thomas believed he could legitimately ascribe honours to Mary in spite of a lack of clear biblical attestation, so Barth affirms the virgin birth in the face of the many critical problems with the infancy narratives. According to some, Barth has at least erred by over-inflating the doctrine of the virgin birth beyond its proper scope within Scripture, all on the basis of his perception of its fittingness.¹ Apart from some manner of limitation and guidance, the criterion of fittingness can easily become a tool that inadvertently conforms his interpretation of Scripture to his prior philosophical and religious commitments, something against which Barth always protested.

Third, what are we to make of Barth's use of the man-woman typology in his interpretation of the virgin birth? Is this typology really inherent to the biblical text or has Barth drawn it from his perception of *Weltgeschichte*? The history of Barth's treatment of the virgin birth, as we saw, suggests that his use of the typology of man and woman in expositing the virgin birth was not derived from Scripture, at least not initially. Furthermore, it is not clear how Barth can maintain that the removal of the man at the conception of Jesus serves as a more suitable sign than the removal of the woman. Even in Barth's own writings, he is able to argue explicitly that the relation of Jesus to his step-father, Joseph, affirms the possibility of a co-existence between divine and human

¹ Wingren, *Theology in Conflict*, 108-28.

fatherhood.² If human fatherhood can stand in a relationship of analogy to divine fatherhood, and the one need not exclude the other, then the grounds of Barth's argument for the symbolism of the removal of the man in the virgin birth would appear to be compromised.

Fourth, does Barth neglect the wider canonical context in which the virgin birth narratives are located? While Barth insists on making the biblical witness his standard in all theological thinking, it is unclear why Barth does not make more of the birth stories in the Hebrew Scriptures. The only place where he does so in relationship to Christ's birth is in *The Great Promise*, and there only in passing.³ Each of the miraculous births described in the Hebrew Scriptures occasioned the advent of a special leader in Israel. Perhaps attention to these Hebrew precedents to the birth of Jesus would have helped to illuminate, for Barth, the precise manner by which the form of Christ's conception and birth fit with his person and work as delineated specifically within the covenant with Israel. Furthermore, attention to these narratives might have provided Barth with more support for his understanding of Mary's lowliness and the sign-character of Christ's miraculous birth, themes that are present in the Hebrew birth narratives. Just as the barrenness of the Israelite women displayed the powerlessness of Israel for their deliverance, so does the virginity of Mary display without question the incapability of all human beings to bring about their own salvation. Attention to the Hebrew precedents makes it clear that Mary fits within the line of the barren woman of Israel and represents

² "No human father, but God alone, is properly, truly and primarily Father. No human father is the creator of his child, the controller of its destiny, or its savior from sin, guilt and. No human father is by his word the source of its temporal and eternal life. In this proper, true and primary sense, God—and He alone—is Father. He is so as the Father of mercy, as the Father of His Son, of the Lord Jesus Christ. But it is of this Father's grace that, in correspondence to His own, there should exist a human fatherhood also. And the fact that the latter may symbolize the fatherhood of God in a human in creaturely form is what lends its meaning and value and entitles it to respect." Barth, *CD*, III/4, 245.

³ Barth, *Great Promise*, 5.

the powerlessness of human beings before God, and so Barth could continue to view the virgin birth as expressing the dialectic of God's "Yes" and "No" without having to rely on a typology of man and woman to do so.

Finally, we raise the question of the suitability of the spiritual conception of Jesus as an image by which to understand and discuss the regeneration of Christians. The connection that Barth perceives between the conception of Jesus by the Spirit and the rebirth of Christians by the same Spirit has proven to be helpful for Christian self-understanding at least since Irenaeus. The connection requires that regeneration be understood in direct relation to the life of Jesus Christ and to the work of God the Spirit. Barth does not, however, develop his use of the spiritual conception of Jesus in his understanding of the Christian life to the same extent as we saw with Augustine, who used the narrative of the spiritual conception in tandem with his understanding of Mary to elucidate his doctrines of virginity, charity and Christian ministry. For Barth, the spiritual conception of Jesus simply emphasizes human incapacity to receive the revelation of God and directs human beings to the only source by whom they might be made capable, the Holy Spirit. In this construal, unlike that of Augustine, Barth offers nothing by way of a "spiritual psychology" by which one might cultivate the dispositions and contours of the Christian life. This is exemplified particularly in Barth's treatment of Mary, which centres on the narrative of the Annunciation, in which her passivity is particularly evident. As it stands, Mary appears to be rather one-dimensional, with Barth having glossed over her existential situation. Barth does not appear to allow the other presentations of Mary in the Gospels, in which other attributes of her character become evident, to fund his interpretation. If he leaves ambiguous the spiritual-existential

condition of Mary, who is an image of the church, we might also ask about how he conceives of other human beings to whom the grace of God has come. Does he construe them in a similar way and give short shrift to the psychological-spiritual contours of their histories as well?

In spite of the questions that remain for Barth's interpretation of the virgin birth, his handling of this aspect of the ancient Christian confession displayed a theological innovation and creativity such as has not been seen since the classical era. For Barth, the writers of the New Testament and the formulators of the Christian creeds were to be owed at least the debt of a sympathetic reading, which meant that what they said about Christ's human origin warranted careful reflection on its own terms. Barth may not have been entirely consistent in this endeavour in every aspect of his treatment of the virgin birth, but he has succeeded in reopening an element of the Christian theological tradition that had long been confined to theological obscurity among European Protestant theologians.

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