

## “The Word became Flesh” in the Work of Karl Barth

Amanda MacInnis-Hackney  
Wycliffe College, University of Toronto

### Abstract

This paper traces Karl Barth’s use and exegesis of John 1:14, “the Word became flesh” from his original lectures on the Gospel of John through three sections of the *Church Dogmatics*: the doctrine of revelation (*CD* I/2 §15), the doctrine of election (*CD* II/2 §33), and the doctrine of reconciliation (*CD* IV/1 §59). This analysis contributes another piece of the puzzle in the ongoing discussion of Barth’s theological development, specifically regarding his use of the Chalcedonian definition, and the doctrine of the *logos asarkos*. This paper will demonstrate that Barth’s repeated use of his original exegesis from his lectures points to a high degree of continuity in Barth’s thought from the 1925 lecture through to the writing of the fourth volume of the *Church Dogmatics*.

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In 1925 and 1933, Karl Barth, in his duties as a university professor, taught a course on the Gospel of John. In neither class did he actually make it all the way through the Gospel, but only got as far as John 8. Despite the fact that the two attempts to teach through John were incomplete, the original exegesis from those lectures<sup>1</sup> would become foundational for Barth’s later theological writings. In 1926, Barth preached a Christmas sermon focused on John 1:14, in which he set the stage for the trajectory his theology would take in light of that verse. In that sermon, he said,

“The Word became flesh” is an equation of unequals which cannot be solved; it remains a riddle according to the riddle of the “darkness” which the Word encounters in the flesh, the Word that became flesh is “true God and true man,” not one or the other, and not some superior third form. The unity of His revelation is not syn-

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1 Karl Barth, *Erklärung Des Johannes-Evangeliums (Kapitel 1–8)* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1976).

thetical but dialectical; it is the question which must always be asked and the answer which must always result.<sup>2</sup>

Barth's exegesis of John 1:14 would become a capstone verse for his theology, particularly in the *Church Dogmatics*,<sup>3</sup> where he explicated "the Word became flesh" in three key doctrines: the doctrine of revelation (*CD* I/2 §15), the doctrine of election (*CD* II/2 §33), and the doctrine of reconciliation (*CD* IV/1 §59). This paper will examine Barth's exegesis of "the Word became flesh" in the early lectures<sup>4</sup> and in the *Church Dogmatics*, and will demonstrate that the exegetical decisions Barth made in 1925 (and in 1933 when he taught the course for a second time) became an exegetical foundation in the *Church Dogmatics* as he constructed his doctrines of revelation, election, and reconciliation. This analysis will lend itself to a re-evaluation of the conventional narrative of the development of Barth's theological thought, specifically, the idea in some quarters of current Barth scholarship that *CD* II/2 represents a profound shift in Barth's theology. This shift is not so much about Barth's understanding of the doctrine of election, which does undergo a substantial change from how he presented the doctrine in the *Göttingen Dogmatics*; rather, in light of II/2, there appears to be a shift in two aspects of his understanding of Christology: in his use of the Chalcedonian statement, "very God and very man," and in his affirmation of the doctrine of the *logos asarkos*.

First, there is an ongoing debate, primarily between Bruce McCormack and George Hunsinger, about just how Chalcedonian Barth actually is. At issue is McCormack's suggestion that Barth is only truly Chalcedonian in his theology before *CD* II/2, but that after *CD* II/2, Barth's Chalcedonian paradigm undergoes a profound ontological shift.<sup>5</sup> This is because, while Barth may in *CD* I/1 affirm and use the ontological definitions of "person" and "nature" as understood in the original formula of Chalcedon, by *CD* IV/1 he redefines the terms by moving away from the language of "person" and "nature," and instead focuses on the language of "history." McCormack argues that the statement that Barth is Chalcedonian "has far more validity for the Christological material found in *CD* I/2 than

2 Karl Barth, "The Word Made Flesh -1926," in *Christmas*, trans. Bernhard Citron (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1959), 13.

3 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2010). All further references will be cited as CD and then the volume number in parenthetical references within the body of the essay.

4 Karl Barth, *Witness to the Word: A Commentary on John 1*, ed. Walther Fürst, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1986). All further references will be cited as *WtW* in parenthetical references within the body of the essay.

5 Bruce McCormack, "Karl Barth's Historicized Christology," in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 201–31; George Hunsinger, "Karl Barth's Christology: Its Basic Chalcedonian Character," in *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000); George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

it does for the material found in the later doctrine of reconciliation.”<sup>6</sup> This leads to discussion about whether Barth was more Alexandrian (emphasizing the divinity of Christ) or Antiochian (emphasizing the humanity of Christ) in his use of Chalcedon. Overall, Barth uses an Alexandrian framework even when emphasizing the Antiochian side of the Chalcedonian paradigm.<sup>7</sup>

Second, McCormack and Hunsinger disagree over Barth’s understanding of the *logos asarkos* (the Word without flesh). The question is, in light of “the Word became flesh” (*logos ensarkos*), how should the relationship between the *logos asarkos* and the *logos ensarkos* be understood? McCormack argues, in light of CD II/2, that Barth abandons the doctrinal necessity of a *logos asarkos*.<sup>8</sup> Hunsinger, on the other hand, argues that Barth continues to affirm the ontological necessity of the *logos asarkos* in II/2 as evidence of God’s freedom, but that, at a practical level, humanity has no access to this *logos asarkos*, because it is only through the *logos ensarkos* that God reveals, elects, and reconciles humanity to himself.<sup>9</sup>

This paper will argue that an analysis of Barth’s use of “the Word became flesh” from the original lectures in three key areas of the *Church Dogmatics* (the doctrine of revelation in I/2, the doctrine of election in II/2, and the doctrine of reconciliation in IV/1) contributes another piece of the puzzle in the discussion of Barth’s theological development, specifically his use of the Chalcedonian statement and the doctrine of the *logos asarkos*. More specifically, Barth’s repeated use of his original exegesis of the Johannine prologue demonstrates a high degree of continuity in Barth’s theological thought, a continuity that lasted from the 1925 lecture through to the writing of the fourth volume of the *Church Dogmatics* thirty years later.

The overall structure of this paper follows the structure of “the Word became flesh” equation, and, by extension, the Chalcedonian statement that Jesus Christ is “very God and very man.” In the doctrine of revelation, Barth exegetes “the Word became flesh” and compares it to the “very God and very man” of Chalcedon. It is here that the most significant and in-depth exegesis occurs, as Barth devotes nearly forty pages to exegeting “the Word became flesh.” In the doctrine of election, Barth focuses on the “very God” or “the Word” side of the equation. In the doctrine of reconciliation, Barth focuses on the “very man” or the “became

6 McCormack, “Karl Barth’s Historicized Christology,” 201.

7 Hunsinger, “Karl Barth’s Christology: Its Basic Chalcedonian Character”; Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology*; Charles Waldrop, “Karl Barth’s Concept of the Divinity of Jesus Christ,” *Harvard Theological Review* 74 (1981): 241–63.

8 Bruce McCormack, “Grace and Being: The Role of God’s Gracious Election in Karl Barth’s Theological Ontology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 92–110.

9 George Hunsinger, “Election and the Trinity: Twenty-Five Theses on the Theology of Karl Barth,” *Modern Theology* 24 (2008): 188–89.

flesh” side of the equation. In other words, at a larger level, Barth’s exegesis of “the Word became flesh” not only forms the foundation for his theology, but also structures the presentation of Barth’s theology. Therefore, at a textual level there is continuity in how Barth uses material from his original lectures in his exegesis of “the Word became flesh” in the *Church Dogmatics*, and at a literary or hermeneutic level, there is continuity in how Barth uses “the Word became flesh” to structure his dogmatic project. This, then, suggests that the exegesis that Barth prepared in his 1925 class on the Gospel of John is not only consistent, but is fundamental to Barth’s entire theology.

### **Overview of Barth’s Exegesis of “the Word became Flesh” in the John Lectures**

To appreciate Barth’s initial exegesis of John 1:14 in the original lectures, it is important to look to his exegesis of the first two verses of John 1. Barth wants his theology to follow Scripture, and here in John’s Gospel, John starts with the divinity, and not the humanity, of Christ. In these opening verses, the discussion is about the Word, and not the flesh, because the Word is the subject and must come first. As Barth notes, the Word is not the beginning of creation, but the Word stood at the beginning of creation. Thus, the Word is distinct from the world (*WttW*, 19). Not only that, since only God was “in the beginning,” John is boldly proclaiming that Jesus is God because there is no one else “in the beginning” (*WttW*, 19). Not only was the Word “in the beginning” with God, but the Word “was” God. It must, therefore, be of the same nature, essence and substance as God (*WttW*, 27).

Barth then explores the question of why John chose the term *Logos* rather than some other term. John could have easily used a word like *Sophia*, but Barth argues that, in choosing *Logos*, John emphasized that Jesus is “the divine address that is directed to humanity” (*WttW*, 25), and that this divine communication from God to humanity is not found solely in the words of Christ, but in his entire being, in the action of his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection. As such, in whatever manner the Greco-Roman culture in which John lived may have used *Logos*, and whether or not Philo or the mystery religions’ use of John directly influenced or inspired John is irrelevant. John’s *Logos* is completely different, and as such the exegete should not look outside the text to understand the *Logos* but should stay focused on the text itself. John’s *Logos* is the event in which God “imparts himself to us,” and it is through the Word that God speaks, has spoken, and will speak (*WttW*, 27). This Word is “the provisional designation of a place which something or someone else will later fill” (*WttW*, 23).

The “became” in “the Word became flesh” is a theological word that anchors the entire statement. “Became” does not refer just to the birth of Christ; rather, “became” is grounded in epiphany, because it is “the concrete historical existence

of the Word in all its breadth, just as the coming of the Baptist in v.6 refers to his total appearance and not simply the first moment of his activity” (*WttW*, 87).

The flesh is at the heart of the revelation of God. The revelation of the Word occurs through the flesh, or more precisely, the revelation of the Word is that it became flesh. The Word is not to be understood without the flesh. One cannot talk about the Word without talking about the flesh, because the incarnate Word is “not without the flesh but in the flesh, through the flesh, as flesh” (*WttW*, 91). Furthermore, “became flesh” does not mean that Jesus took on neutral human existence, or that he simply took on the form of a male, because neither of these are enough to save humanity. The Word “became flesh,” which is in “exclusively hostile opposition to God” (*WttW*, 87), and the Word became flesh, which is a descendant of Adam “under the sign of the fall and in the sphere of darkness, of fallen and corrupt human nature which needs to be sanctified and redeemed” (*WttW*, 88). Jesus did not assume pre-fallen flesh, but flesh that is fully corrupted. Following Hermann Bezzel, Barth affirms that Jesus “lived out the idea of humanity in its distorted form” (*WttW*, 89).

That “the Word became flesh” means that God joins the ranks of his enemies, and chooses to bind himself to “base and ignoble men” (*WttW*, 89). John’s pronouncement that the Word “dwelt among us” further explains the mystery of “the Word became flesh,” because this tabernacling of God, or “lodging” (*WttW*, 94), is both intimate and temporary. God has pitched his tent, not on the edges of human existence, but right in the middle of it.

### **“The Word became Flesh” and the Doctrine of Revelation**

In constructing his doctrine of revelation, Barth asks two key questions: how much is God, without ceasing to be God, free *for* humanity; and how much is God free *in* humanity to deal with those who belong to God and obey Him, even though they are sinful? (*CD* I/2, 2). Barth’s thesis is that, “God is not prevented either by His own deity or by our humanity and sinfulness from being our God and having intercourse with us as with His own. On the contrary, He is free *for* us, and *in* us. That is the central content of the doctrine of Christ and the doctrine of the Holy Spirit” (*CD* I/2, 2).

Thus, revelation is at the heart of both christology and pneumatology. God’s revelation is self-revelation. Humanity can in no way discover God without God first revealing himself. There are two reasons why it is impossible for humanity to discover God. First, there is the distinction between God’s holiness and humanity’s sin, which means that “revelation occurs, therefore, to reverse the epistemic consequences of the Fall.”<sup>10</sup> Second, the distinction is not merely about the differ-

10 Trevor Hart, “Revelation,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 41.

ence between holiness and sinfulness, but it is about the wholly-otherness of God and the way in which, through faith, humanity is confronted by the “absolute mystery” of God.<sup>11</sup> Revelation is necessary because God is hidden and, at the same time, humanity is blind. Thus, “revelation and it alone really and finally separates God and man by bringing them together” (CD I/2, 29).

In CD I/1, Barth examines the doctrine of the Trinity as it relates to revelation, and in CD I/2, he turns to christology. In his definition of christology, Barth specifically employs the language of John 1:14, stating that christology is “the doctrine of the incarnation of the Word of God made flesh” (CD I/2, 3). With this definition of christology, the doctrine of revelation begins to take shape. For Barth, Jesus is the “objective reality of revelation.”<sup>12</sup> In other words: revelation is the event of Jesus Christ. Revelation had to be incarnation. It could not be anything else. Because revelation is the action of God, anything less than the incarnation of the Word becoming flesh would not be revelation. It is Jesus Christ who crosses the boundary between God’s hiddenness and humanity’s blindness, and it is in the event of the incarnation of Jesus Christ that the “togetherness of God and man” occurs, making the “boundary visible to [humanity] in an unprecedented way” (CD, I/2, 29).

Paul McGlasson argues that, overall, Barth’s use of exegesis in the *Church Dogmatics* represents a “conceptual-analytical approach,” wherein Barth uses exegetical excursus as a “conceptual support for a particular theological concept or argument.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, for the most part, Barth’s exegetical work is limited to the small-print sections that serve as support for the theology in the main body of the text. There are exceptions to this, however, including Barth’s exegesis of John 1:14 in §15 of CD I/2. Here, Barth’s exegesis of “the Word became flesh” is not relegated to the small print sections, but instead forms the majority of the large print text of this section, with the small print sections reserved for exegesis of tangential scripture passages, and discussions of the historical development of theological thought (e.g., the historical development of the an/en hypostatic union). Thus, the exegesis of John 1:14 “functions [so as] to introduce and guide the dogmatic presentation”<sup>14</sup> of the theme of christology as it relates to the doctrine of revelation.

The nearly forty pages of exposition in the second sub-section of §15 are divided into three parts, as Barth exegetes John 1:14 and juxtaposes its three key words, “λογος,” “σαρξ,” and “ἐγένετο” alongside the Chalcedonian statement that Jesus Christ is “very God and very man.” For Barth, this christological statement, “The

11 Hart, “Revelation,” 42.

12 Later, Barth examines the “subjective possibility of revelation,” that is, the Holy Spirit.

13 Paul McGlasson, *Jesus and Judas: Biblical Exegesis in Barth* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 91.

14 McGlasson, *Jesus and Judas: Biblical Exegesis in Barth*, 93.

Word became flesh” is the heart of the mystery of revelation, and the mystery of revelation is the object of christology, that is, Jesus Christ (*CD I/2*, 133).

In part one, Barth starts with *λογος*, which he describes as “the divine, creative, reconciling, redeeming Word which participates without restriction in the divine nature and existence, the eternal Son of God” (*CD I/2*, 132). Very briefly (in a small print section), Barth makes note of the context of John 1:1–12 for exegeting *λογος*, emphasizing that the Word is “the object of John’s witness” (*CD I/2*, 132), and then begins to consider what it means that Jesus is “very God.” That Jesus is fully divine means that he is “the one, only, true, eternal God” (*CD I/2*, 132) and that he has the same “fullness of deity” as God the Father and God the Holy Spirit (*CD I/2*, 133). As God, Jesus is “creator, reconciler and redeemer,” never ceasing to be God, and yet at the same time, Jesus presents something of a paradox, because “he is the king of kings just when he enters into the profoundest hiddenness in ‘meekness of heart’” (*CD I/2*, 133).

Barth then proceeds to make four statements that affirm that the Word is “very God.” First, the Word is the subject in the statement “the Word made flesh,” and, as such, the event of revelation in the Incarnation is by God’s action and is not reliant on any human effort, nor is it the result of an evolutionary necessity.<sup>15</sup> Second, “the Word became flesh” is an act of divine freedom, and it was not done out of a necessity from within the divine nature. In other words, the Incarnation is not the result of a fundamental necessity from any of the attributes of God, nor is the Incarnation done out of a sense of duty or debt to creation (*CD I/2*, 135). Therefore, “the Word became flesh” is a miracle.<sup>16</sup> Third, the equation “very God and very man” is irreversible because, while Jesus is the incarnate Word (that is, the Word with flesh), he was the Word prior to his enfleshment. The flesh is dependent on the Word, and therefore the Word “can never become the predicate or object” in the statement “the Word became flesh” (*CD I/2*, 136). The “and” in “very God and very man” is therefore extremely important. While Barth will more fully explore the “became” and “and” in part three, here he makes a point of emphasizing that the “and” serves to protect “the Word became flesh” from two possibilities: one, that the *λογος* had to change from his “mode of being” into the mode of being of a creature; and two, that Jesus became some sort of third thing, that is, some other mode of being that is neither divine nor human (*CD I/2*, 136). Fourth, and finally, Barth devotes several pages to a discussion surrounding the role of Mary. In short, Barth agrees that Mary, and doctrine concerning her, is “a legitimate expression of Christological truth,” but at the same time, he has harsh

15 In a small print section, Barth considers, and rejects, Schleiermacher’s understanding of Jesus as the continuation, or development, of creation. *CD I/2*, 134.

16 Barth goes on to consider more fully the miracle of Christmas in the third subsection of §15 (see pp. 172–202).



words for Mariology, calling it “an excrescence, i.e., a diseased construct of theological thought” (*CD I/2*, 139).

In part two, Barth shifts his focus to the “very Man” part of the statement “very God and very Man,” and considers the exact nature and meaning of “flesh” in John 1:14. Paralleling his discussion of the Word, Barth offers four points regarding the humanity of Jesus. First, Jesus assumed the same human existence as humanity. He was “participating in the same human essence and existence, the same human nature and form, the same historicity that we have” (*CD I/2*, 147). Jesus’ humanity is central for Barth’s doctrine of revelation, because “what in fact makes revelation revelation and miracle miracle is that the Word of God did actually become a real man, and that therefore *the life of this real man was the object and theatre of the acts of God*, the light of revelation entering the world” (*CD I/2*, 147).

Second, Barth defines “flesh” in general. “Flesh” is the essence and existence of humanity. It is “that which makes a man man as opposed to God, angel or animal” (*CD I/2*, 149). Jesus becoming flesh was not adoptionism, wherein a human male who already existed was taken up by the Son of God. The humanity of Jesus “was never a reality by Himself” (*CD I/2*, 150). That Jesus became flesh was also not an event in which God and humanity existed side by side in Jesus, dueling for control. Barth then emphasizes what Jesus was not: he was not a demi-god, an angel, or an ideal human. Instead, Jesus as the “Word became flesh,” who is both fully divine and fully human, “represents God to us and He represents us to God. In this way, He is God’s revelation to us and our reconciliation with God” (*CD I/2*, 151).

Third, Barth defines “flesh” specifically. Barth focuses on flesh as that which is under judgment from God; in other words, the fallen condition of humanity. Thus, Barth defines flesh as “the concrete form of human nature marked by Adam’s fall, the concrete form of that 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 with God” (*CD I/2*, 151).

Flesh is an adversary of God, and Barth notes that this opposition of the flesh to God can be seen specifically in John 1 (vv. 5, 9, 11, 21). That Jesus assumes this flesh that is in opposition to God is integral to the event of revelation, because Jesus “would not be revelation if he were not man. And He would not be man if he were not ‘flesh’ in this definite sense” (*CD I/2*, 152). Finally, even though Jesus became the same flesh, he is also different. Jesus, in adopting the true being of humanity, hallows humanity by becoming human (*CD I/2*, 155–56). Here, Barth takes a critical swipe at the moral/exemplar understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ, because in being obedient, Jesus Christ did not just live a sinless life, but actually became “the divine bearer of the burden which man as a sinner must bear” (*CD I/2*, 156).



In part three of §15, Barth exegetes the word “ἐγενετο,” arguing that it is this “became” that is at the core of the mystery of revelation. Barth considers the possibility of using the word “assume” to explain Jesus taking on flesh and suggests that the language of assumption can protect against teachings that would have Jesus Christ relinquish his divinity, or have Jesus Christ become something other than both fully divine and fully human. Expanding on his comments in part one about the necessity of the “and” in the statement, “very God and very man,” Barth explains that the “became” or “assumed” points to the unity and unchangeableness of God (*CD I/2*, 161). He then spends several pages evaluating anhypostatic and enhypostatic understandings of the unity between Jesus’ divine and human nature. Barth argues that “the Word became flesh” is both a *completed* event, and a completed *event* (*CD I/2*, 165). It is a *completed* event, because “the reality of Jesus Christ is an objective fact.” It is a completed *event*, because it is an act of revelation in which humanity has been reconciled to God. In Jesus Christ, there is a shift “from non-revelation to revelation, from promise to fulfillment, from the cross to resurrection” (*CD I/2*, 167), and this *completed event* of the “Word became flesh,” Barth concludes, is a mystery.

The structure of Barth’s exegesis obviously looks different between the original lectures in *Witness to the Word* and the *Church Dogmatics*. This is understandable given the difference in purpose. In the lectures, Barth is exegeting John, verse-by-verse, word-by-word. In the *Dogmatics*, Barth is exegeting select verses, which, while being cognizant of the scriptural context in which they appear, still means that he can only summarize his fuller exegetical research.

In looking specifically at John 1:14, one of the most obvious differences is that in the original lectures, Barth does not actually exegete λογος in his discussion of v. 14. This is because Barth had already exegeted λογος in his analysis of v. 1. Thus, in the original lectures, save for a brief, one paragraph summary of his previous discussion of the λογος, Barth starts his exegesis of v. 14 with σαρχ ἐγενετο. Another difference is that, in the original lectures, Barth’s exegesis of John 1:14 is linear. He exegetes λογος first (albeit thirteen verses earlier), then ἐγενετο, and then σαρχ. In *CD I/2*, Barth exegetes John 1:14 in a different order: λογος, σαρχ, and then ἐγενετο. This is because Barth is exegeting “the Word became flesh” alongside the Chalcedonian definition of “very God and very Man,” which functions as a hermeneutical construct in the *Church Dogmatics*.

That being said, Barth does not abandon his exegetical work from the original lectures to start over again. Instead, throughout his exegesis in §15 there are re-workings and selections from his original research. For example, in part two, where Barth considers what it means that Jesus is “very Man,” there is an extended small print section in which he gives an overview of the historical exegesis of John 1:14. Barth starts with Calvin’s reflection on the verse, and uses the same quote

about the derogatory nature of the term ‘flesh,’ and how Jesus taking on flesh demonstrates the extent to which he humbled himself in order to do so (*CD I/2*, 152; *WttW* 88). Barth then considers how the incarnation of Jesus, which on the surface may bear a resemblance to incarnations in other religions such as Egyptian mythology, Buddhism, or Zoroastrianism, is actually something quite different. Only in Christianity is the Incarnate One made sin, and only in Christianity is there “so strict a concept of Emmanuel, of revelation and reconciliation” (*CD I/2*, 152). Barth makes the same comparison in his original lectures, but with a little more detail. In the original lectures, Barth cites the work done by Walter Bauer on parallels between different religious incarnations, and besides mentioning Egyptian mythology, Buddhism, and Zoroastrianism, also mentions Aesculapius from Greek mythology, and Anos Uthra from the Gnostic tradition of the Mandeans. In noting the difference between the incarnations as found in various religious traditions and the Incarnation of Jesus in Christianity, Barth says that John “speaks explicitly of becoming flesh, of assuming the nature of Adam, of the servant form which is proper to human nature under the sign of the fall and in the sphere of darkness” (*WttW*, 88). This language of assumption does not occur in this specific small print section of §15. Instead, Barth incorporates this imagery in his later discussion of the “and” / “became” component of the “the Word became flesh” / “very God and very Man.” As well, in this same section of historical exegesis in part two of §15, Barth provides several quotes, which also appear in the original lectures, from the work of Hermann Bezzel, regarding the corruption of human flesh, and that Jesus entered into this “body of weakness” (*CD I/2*, 155; *WttW*, 89).

Another example of significant overlap occurs in Barth’s exegesis of ἐγένετο. In his original lectures, Barth argues that ἐγένετο is “the sign equating ὁ λόγος and σαρχ” (*WttW*, 90). As in *CD I/2*, Barth emphasizes that the statement, or equation, “Word became flesh” is irreversible, and that this equation does not in any way lead to either the Word ceasing to be the Word, or to the creation of a new third mode of being (*WttW*, 91). The significance of ἐγένετο for the statement “the Word became flesh” is the same in the original lectures and in §15, especially in terms of exegetical content. The difference is in presentation. Nowhere in his original exegesis of v. 14 does Barth overlay or even refer to the Chalcedonian statement “very God and very Man.” The building blocks are there for it, but it is not fully realized until §15. This demonstrates maturation in Barth’s thought, as he moves from a heavy emphasis on exegesis with minimal theological reflection in the original lectures, to a balance of exegesis and theological reflection in *CD I/2*.

Of the three doctrines (revelation, election, and reconciliation), revelation is the most prominent and well-developed theology present in the original lectures. This is not surprising given that, in the *Göttingen Dogmatics*, Barth had already linked John 1:14 to revelation, defining “the Word became flesh” as “the objective

possibility of revelation.”<sup>17</sup> Consequently, in the original lectures on John’s Gospel, the doctrine of revelation runs throughout the text. In his introductory remarks, just prior to the commencement of verse-by-verse exegesis, Barth argues that the entirety of John’s Prologue is focused on “the question of the situation that arises when we hear a witness to revelation” (*WttW*, 18). Both John the Baptist, and the Gospel of John are witnesses to revelation. Both point to Jesus Christ, and it is this relationship between witness and revelation that is the “formula” and “guiding thread” of the Johannine Prologue (*WttW*, 18–19). In his discussion of the definition and etymology of *λογος*, Barth rejects the idea that contemporary uses and definitions of the term (such as in Philo, or in Mandaean Gnosticism) are significant for understanding John’s use. Instead, Barth argues that what is important is examining how *λογος* functions in the Prologue, mainly, as “the principle of revelation” (*WttW*, 25). The *λογος*, Jesus, is “the revealer,” and it is “in the fullness of the Word [that] God reveals himself and has revealed himself” (*WttW*, 27).

In his exegesis of v. 14, the doctrine of revelation takes centre stage. As revelation, the “Word became flesh” is an action, not just an abstract idea, and the reality of the action of God’s address to humanity (*WttW*, 89–90). Revelation is not the *λογος* on its own, but it is revelation specifically in the Word becoming flesh. The enfleshment of the Word is the epiphany, which he defines as “the concrete historical existence of the Word in all its breadth” (*WttW*, 87). In his discussion of the irreversibility of the equation “Word became flesh,” Barth argues that the Word, as the subject, is the Word who speaks, acts, reveals, and redeems, and yet at the same time, it is the entirety of the equation that is “the reality and possibility of revelation” (*WttW*, 91). This revelation, this epiphany, is historical and real, and entirely the work of the *λογος* rather than the *σαρξ*.

The dialectic of hiddenness and revealing is apparent, as Barth continues to exegete the rest of the verse, specifically, “and dwelt among us.” It is in this tabernacling of the divine *λογος* in human *σαρξ* that the revelation of God is “complete,” “once-for-all,” and “here and now” (*WttW*, 95).

### **“The Word became Flesh” and the Doctrine of Election**

In *CD* II/2, Barth examines “the Word became flesh” as he argues that Jesus Christ is both the electing God and the elected human. But he uses the material from the original lectures in a substantially different way than in *CD* I/2. In this instance, the exegetical material is relegated to the small print section and Barth focuses on John 1:1–2, examining how “the Word” demonstrates that Jesus Christ is not only the elected human, but first and foremost the electing God.

17 Karl Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian Religion, Vol. One*, ed. Hannelotte Reiffen, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), 166–67.

*CD II/2* starts with a shift from the doctrine of the knowledge of God to looking at the election of God. Barth's thesis for this new chapter is that:

The doctrine of election is the sum of the Gospel because of all words that can be said or heard it is the best: that God elects man; that God is for man too the One who loves in freedom. It is grounded in the knowledge of Jesus Christ because He is both the electing God and the elected man in One. It is part of the doctrine of God because originally God's election of man is a predestination not merely of man but of Himself. Its function is to bear basic testimony to eternal, free and unchanging grace as the beginning of all the ways and works of God. (*CD II/2*, 3)

In §32, Barth argues that the election of God is an election of grace, a grace in which God, in his freedom and love, covenants to be 'God for us' in Jesus Christ.<sup>18</sup> This covenanting is not done by God out of a sense of duty or debt to humanity, but out of God's divine freedom, which "means that grace is truly grace" (*CD II/2*, 10). God elects to enter into covenant with humanity "in order to not be alone in His divine glory, but to let heaven and earth, and between them man, be the witnesses of His glory. He elects the way in which His love shall be shown and the witness to His glory established" (*CD II/2*, 11). This election of grace, this decision by God, in Jesus Christ, is the "whole of the Gospel. . . . It is the very essence of all good news" (*CD II/2*, 13–14).

In §33, Barth focuses in on the heart of election: Jesus Christ, who is both the electing God and the elected human. Barth begins by reminding the reader of the event of reconciliation: "between God and man there stands the person of Jesus Christ, Himself God and Himself man, and so mediating between the two" (*CD II/2*, 94). Alluding to the language of John 1:1–2, which he will more fully exposit in the subsequent small print section, Barth says that Jesus Christ is the election of God because he was with God from the beginning: "He is the beginning of God before which there is no other beginning apart from that of God Himself," and He is the election of God "before which and without which and beside which God cannot make any other choices" (*CD II/2*, 94).

After this brief introduction, Barth begins an extended small print section where he presents his exegesis of John 1:1–2. Barth focuses on the Logos, arguing that, because Jesus is the Logos who was with God and was God Himself, Jesus is the electing God. Barth ties the Logos to revelation ("He was the principle, the

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18 "Jesus Christ is indeed God in His movement towards man, or, more exactly, in His movement towards the people represented in the one man Jesus of Nazareth, in His covenant with this people, in His being and activity amongst and towards this people. Jesus Christ is the decision of God in favour of this attitude or relation." *CD II/2*, 7.

intrinsically divine basis of revelation”) and to reconciliation (He is the “Word, the divine self-communication proceeding from person to person and uniting God and man”) (*CD* II/2, 97). Barth describes the Logos as being “the x in an equation whose value we can know only when the equation has been solved” (*CD* II/2, 97). This idea of the Logos being like the x of an equation is not new in II/2, but appears in his exegesis of John 1:1 in the original lectures, where he argues that “As an ideogram it can stand there like the inscription on the diadem of the white rider in Revelation 19, which can be read but not understood, like the x in the equation whose value will appear only when the equation is solved” (*WttW*, 27).

This idea of the Logos as placeholder suggests that for Barth’s understanding of the eternal Son (the *logos asarkos*—the Word without flesh) this placeholder, this word without flesh, is necessary because it speaks to God’s freedom. The event of the Word becoming flesh is a miracle (*CD* I/2, 135), and as such was not dependent on either a necessity in God’s nature or on a world-process.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, while acknowledging the theological need for a *logos asarkos*, Barth does not want to dwell on the abstract, and what matters is the concrete event of the Word became flesh, because “in the name and person of Jesus Christ we are called upon to recognize the Word of God, the decree of God and the election of God at the beginning of all things, at the beginning of our being and thinking, at the basis of our faith in the ways and works of God” (*CD* II/2, 99). Barth demonstrates this notion by referencing John 1:2, which describes Jesus Christ as being the one who made the whole world. He lends further support to it by giving examples of New Testament verses that describe Jesus Christ as the “head,” “first-born,” and “heir.” In each of these verses it is Jesus Christ “*in concreto* and not *in abstracto*” who has this authority and place (*CD* II/2, 98).

McCormack argues that Barth needs to abandon the *logos asarkos*, and seems to suggest that Barth never should have held to the doctrine in the first place, because it posits “a mode of existence in God above and prior to God’s gracious election.”<sup>20</sup> Following McCormack,<sup>21</sup> Paul Dafydd Jones argues that Barth’s

19 Paul Molnar, “Can Jesus’ Divinity Be Recognized as ‘Definitive, Authentic and Essential’ If It Is Grounded in Election? Just How Far Did the Later Barth Historicize Christology?,” *Neue Zeitschrift Für Systematische Theologie Und Religionsphilosophie* 52 (2010): 53. See also, *CD* II/1, 306–308.

20 Bruce McCormack, “Grace and Being: The Role of God’s Gracious Election in Karl Barth’s Theological Ontology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 102; Molnar characterizes McCormack’s argument this way: “For instance, it has been said [by McCormack] that Barth should have seen that election is the ground of God’s trinity and that therefore it was and is impermissible to maintain that God ever could have been the triune God without us.” Molnar, “Can Jesus’ Divinity Be Recognized as ‘Definitive, Authentic and Essential’ If It Is Grounded in Election? Just How Far Did the Later Barth Historicize Christology?,” 40.

21 McCormack’s hesitation concerning Barth’s understanding of *logos asarkos* can be seen in his worry about the implications of the idea of “God becoming.” McCormack’s hesitation is misplaced given that Barth clearly defines in I/2 what the function of “became” is, that is, as an equal sign

understanding of the *logos asarkos* changes in II/2 because his “use of the *logos asarkos* is strictly circumscribed.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, where Barth could say in the original lectures that “inasmuch as every word here relates to Jesus Christ, it also relates to the Logos as the revealer of God who announces himself before and even apart from Jesus of Nazareth” (*WttW*, 43), Jones argues that by II/2 Barth can no longer say the same thing. What Jones fails to note, when referencing this quote to support his argument, is that Barth’s statement is taken from his exegesis of John 1:4, and not from his exegesis of 1:1–2. Thus, Barth’s omission of it does not necessarily represent a circumscribing of the *logos asarkos* in II/2, because Barth is exegeting John 1:1–2 and not John 1:4 in this small print section. If anything, that Barth directly alludes to his “x equation” in II/2 without change from the John lectures suggests more continuity rather than discontinuity in his understanding of the *logos asarkos*.

Molnar offers a helpful critique against those, like Jones and McCormack, who see Barth abandoning the *logos asarkos*. He views Barth’s assertion that Jesus is divine and human from all eternity not as an abandonment of the *logos asarkos*, but rather an attempt “to uphold God’s pre-temporal, supra-temporal and post-temporal existence in way that corresponded to his eternal Trinitarian being and action as actions of one who loves in freedom.”<sup>23</sup> Hunsinger’s analogy is also useful for understanding the relationship between the eternal and incarnate Son, between the *logos asarkos* and the *logos ensarkos*. He likens it to the sentence “the Queen was born in 1819,” where he states, “I am speaking about the infant who would eventually be the queen. Though she was not yet the queen, she enjoyed coronation in due course. We might say that Victoria became what she was ordained to be. In that light one can say, retrospectively, ‘the Queen was born in 1819.’”<sup>24</sup> In other words, the Logos is the placeholder, the x in the equation, and one can speak of this *logos asarkos* only in light of the reality of the *logos ensarkos*. As it relates to election, the *logos asarkos* is necessary to establish the divinity of Jesus Christ, but the actual event of election occurs only in “the Word become flesh.”

Barth concludes his exegetical section by noting that Jesus Christ is the start-

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between Word and flesh. I would suggest that McCormack’s reservation about “became” could be resolved by looking at how Barth translates the second half of John 1:14, “and dwelt among us.” The “dwelt among us” being provisional “rather than complete fulfillment of the divine presence” (See Webster, “Karl Barth’s Lectures on the Gospel of John”, 228) helps to protect against the supposed danger that McCormack sees in “God becoming.”

22 Paul Dafydd Jones, *The Humanity of Christ: Christology in Karl Barth’s Church Dogmatics* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 95.

23 Molnar, “Can Jesus’ Divinity Be Recognized as ‘Definitive, Authentic and Essential’ If It Is Grounded in Election? Just How Far Did the Later Barth Historicize Christology?,” 64.

24 George Hunsinger, “Election and the Trinity: Twenty-Five Theses on the Theology of Karl Barth,” *Modern Theology* 24 (2008): 182.

ing point of election, because Jesus Christ is the name that God elected to bear, and as such, “Jesus Christ is the eternal will of God, the eternal decree of God and the eternal beginning of God” (*CD* II/2, 99). The decision that Jesus Christ would be God’s election was always God’s plan, for just as the Logos was in the beginning with God, so too was it God’s decision from the beginning that the Word made flesh would be the election of grace for the world. “God anticipated and determined within Himself . . . that the goal and meaning of all His dealings with the as yet non-existent universe should be the fact that in His Son He would be gracious toward man, uniting Himself with him” (*CD* II/2, 101). Again, Barth ties election to reconciliation, because God elected to be reconciled with humanity.

After the small print section, which relies on the exegesis from his original lectures, Barth continues to use the framework of “the Word became flesh” to carry forward his exploration of the doctrine of election in the subsequent large print section. Just as in *CD* I/2, where Barth considers the implications of the Word, or the “very God” side of the equation, and then flips to the flesh, or the “very man” side of the equation, in II/2 Barth maintains the same structure. Having considered the implications of Jesus, the Word who was with God and who was God, as the subject of election, he then examines the other side, that Jesus, who is “very man,” is the object of election. That Jesus Christ is “very man” means that

the passive determination of election is also and necessarily proper to Him. It is true, of course, that even as God He is elected; the Elected of His Father. But because as the Son of the Father He has no need of any special election, we must add at once that He is the Son of God elected in His oneness with man, and in fulfillment of God’s covenant with man. Primarily, then, electing is the divine determination of the existence of Jesus Christ and election (being elected) the human (*CD* II/2, 103).

Even in exploring the “very man” side of the equation, Barth is quick to once again return to an Alexandrian voice by reiterating that Jesus Christ as “very man” can only be understood in light of him first being “very God.”<sup>25</sup>

Finally, Barth concludes the first part of §33 by defining that to which Jesus is elected: Jesus is elected to suffering. Again, Barth brings in John 1:14. “The Word became flesh,” because “this formulation of the message of Christmas already includes within itself the message of Good Friday. For ‘all flesh is as grass’” (*CD* II/2, 122). Even though Barth has been talking about how Jesus is the elected human, he points back to his discussion in *CD* I/2 about the difference and signifi-

25 “Jesus Christ is the electing God. We must begin with this assertion because by its content it has the character and dignity of a basic principle, and because the other assertion, that Jesus Christ is elected man, can be understood only in the light of it.” *CD* II/2, 103.



cance of Jesus taking on flesh specifically, and not just humanity in general. Jesus Christ, as the elected human and because he is “the Word became flesh”, is elected to suffering, judgment, wrath, and rejection.

In his analysis of Barth’s doctrine of election, Paul Dafydd Jones expresses surprise that Barth has apparently “lifted sections from these [John] lectures to pad the excursus” of *CD II/2*.<sup>26</sup> Given how Barth has used the John lectures in *CD I/2*, his continued use of those lectures in *CD II/2* should not be surprising. Instead, it demonstrates that Barth is a scholar who desires to stay as close as possible to the biblical text when doing his theology.<sup>27</sup> Other than the fact that in *CD II/2* Barth relegates his exegesis of Logos to the small print section rather than incorporating it into the main text as he did in *CD I/2*, his use of the original exegesis continues in the same manner. While not quoting large sections of the original lectures, Barth obviously relies on those original lectures. Not only does Barth’s characterization of the Logos being like the  $x$  in an equation that is yet to be solved come directly from the lecture material, but Barth also relies heavily on the lectures in his discussion of whether John was aware of the different uses of Logos in the ancient world, such as when he describes Philo’s use of Logos and the “personal, semi-personal and impersonal essences” of the Mandeian religion (*WttW*, 24; *CD II/2*, 96–97).

There are additional pieces of evidence that Barth relied heavily on his original lectures. Coming directly from the lectures, and reappearing in the exegetical section of *CD II/2*, is Barth’s reference to Goethe, where as soon as Faust tries to translate the “word” as “deed” the devil appears (*WttW*, 26; *CD II/2*, 97). Barth also draws heavily from his exegesis of v. 2, where he considers whether the  $\acute{\omicron}\nu\tau\omicron\varsigma\ \eta\nu$  refers backwards to the  $\acute{\omicron}\ \lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma$ , or if it can refer forward to Jesus. In looking at Zahn’s and Schlatter’s exegetical work on the passage, Barth ends up agreeing with Schlatter that the  $\acute{\omicron}\nu\tau\omicron\varsigma\ \eta\nu$  does not point backwards, but forwards (*WttW*, 28; *CD II/2*, 98). In using  $\acute{\omicron}\nu\tau\omicron\varsigma\ \eta\nu$ , John was appropriating John the Baptist’s words as found in v. 15, but was doing so while pointing forward to Jesus Christ rather than back to the  $\acute{\omicron}\ \lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma$ . The Word who was with God and was God is the Logos who has come in person, that is, Jesus Christ, who is the Word became flesh. The Logos is then “by definition *incarnandus*.”<sup>28</sup> This would suggest that while holding to a *logos asarkos* even in the original lectures, Barth was at

26 Jones, *The Humanity of Christ: Christology in Karl Barth’s Church Dogmatics*, 95.

27 “The biblical exegesis in the *Church Dogmatics* is, above all, an attempt to stay close to the biblical text. It is a remarkably sober, painstaking, almost mundane corpus of exegesis, at least insofar as it stretches the scope of a biblical text seemingly beyond its limits only after the most careful and precise mapping of its textual, literary, and theological coordinates.” McGlasson, *Jesus and Judas: Biblical Exegesis in Barth*, 13.

28 John Webster, “Karl Barth’s Lectures on the Gospel of John,” in *What Is It That the Scripture Says? Essays in Biblical Interpretation, Translation and Reception in Honour of Henry Wansbrough OSB*, ed. Philip McCosker (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 226.

the same time uninterested in abstracting the Word from the flesh. The Logos, because he has come and he has now been revealed, is none other than Jesus Christ. Thus, Barth is able in *CD* II/2 to make Jesus the subject and object of election, without having to deny the dogmatic necessity of holding to a *logos asarkos*.

### **“The Word became Flesh” and the Doctrine of Reconciliation**

For Barth, reconciliation is not just about forgiving sins, or about individual salvation. It is about fulfilling the promise and command of relationship: “I will be your God and you will be my people.” Reconciliation is the restoration of God’s relationship with humanity to what it was always intended to be. Barth further defines reconciliation as “the restitution, the resumption of a fellowship which once existed but was then threatened by dissolution” (*CD* IV/1, 22). Reconciliation maintains, restores, and upholds the relationship even when it is faced with the possibility of being disrupted or broken (*CD* IV/1, 22). This reconciliation is grounded in the covenant that is fulfilled in the atonement of Jesus Christ. Covenant is at the centre of the whole Christian message, and Barth argues that failure to get the covenant right means that all the rest of Christian theology will be fundamentally flawed (*CD* IV/1, 3).

Because covenant is at the heart of the Christian message, faith, then, is the acknowledgement of the truth and reality of the covenant of reconciliation.<sup>29</sup> Covenant is the foundation of the three Christian virtues: faith, hope, and love. One cannot start with faith, hope, and love and work one’s way back to a theology of reconciliation. Rather, it is necessary to first start with the message of covenant, which is, in turn, “the subject-matter of the Christian faith, the origin of Christian love, and the content of Christian hope” (*CD* IV/1, 3). As Busch notes, faith, hope, and love are not “precondition[s] but rather consequence[s] of the validity of reconciliation.”<sup>30</sup> Reconciliation is a call to faith, a call to confess that reconciliation, through the event of Jesus Christ, has really and truly happened (*CD* IV/1, 76).

The Chalcedonian paradigm of “very God and very man” structures Barth’s presentation of covenant. The divine covenant is a relationship between the divine and the human, each being fully themselves, and yet they are united in their distinction. They are not equals, with equal tasks and responsibilities, but they are both active partners participating and contributing to the asymmetric relationship of the covenant. In each chapter of his doctrine of reconciliation, Barth employs this asymmetric dialectic to explore the relationship between God and the world, and more specifically between God and the Church. Barth examines the character

29 Eberhard Busch, *The Great Passion: An Introduction to Karl Barth’s Theology*, ed. Darrell L Guder and Judith J Guder, trans. Geo Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 216.

30 Busch, *The Great Passion*, 216.

of God (as demonstrated through the person and work of the Son), the failure of the covenant partner (humanity), and the work of God to make humanity a fit covenant partner (justification, sanctification, calling).

In *CD IV/1*, Barth returns to the issue of the *logos asarkos*. In §57, Barth states that “in this context we must not refer to the second ‘person’ of the Trinity as such, to the eternal Son or the eternal Word of God *in abstracto*, and therefore to the *logos asarkos*” (*CD IV/1*, 52). There is a spectrum of opinion in the scholarship regarding this issue. At one end, McCormack and Jones argue that in *CD IV/1* Barth has abandoned the *logos asarkos*. At first glance, Barth’s statement might lend itself to a reading in which Barth is rejecting the concept of the *logos asarkos* in light of his doctrine of election.<sup>31</sup> Paul Molnar goes so far as to say that not only does Barth not wholly reject the “special Christology” of the *logos asarkos* in *CD IV/1*, but his entire discussion of the incarnation as it relates to reconciliation “was possible only because of his consistent perception of the divine freedom” of the Logos.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, Darren Sumner suggests that Barth moves from “enthusiastic affirmation to sharp critique” of the doctrine.<sup>33</sup> According to Sumner, in *CD II/2*, Barth relativizes the *logos asarkos*, because it is Jesus Christ and not the Logos who is the subject (and object) of election. In *CD IV/1*, however, rather than denying the *logos asarkos* completely, Barth “reframe[s] the doctrine so as to maintain its sacramental intent while at the same time forestalling the most minute or well-intentioned separation between the logos-in-himself and the logos-become-human.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, the *logos asarkos*—*logos ensarkos* distinction is not sequential, but is so closely related that “one does not take place without the other because the one is actualized in and through its union with the other.”<sup>35</sup>

The key is Barth’s use of the phrase “in this context.” The “context” in which Barth is discussing the relevance and usefulness of the *logos asarkos* is not dogmatic theology in general, but his specific consideration of the doctrine of reconciliation, in this case covenant as the “presupposition of the atonement” (*CD IV/1*,

31 Bruce McCormack, “Grace and Being: The Role of God’s Gracious Election in Karl Barth’s Theological Ontology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 100. Hunsinger charges McCormack with taking a “revisionist” approach to Barth’s understanding of the Trinity, as opposed to a “traditional” approach. George Hunsinger, “Election and the Trinity: Twenty-Five Theses on the Theology of Karl Barth,” *Modern Theology* 24 (2008): 179.

32 Molnar, “Can Jesus’ Divinity Be Recognized as ‘Definitive, Authentic and Essential’ If It Is Grounded in Election? Just How Far Did the Later Barth Historicize Christology?,” 42.

33 Darren Sumner, “The Twofold Life of the Word: Karl Barth’s Critical Reception of the Extra Calvinisticum,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 15 (2013): 42.

34 Sumner, “The Twofold Life of the Word: Karl Barth’s Critical Reception of the Extra Calvinisticum,” 52.

35 Sumner, “The Twofold Life of the Word: Karl Barth’s Critical Reception of the Extra Calvinisticum,” 56.

52). Barth is not denying the importance of, or changing his mind on the *logos asarkos* as it relates to the doctrine of Trinity, or its importance in relation to God's freedom. But in the context of reconciliation, a discussion of the *logos asarkos* is pointless, because reconciliation occurs *not* through the abstract "Word," but through the incarnate Jesus Christ. For Barth, any discussion of a *logos asarkos* in relation to reconciliation is a philosophical endeavor rather than a theological one that "pay[s] homage to a *Deus absconditus* and therefore to some image of God which we have made for ourselves" (CD IV/1, 52). This is because Jesus Christ is the event of reconciliation and the fulfillment of the covenant. From eternity, God covenanted in Jesus Christ and in him the Gospel, "the gracious address of God," and the Law, "the gracious claim of God," are fulfilled (CD IV/1, 53). Jesus Christ "is therefore the concrete reality and actuality of the promise and command of God, the fulfillment of both, very God and very man, in one person amongst us, as a fellow-man" (CD IV/1, 53). Thus, the *logos asarkos* is irrelevant to the discussion of the reconciliation, because reconciliation is found only in Jesus Christ who is "the Word became flesh."

In §59, Barth focuses on the condescension of Jesus. In becoming human, Jesus enters into the far country, that is, the fallen and evil society that actively opposes God. Barth argues that it is precisely in his going into the far country and becoming a servant, that Jesus is revealed to be "very God" (CD IV/1, 157). Any discussion of Jesus' becoming flesh must be done in light of the priority of his deity. Thus, Barth continues his pattern of an Alexandrian Christology, wherein the deity of Christ takes precedence over his humanity,<sup>36</sup> because it is in his obedience that Jesus shows himself to be very God (CD IV/1, 164).

As he considers this obedience and condescension, Barth exegetes "the Word became flesh" of John 1:14, focusing specifically on the "flesh." He writes:

'Flesh' in the language of the New (and earlier the Old) Testament means man standing under the divine verdict and judgment, man who is a sinner and whose existence therefore must perish before God, whose existence has already become nothing, and hastens to nothingness and is a victim to death. 'Flesh' is the concrete form of human nature and the being of man in his world under the sin of the fall of Adam – the being of man as corrupted and therefore

36 While Hunsinger's tracing of where Barth employs an Alexandrian or Antiochian voice through CD IV is useful, it should be held in balance with Charles Waldrop's observation that, while Barth does appear to take an Antiochian voice at various points in his Christology, the Antiochian elements that he embraces ultimately fit into an overall theological framework that is Alexandrian. George Hunsinger, "Karl Barth's Christology: Its Basic Chalcedonian Character," in *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 137; Charles Waldrop, "Karl Barth's Concept of the Divinity of Jesus Christ," *Harvard Theological Review* 74 (1981): 260.

destroyed, as unreconciled with God and therefore lost. (*CD IV/1*, 165)

While Barth does not copy verbatim his original definition of flesh that he used in the original lectures or in *CD I/2*, his description of flesh is substantially the same. In each case, the point that Barth is making is that Jesus did not become just a human, but that in specifically becoming flesh, he submitted himself to the “wrath and judgment of God” (*CD IV/1*, 166).<sup>37</sup>

It is at this point that Barth’s examination of the “flesh” includes a significant clarification to his original exegesis. As Barth returns to the large print section of his argument, he qualifies the significance of the flesh by pointing out that the Word not only became flesh, but it became *Jewish* flesh. This is not an insignificant qualification. That the Word became Jewish flesh is of such great importance that “the Church’s whole doctrine of the incarnation and the atonement becomes abstract and valueless and meaningless to the extent that this comes to be regarded as something accidental and incidental” (*CD IV/1*, 166). That the Word became Jewish flesh means that Jesus entered concretely into Israel’s history, and fulfilled God’s covenant with Israel. As such, there is no room for a docetic theology, because this Jewish flesh means that the New Testament cannot be separated from the “soil of the Old Testament” (*CD IV/1*, 166). The gracious election, wherein God chooses to reveal himself to the king and the kingdom of Israel, and which called them to a vocation of obedience and service to God, is what Jesus takes up, because he is the perfect king of Israel, and the perfect Israelite. Even in God’s original covenant with Israel, God was entering into the far country of sin and evil and opposition, because, in electing Israel, God was already ruling and demonstrating faithfulness to an unfaithful and rebellious people. Thus, Jesus, taking the place of Israel, takes “the place of this disobedient son, this faithless people and its faithless priests and kings” (*CD IV/1*, 171). In other words, Jesus is very God and very Israelite, because it is in Israel, as is testified to in the Old Testament, that “the being and nature of man are radically and fundamentally revealed” (*CD IV/1*, 171).

So why does Barth only now modify his discussion of the flesh to emphasize that the Word became Jewish flesh specifically? Mark Lindsay observes that Barth’s appreciation and acknowledgement of Jesus’ Jewish heritage was not a post-World War II development, but rather, even as early as 1924, Barth recognized “the Jewish particularity of revelation’s historicity.”<sup>38</sup> But here, in the doctrine of reconciliation, Barth’s discussion of the Jewishness of Jesus is more than

37 Compare with *CD I/2*, 151, where Barth writes that flesh includes “the narrower concept of the man who is liable to the judgment and verdict of God.” See also *WtW*, 88–89.

38 Mark R. Lindsay, *Barth, Israel and Jesus: Karl Barth’s Theology of Israel* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 94.

just an acknowledgment; it is fundamental to his theological presentation of the Word condescending to take on flesh. It could be that Barth is using the Jewish flesh as an archetype for sinful humanity.<sup>39</sup> That is, in becoming Jewish flesh, Jesus is taking on the most sinful, and the worst of the human condition. Barth had used archetypes that represented the Jewish people previously in his doctrine of election, where he devotes nearly fifty pages to an analysis of Judas Iscariot, who serves as a representation of both the Jewish election and rejection. Judas, elected as an apostle, “willed to persist in opposition to Jesus,” and like Esau, another archetype, sold his birthright, rejecting the gracious election he had received (*CD II/2*, 465). Thus, Judas (in accepting thirty pieces of silver), Esau (in exchanging his birthright for a bowl of stew), and Israel (in rejecting the call to be a kingdom of priests to the world), all willfully and deliberately forsook their election, doing so not with closed eyes, but with open eyes (*CD II/2*, 469). In this rejection of God’s election, Israel (“the tribe of Judah,” “the city of Jerusalem”), as represented by Judas, “can only perish and disappear, to make way for another. Its lost and forfeited life can only continue in this other, being raised again from the dead... This is the judgment which is carried out in the death of Judas” (*CD II/2*, 470). Given this “anti-Judaic—though not anti-Semitic”<sup>40</sup> presentation in *CD II/2*, it is possible that Barth is using Jesus’ Jewish humanity to represent just how far into the far country God was willing to go to reconcile the world to Himself. It is more likely that, in emphasizing Jesus’ Jewish flesh, Barth is affirming that the Jewish people continue to be elect. Because the Jews are chosen by God, that “determines Israel to be the necessary and appropriate place in which God, in Christ, condescended to come—certainly in solidarity with Israel... but [also] on behalf of Israel and the whole world.”<sup>41</sup> This emphasis on Jewish human flesh once again protects against any theological interpretations suggesting that the “Word became flesh” somehow indicates a change in his mode of being, that he became a *tertium quid*, or that he did not truly and concretely tabernacle in the full reality of human existence.

After characterizing flesh as existing “with the ‘children of Israel under the wrath and judgment of the electing and loving God,’” Barth concludes his discussion of the issue by reminding his reader that this existence is Jesus’ existence: “*He* [Jesus] stands under the wrath and judgment of God. *He* is broken and destroyed on God” (*CD IV/1*, 174). Barth then circles back, reminding the reader that this discussion of the flesh is an example of the condescension of God, and that this act of condescension of becoming flesh is an act of His divinity. In other

39 Lindsay, *Barth, Israel and Jesus: Karl Barth’s Theology of Israel*, 95.

40 Katherine Sonderegger, *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew: Karl Barth’s “Doctrine of Israel”* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 174.

41 Lindsay, *Barth, Israel and Jesus: Karl Barth’s Theology of Israel*, 96.

words, even though he spent time looking at the humanity of Christ using an Antiochian voice, it is now time to return to the Alexandrian voice that overarches his entire Christology. He returns to the framework of “the Word became flesh,” and once again, picking up the argument he made in both the original lectures and in *CD I/2*, states that the statement, “Word became flesh,” (or “very God” and “very man”) is irreversible, and that “the divine being does not suffer any change, any diminution, any transformation into something else, any admixture with something else, let alone any cessation” (*CD IV/1*, 179; *WttW*, 90–91).

Barth’s reiteration of this idea that the Word does not cease to be the Word when it condescends to become flesh, in nearly the same way as he argued in the original lectures and in *I/2*, is evidence of continuity in Barth’s thought regarding the relationship between the Word and flesh after *CD II/2*. That is, while Barth does not specifically reference the issue of the *logos asarkos* here in §59, his repeated emphasis that the Word does not cease to be the Word suggests that the ontological necessity of a *logos asarkos* factors into Barth’s theological presentation of the Word became flesh.

Compared to *CD I/2* and *CD II/2*, Barth devotes less space to exegesis of John 1:14 as he sets forth his christological groundwork of the doctrine of reconciliation. But this is not unique in regard to John 1:14 in *CD IV/1*. Indeed, there is less exegesis in general in *CD IV* than in the previous volumes. It is possible that the lack of exegesis in *IV/1* is for pragmatic reasons. By *CD IV/1*, Barth has been working on his dogmatics for twenty-five years (closer to thirty when *Göttingen Dogmatics* and his abandoned *Christian Dogmatics* are included), and he is still, at this point, not even close to completing the project. Barth would not finish his dogmatics, passing away in 1968, leaving the final volume on the doctrine of redemption unfinished. Another possible explanation is that the decrease in exegetical material around John 1:14 in *CD IV/1* is evidence that Barth’s exegetical material is sufficiently mature, and thus Barth has no need to repeat *everything* he had previously said. And yet, Barth finds specific moments where it is necessary to repeat exegetical concepts, because they have significant impact on his doctrine of reconciliation. That Barth repeats his discussion of the irreversibility of the equation that “the Word became flesh” suggests that Barth has not completely abandoned the need for an ontological affirmation of the *logos asarkos*, and it demonstrates more continuity than discontinuity in his christology before and after *CD II/2*. In adding the qualifier that the Word became not only human flesh, but Jewish flesh, Barth in no way contradicts or repudiates his earlier exegesis, but instead demonstrates that he continues to plumb the depths of the biblical text. Whatever the reason for the paring back of exegesis, there is no indication that, in the doctrine of reconciliation, Barth has begun to do theology divorced from the foundation of Scripture. Whether it is in the original lectures, in *CD I/2*, *II/2* or



IV/1, Barth continues to keep Scripture, the “witness to revelation,” at the centre of his dogmatic project.

## Conclusion

Several observations result from this analysis of Barth’s exegesis of “the Word became flesh.” First, and most generally, there needs to be more study of Barth’s early exegesis. Only the first chapter of his work on the Gospel of John has so far been translated into English at this time, with his material on John 2–8 available only in German. Even within the German scholarship, study of Barth’s course on the Gospel of John is lacking. Similar projects to this one could be done, tracing Barth’s exegesis of specific passages and verse in the original lectures and comparing it to material in the *Church Dogmatics*. Second, in the ongoing discussions over issues like the *logos asarkos*, there is little interaction with Barth’s early exegetical material. A closer reading of Barth’s exegesis, both in the original lectures and in the *Church Dogmatics*, could nuance and enrich the very focused academic discussions that develop around these crucial points in Barth’s theology. Finally, and most importantly, what this examination of Barth’s exegesis of “the Word became flesh” demonstrates is that there is a profound continuity in Barth’s theological thought. While there can be debate over whether or not Barth shifted from being a dialectical theologian to being an analogical theologian, or whether or not Barth moved from a pneumocentric christology to a christocentric christology, or whether Barth changed his mind on the *logos asarkos*, what cannot be debated is that from 1919 until his death, Karl Barth remained a theologian who was shaped by, dependent upon, and constrained by Scripture. The Bible is the witness to revelation that testifies to Jesus Christ, who is both the Revealer and the Revelation, who is both the Electing God and the Elected human, and who is both the Reconciler and the means of reconciliation.

Barth never did teach again on the Gospel of John, but if he had taken the opportunity later in his career, it is almost certain that he would not have gotten any further through the material than he did in 1925 and 1933. Through forty years of exposition and theological reflection, Barth continued to plumb the depths of “the Word became flesh,” and discovered deeper and deeper layers to the significance of these four simple words: ὁ λόγος σαρχ ἐγένετο.