“How “Dialectical” is Barth’s Church Dogmatics?”
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Introduction

The preeminent Catholic theologian of the twentieth-century, Hans Urs von Balthasar, used to carry Volume I/I of Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* with him wherever he went. Having immersed himself in the *Church Dogmatics*, Balthasar became a leading authority on Barth and heavily influenced Barth studies, especially with the publication of his book *The Theology of Karl Barth* (1951). In that book, Balthasar argued that Barth, over the course of his career, progressed from a dialectical to an analogical method in his theology.¹ This thesis influenced Barth studies for some time, until Bruce McCormack released his book *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* (1997), wherein McCormack argued that Barth maintained his dialectical method throughout his career. This paper seeks to find a middle ground between the theses of McCormack and Balthasar by demonstrating that both the analogical and dialectical methods are evident in Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*. To show this, this paper will examine one section of the *Church Dogmatics*, “The Nature of the Word of God” in I/I. This section, as well as others, employs both the analogical and dialectical methods, and although this paper lacks the space required to show this dynamic between the two methods throughout the entire *Church Dogmatics*, it is my contention that this dynamic can be found throughout the entirety of that text.²

To find the middle ground between Balthasar’s and McCormack’s theses, this paper, first, will outline the essential features of the dialectical method in theology. Second, it will show

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¹ Although more precise definitions for the analogical and dialectical methods will appear over the course of this paper, the dialectical method pits two terms against each other while the analogical method maintains that there is some similarity between the two terms. Again, a more detailed description will arrive in due course.
² See, for example, “The Being of God as the One who Loves in Freedom” in I/I for evidence of this dynamic before the alleged shift in Barth’s thinking in his doctrine of election (II/II), or “The Way of the Son into the Far Country” in IV/I for evidence of this dynamic after the alleged shift.
that the dialectical method is contingent upon a “real dialectic” of veiling and unveiling. Third, this paper will show that the relationship between the “real dialectic” and the dialectical method indicates that the dialectical method incorporates an analogical method along with the dogmatic and critical methods. Thus, this paper will show that the dialectical method is most pervasive in the *Church Dogmatics*, though this is never at the expense of the analogical method.

**The Methods**

Dialectical theology stands somewhat in contrast both to dogmatic and to critical theology. Each of the three represents a specific theological method by which the theologian can explain man’s ability to understand and speak of God. To understand the dialectical method, it will help first to outline the dogmatic and critical methods, for dialectical method is a combination and opposition of the two.

The dogmatic method makes positive statements about the nature of God and His relationship to creation. It stands upon the assumption, whether stated or unstated, that human words can describe divine realities. Thus, in the dogmatic method, there is a correlation between the human words expressed by the Church (as in the Nicene Creed, Holy Scripture, etc.) and, say, the nature of Triune God. Christian dogma as expressed in the Nicene Creed, for example, states that the Son is eternally begotten of the Father. A dogmatic statement such as this explains the divine reality as it has been revealed to man in history and therefore makes this divine reality explicit for present-day man as well. It furthermore sets limits upon what the Christian can and cannot believe. As a consequence of our previous dogmatic example, the Christian cannot believe that Christ was created by the Father nor that Christ was begotten by the Father at some
point in time. The strength of dogmatic method thus “lies in its ‘taste for objectivity.’”³ It is determined to know and express the realities of God and his world rather than allowing God and his world to remain inchoate in, unclear in, or absent from our human understandings.

The critical method stands in contrast to the dogmatic method. The critical method is skeptical of the human’s faculties and eventually negates the possibility that they can secure any knowledge of God. The human, in the critical method, exists on a lower plane of reality than God and therefore cannot understand God. It would be like the nonrational fish trying to understand the rational and self-aware human, except worse. For humans and fish both exist in the world of created and perceivable beings, while God remains entirely uncreated and unperceivable, impossible to be known through man’s natural faculties. In short, God is not an object to be perceived for He is a wholly transcendent reality that humans cannot stand over against to examine, dissect, or put to work. The strength of critical theology thus lies in its circumspection before a sovereign God, for it makes no impudent attempts to describe positively a transcendent and unperceived reality.

Barth’s dialectical method incorporates both the dogmatic and the critical method by pitting each against the other. “The word dialectic (dia-lektiké) refers to a form of speaking that sets one work against another (dia in the sense of against) and, in this necessary and unavoidable clash, finding a way or pointing to a direction (dia in the sense of “through”) past the immediate confrontation.”⁴ Barth’s pitting of the dogmatic against the critical method, however, will not be resolved into some higher synthesis as a Hegelian dialectic would be. Instead, the tension of the dialectic remains constant: Now the theologian is resolutely dogmatic, now she is resolutely critical. She never moves past the dialectic to achieve something other than the dogmatic and the

⁴ Hons Urs von Balthasar, The Theology of Karl Barth, 73.
critical (the thesis and the antithesis), nor does she compromise the dialectic by becoming a tepid blend of dogmatism and criticism. The dialectic therefore remains a complementary dialectic in which “no reconciliation or synthesis between the [thesis and antithesis] is admitted; therefore, such movement as exists has the character of ceaseless to-ing and fro-ing between the two without any real progress.”

Because the dialectical method retains both the dogmatic and the critical method without compromising either, it also retains the uncompromised strengths and weaknesses of both. When being specifically dogmatic, the dialectical method keeps its “taste for objectivity” along with its stern conviction in describing divine realities. As a side effect, however, the dialectical method is sometimes naïve and audacious for it acts as if its dogmatic statements accurately and definitively capture these divine realities. When being specifically critical, on the other hand, the dialectical method keeps its humility and circumspection before a sovereign God. As a side effect, however, the dialectical method sometimes appears empty-handed and impotent, as if the theologian had nothing constructive to contribute to the theological discourse. Since Barth pits the dogmatic against the critical, moreover, his method appears to be replete with contradictions. He gives with one hand what he takes away with the other. He dogmatically states and then critically rejects.

Real Dialectic: Veiling and Unveiling

Barth argues that humans cannot know God merely by means of their own faculties, and yet the theologian, as if she knows God, still makes dogmatic statements about Him. How then does the theologian come to know God? “The short answer is that God can only be known through God. Knowledge of God is possible only as a divine possibility (miracle!) and never a human

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5 McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic*, 163.
possibility.”⁶ It is only through God’s Self-disclosure that man comes to a knowledge of God; that is, God is always the subject of His own knowledge. But in order to communicate Himself to man, God “must make Himself known, and must do so in such a way that He remains God even in—precisely in—His revelation.”⁷ He cannot become something other than Himself in this revelation, for then He would become not God and reveal nothing to man. God therefore veils Himself in a medium in such a way that He does not become identical with the medium. He does not transform into the created being of the medium, or else he would cease to be God. But God who is veiled in the medium is still unperceivable; that is, humans can only perceive the medium and are still entirely incapable of perceiving the God who is veiled.

God, by veiling Himself in the medium, now becomes even more unknowable than before (!), for He is now hiding in this ordinary, historical man and these ordinary human words. Humans can only witness the revealed God, Barth contends, if the “pure event” of revelation occurs, which is an event “lacking any prior conditions which might be said to have produced the event and lacking as well any ongoing effects which might be said to be a continuing presence of that which produced the event.”⁸ The event of revelation, for Barth, is thus by no means a spatial or temporal event, for all spatial and temporal events have causes and effects. Thus human powers, since they are both spatial and temporal, cannot manifest the revelation, nor can any human power point to the lingering residue of past revelation. The event is never in any way achievable by man; it is never a human possibility, but only a divine possibility. God must initiate the event in which “the veil—without ceasing for a moment to be a veil—is… lifted so that light can shine through it.”⁹ Again, no human power can lift the veil; “an act of God is

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⁶ McCormack, Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic, 248.
⁷ Ibid, 249.
⁸ Ibid, 253.
⁹ Ibid, 250.
required.” But as the veil is lifted, man catches a glimpse of God and looks upon God with faith in the moment of revelation. In this moment, man does indeed know God.  

Barth calls this dialectic between the veiling and unveiling of the Word a “real dialectic,” which means that it “describes a dialectical relationship between two magnitudes or states of affairs which are objectively real prior to human knowledge of them.” This dialectic is thus not principally a dialectic of a noetic character, but a real dialectic of God’s revelation to man in His veiling and unveiling. It is not dependent upon human knowing. Barth’s conviction, nonetheless, “is that human knowledge of dialectical relations will also be dialectical in character.” That is, the noetic character of a “real dialectic” will also be dialectical.

Barth points to this real dialectic and our understanding of it when discussing “God’s Language as God’s Mystery.” He writes, “When by the miraculous act of God His Word is spoken to us and received by us in its secularity, this may mean that we really hear the "God with us" that is spoken to us but we hear it only in the secular form in which it is said to us. But it may also mean that we do indeed hear it in its secular form but really hear it thus.” In other words, the Word of God always reveals itself either as veiled or as unveiled (that is, either as mere human words or as “God with us”), never as both simultaneously; it is, in its mysteriousness, one-sided. Barth again: the Word of God “does not meet us partly veiled and partly unveiled, but either veiled or unveiled, yet without being different in itself, without being spoken and received any the less truly either way.” The noetic grasp of the Word’s revelation is thus dialectical, but this only reflects the real dialectic of God in His veiling and in His unveiling. God chooses to

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10 Ibid, 250.
11 Ibid, 257.
12 Ibid, 270.
13 Ibid, 270. For evidence of this in the Church dogmatics: “Our thinking can be realistic or idealistic but it cannot be Christian.”
14 Barth, Church Dogmatics II, 175.
15 Barth, Church Dogmatics, 174.
veil Himself in the medium of one of the threefold forms of Church proclamation, Holy Scripture, and revelation, but also chooses to unveil Himself within these forms. He thus hides Himself and at the same time reveals Himself. Man, who can only witness one or the other, therefore sometimes misses God for the words and sometimes misses the words for Him.

Human understanding can, in a sense, map onto this real dialectic, but that does not mean that human understanding can stand over against the dialectic as to synthesize it nor that the description of the dialectic itself is the revelation of God. Human understanding is always caught in the contradiction between the content of the revelation and the form of revelation, for the form never matches the content. The form is always of mere human words and the content is the divine Word Himself. The form is a multiplicity, the content a singularity. Barth argues, moreover, that the “erasure of the distinction and indeed of the antithesis of form and content we cannot achieve” Human understanding cannot synthesize the incongruity between the form and the content. Our understanding of the revelation is always “form without content or content without form.”

Humans, by the miracle of God, are not left in the unresolved tension of the contradiction. We can in no way resolve the contradiction by our own powers, but the contradiction can be and is resolved in the Word of God Himself. Faith, for Barth, means “recognising that synthesis cannot be attained and committing it to God and seeking and finding it in Him… Committing it to God and seeking it in God, we really do find it; we hear the full and true Word of God, whether it be the divine content in its secular form or in the secular form the divine content.” Thus, in typical Barthian fashion, the contradiction both can be resolved and cannot be resolved; it is an impossible possibility. The contradiction is not resolved by means of

16 Ibid, 175.
17 Ibid, 175.
18 Ibid, 175.
the human faculties, and the contradiction is resolved by God, in whom there is no contradiction. Though resolved by God, He nonetheless “now leads us through form to content and now from content back to form, and either way to Himself, not giving Himself in either case into our hands but keeping us in His hands.”19 This can only be an unsatisfying answer to the systematizer, for the contradiction is still blatant as the human mind flips and turns in an attempt to resolve the opposition between the form and the content.

At this point, however, it is helpful to remember Barth’s thoughts on the science of theology to which he and the systematizer belong. Barth argues that theology in itself cannot lead us to the Revelation; for that, an act of God is required. Theology therefore always needs God to accomplish what it sets out to accomplish, for in its own powers it is unable. In its own powers, theology is only able to arrive at the dialectic; that is, at the contradiction. It has no “capacity for bringing about the Self-speaking of God.”20 It can merely point to God. “Like the Baptist, it takes on the role of herald, ‘preparing the way of the Lord, not because of its innate skill but by virtue of its mandate of startling the hearer into full attention.’”21 Just as John the Baptist would have worked in vain had Christ not come, so too the dialectician would work in vain if Christ does not reveal Himself.

But God does indeed reveal Himself, and He chooses to do so in the threefold forms of the Word. When the Word is unveiled, the human understands that the medium is, in fact, a medium. It is not mere human words, nor is it a mere ordinary man. It is the veil of God Himself. But the veil is never jettisoned such that we could ever “fly off beyond [the form] and try to enjoy the divine content alone.”22 The form is inextricably bound up with the content in the

19 Ibid, 176.
20 McCormack, Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic, 314.
21 Karl Barth cited in Balthasar, Theology of Karl Barth, 77.
22 Barth, Church Dogmatics, 175.
revelation. It is thus, to use a term not used by Barth, a “moment” of the revelation, rather than a mere instrument to the revelation,\textsuperscript{23} though it does at times serve as an instrument to the content.\textsuperscript{24} There is no revelation apart from the form, nor is there revelation apart from the content. Content and form are inseparable, though distinct, from each other in the revelation of the Word. Thus, although we can never analyze by our own powers the content apart from the form, we can analyze the forms of revelation to understand how the revelation is.

The Reflection

This is where analogy makes its entrance. Indeed, this is where the section “The Nature of the Word of God” begins.\textsuperscript{25} The purpose of this section, which Barth explains in the beginning, is to “remember the forms in which [the Word of God] is real for us and learn from these forms how it is. This How is the attainable human reflection of the unattainable divine What. Our concern here must be with this reflection.”\textsuperscript{26} The language of reflection here indicates that this section of the Church Dogmatics will be analogical in character, as the reflected image of an elephant in the water would be analogous to the actual elephant. It would not be the elephant, but a reflected image of the elephant.\textsuperscript{27} Barth’s analogy between the nature of the Word of God and the

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\item \textsuperscript{23}Moments can be defined in contradistinction to pieces. Pieces are parts that can subsist and be presented even apart from the whole; they can be detached from their wholes.” Moments, on the other hand, “are parts that cannot subsist or be presented apart from the whole to which they belong; they cannot be detached.” That the content and the form are “moments” of revelation means that they cannot realistically be separated as individual and independent parts of the revelation, though they can be analyzed as if they were such. Definitions of moments and pieces received from Robert Sokolowski’s \textit{Introduction to Phenomenology} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
\item \textsuperscript{24}“Through form to content.” (176 emphasis mine). One must also ask whether content serves as an instrument to form, but Barth seems to prohibit this when he says “from content back to form.” (176). The preposition “from” rather than “through” seems to be indicative.
\item \textsuperscript{25}Barth just explained in the previous section the forms of the Word of God.
\item \textsuperscript{26}Barth, \textit{Church Dogmatics}, 132.
\item \textsuperscript{27}The reader sees a connection here with this section: “The doubtful thing is not whether God is person, but whether we are. Can we find among us even one man whom we can call this in the full and proper sense of the term? But God is real person, really free subject.” (138f) This connection becomes especially evident when we consider the fact that we are made in the \textit{image} of God: our personhood is analogous to His personhood, though not from the bottom-up, but from the top-down (as will be shown in this and the following paragraph). Barth does not allow for
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threefold forms, however, will be a distinctive kind of analogy to be sure. This analogy of the
“reflected image” is not like the analogia entis (analogy of Being) in which the observer
“surveys all before him and then synthesizes what he surveys.”28 The observer, in the analogia
entis, by means of his own faculties, reasons from the Being of the created order to the Being of
God without an initial and explicit self-disclosure from God in the gift and with the light of faith.
Barth, in fact, describes the analogia entis as the invention of the anti-Christ.

The “reflected image” of the nature of the Word of God, by contrast, is not a product of
man’s natural faculties, but only a result of God’s self-disclosure in history through the forms of
Church proclamation, Holy Scripture, and revelation. Each of these forms, as Barth argues, is
language, which means that God Speaks.29 “For all its human inadequacy, for all the brokenness
with which alone human statements can correspond to the nature of the Word of God, this
statement [i.e., “God Speaks”], does correspond to the possibility which God has chosen and
actualised at all events in His Church.”30 The fact that the Church can proclaim that God speaks
and that this proclamation is indicative of the divine nature, then, is not a product of man’s
natural capacities, but the product of God constantly initiating the discussion with man
throughout the history of the Church. The analogy between human language and God’s Word is
thus no mere human achievement, but “a description of a relation of correspondence between the
divine Self-knowing and human knowledge of God which arises as a consequence of God’s act
of Self-revelation.”31 The analogy is entirely contingent, therefore, upon the revelation of God in

anthropomorphism, but instead seems to think that we are called persons by a sheer grace—we are the ones who are
blessed with personhood, not the other way around.

1992), 108.
29 Barth, Church Dogmatics, 132.
31 McCormack, Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic, 313.
His veiling and unveiling, and is in no way achieved through human faculties alone, as the *analogia entis* purportedly would be.

Barth, however, will not allow this analogy between the divine Word and human language to remain unchallenged for long. The once-concealed dialectical tension eventually emerges, and the analogy is inevitably confronted by the negation. After explaining the concepts that he derives from “God’s Language as God’s Speech” and “God’s Speech as God’s act,” Barth writes, “when we consider all the concepts [hitherto mentioned]… there might be a continual temptation to think and speak of the Logos of God as thus described in the same way as we think and speak of some other spiritual factor that may be hard to grasp but can in fact be grasped.”

The Word of God, though the theologian can outline its attributes, is still incomprehensible to her; the theologian is unable to wrap her mind around Him. Moreover, the theologian cannot even approach the Word of God in her own powers without the Word first revealing Himself to her. Barth writes, “we cannot utter even a wretched syllable about the *how* of God's Word unless the Word of God is spoken to us as God's Word.”

We can never stand over against the Word of God as another entity in the world to investigate, for the Word is transcendent and is the subject of His own revelation. This revelation, moreover, cannot be remembered or anticipated as one might remember or anticipate an encounter with a created entity. “What God and His Word are, we can never establish by looking back and therewith by anticipating. This is something God Himself must constantly tell us afresh.” Thus, God never reveals Himself to man such that man can later bring up the revelation for recollection. Man, instead, is so unable to know God by his own powers that God must reveal Himself always anew so that man may know Him once again. That is the Barthian negation of humanity.

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32 Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 162.
33 Ibid, 164. (emphasis added)
34 Ibid, 132.
God nevertheless reveals Himself in the forms of Church proclamation, Holy Scripture, and revelation, and these forms, unlike the content, are analyzable. From these forms, Barth infers the attributes of the revelation which, since both the form and content are moments of the revelation, also includes attributes of its content. This does not mean that the theologian can explain away or systematize the content of the revelation by an investigation of the forms, but rather that the forms are telling of the content. Thus, when inferring “God Speaks” from the fact that the forms of the Word of God are language, Barth can write, “Speaking is not a "symbol”… It is not a designation and description which on the basis of his own assessment of its symbolic force man has chosen for something very different from and quite alien to this expression.”

Thus the proposition “God Speaks” is not diametrically opposed to the Word, nor is it identical to Him. It is, instead, analogically related. From here, Barth can explain the attributes of the Word of God from the proposition “God Speaks.”

But this analogy is contingent upon the noetic dialectic of dogmatism and criticism which is contingent upon a “real dialectic.” Since the analogy works within the dogmatic method by assuming that it can accurately describe God, the analogy is always confronted by the critical method. It is always confronted by the negation of man. This does not disaffirm the analogy, however. Nor does it disaffirm the critical method. Both, for Barth, stand on their own accord, though remain in unending opposition to each other. They are in dialectical tension, each disputing the other while each remains indisputable.

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35 Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 132f.
Bibliography


