

What does it mean to call Karl Barth a 'christocentric' theologian?

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Abstract

Karl Barth's interpreters often characterize him as a 'christocentric' theologian. This term, however, is subject to a variety of interpretations, ranging from the totalitarian and isolationist critiques of the 'christomonist' objection to the indeterminate and decentred approaches offered by various postmodern readings. The disparity between these two approaches suggests a level of ambiguity in the term that hinders its usefulness unless carefully qualified. Indeed, 'centric' terminology itself remains rather ambiguous until the substantive formal and material considerations that lie behind any given form of centrality are addressed. This article proposes to alleviate the ambiguity that has thus clouded the use of 'christocentric' as a description of Barth's theology by offering five formal and material qualifications; Barth's christocentricity must be understood in terms of (1) a veiling and unveiling of knowledge in Christ, (2) a methodological orientation, (3) a particular christology, (4) a trinitarian focus and (5) an affirmation of creaturely reality. Using these criteria, the article also argues that both the christomonistic and postmodern interpretations break down at certain points because they fail to appreciate fully these qualifications and thus the particular nature of Barth's christocentrism.

The centrality of Jesus Christ in the content, form, and method of Karl Barth's theology has long been identified as one of its most notable attributes.¹ That christology should be the focal point of dogmatic theology is a point on which Barth was particularly clear:

A church dogmatics must, of course, be christologically determined as a whole and in all its parts If dogmatics cannot regard itself and

¹ Although in at least some respects Barth's theology can be characterized as christocentric from the very beginning, the unique 'christological concentration' that was so prominent in his mature years developed gradually throughout his career as it came to be grounded in a more thoroughly developed christology (see Barth's description of this development in *How I Changed my Mind*, tr. John D. Godsey (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 1969), p. 43; also Bruce McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909–1936* (Oxford: OUP, 1997), pp. 453–5, and T. F. Torrance, *Karl Barth, Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990), p. 138).

cause itself to be regarded as fundamentally Christology, it has assuredly succumbed to some alien sway and is already on the verge of losing its character as church dogmatics.²

As Robert Cushman says, 'For Barth the object of theology is God, the Word of God, and its revelation in Jesus Christ. Any other method imposes, in principle, man-made constructs on that which transcends man'.³ So, according to Barth, christology forms 'the heart of the Church's dogmatics' and any deficiency or deviation here 'would mean error or deficiency everywhere'.⁴ Christology is so fundamental to Barth's theology that von Balthasar defines Barth's approach as 'radically christocentric' and asserts that he 'interprets all secular and worldly relations and realities' on that basis.⁵

To describe Barth as a christocentric theologian would therefore seem like a fairly straightforward proposition. But, what exactly does it mean for a theology to be called 'christocentric'? To serve usefully as a prominent characterization of a particular theology, as it does with respect to Barth's theology, one would reasonably expect that the term be fairly well defined and understood. As J. K. Riches rightly points out, however, there is an unfortunate ambiguity inherent in the term, which, unless clarified, hinders its usefulness as a theological descriptor and, with respect to Barth's theology especially, results in widespread misunderstanding. Consequently, in this article I shall indicate the nature of the ambiguity that underlies 'centric' terminology of this type and some of the problems that it presents for reading Barth's theology. I will then suggest that any attempt to identify Barth's theology as christocentric must account for the particularities of his particular brand of christocentrism. To that end, I will suggest five guiding principles that should inform our understanding of Barth's christocentrism and help avoid errant readings of his theology.

The ambiguity of centric terminology

Bruce McCormack argues that one must account for (at least) the differences between formal and material centricity:

² K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956–75), I/2, p. 123 (henceforth CD). **Q1**

³ Robert E. Cushman, 'The Doctrine of God and Man in the Light of Barth's Pneumatology', in *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1981), p. 11.

⁴ CD, IV/1, p. 3.

⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, tr. Edward T. Oakes (San Francisco: Communio, 1992), p. 30.

Formally, it simply means that a Christology stands at the approximate centre of a particular theology, giving to it its characteristic shape and content. That much is true of all so-called 'christocentric theologies'. Materially, however, the meaning of the term can differ widely for the simple reason that the doctrine of Christ which is placed at the centre of theology differs from one 'christocentric' theologian to the next.⁶

Thus, there may be theologies that could be designated christocentric in a formal sense that is not reflected in its more material considerations (for example, Schleiermacher).⁷ Equally, there may be multiple theologies with equal right to the christocentric label on both the formal and material levels but which still differ significantly in terms of their material development. The significance of this can be seen in the fact that christocentric is a term commonly associated not only with Barth's theology but also that of Ritschl, Harnack, and Herrmann.⁸ In addition to the differences that can arise with respect to formal and material centrality, one should also note methodological variations – for example, the differences between a central starting point that enables one to incorporate other modes of discourse and a more deterministic centre that establishes a definite circumference beyond which one may not reach. Clearly, then, any useful description of what it means to call Barth a

⁶ McCormack, *Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, p. 453.

⁷ As Hunsinger points out, Schleiermacher's theology (and arguably that of most nineteenth-century theologians) was 'formally but not substantively christocentric' (*Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 283; see also Torrance, *Karl Barth*, p. 35). Von Balthasar and William Stacy Johnson also point out that Schleiermacher's christocentrism is undermined by his methodological and material commitment to religious awareness as the basis of theology (Von Balthasar, *Theology of Barth*, p. 37, and Johnson, *The Mystery of God: Karl Barth and the Postmodern Foundations of Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), p. 110).

⁸ Eugene TeSelle largely glosses over the significant differences between these various theologians in his attempt to characterize twentieth-century christocentric theologians as offshoots of nineteenth-century German idealism (*Christ in Context: Divine Purpose and Human Possibility* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975)). S. W. Sykes argues that although there is a formal similarity between the christocentric approaches of Harnack and Barth, they are distinguished by substantial material differences ('Barth on the Centre of Theology', in Sykes (ed.), *Karl Barth: Studies in his Theological Method* (Oxford: OUP, 1979), pp. 28–9; for a similar point with respect to Wilhelm Herrmann see Joseph L. Mangina, *Karl Barth: Theologian of Christian Witness* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 8–9). Thus, while there is a formal parallel between Barth's christocentrism and that of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German theologians, their influence on his christological concentration should not be over-emphasized. Hunsinger convincingly argues that a more fruitful background for understanding Barth's theology, and his christocentrism in particular, can be found in the theology of Luther (see *Disruptive Grace*, pp. 279–304).

christocentric theologian will need to do more than simply recognize the formal centrality of Jesus Christ to his theology. A more useful definition will need to address its material and methodological particularities as well.

This ambiguity also becomes clear when we look at some of the different ways in which Barth's christocentrism has been interpreted. The scope of Barth's christocentrism has repeatedly led to charges that Barth's theology is christomonistic – i.e. a theological system that reduces everything to christology.⁹ Barth, according to this interpretation, focuses so completely on the ontological and epistemological centrality of Jesus Christ for the entire cosmos that the particularity, significance, and, ultimately, even the reality of humans and other creaturely beings are lost as everything is subsumed under the totalism of Barth's christology.¹⁰ Similarly, Barth is critiqued for developing an isolationist approach to theology.¹¹ From this

⁹ Such criticisms have not dissipated (e.g. Philip J. Rosato, *The Spirit as Lord: The Pneumatology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1981), p. 145; Ronald F. Thiemann, 'Toward a Theology of Creation: A Response to Gustaf Wingren', in Henry Vander Goot (ed.), *Creation and Method: Critical Essays on Christocentric Theology* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981), p. 120; James Richmond, 'God and the Natural Orders: Is there Permanent Validity in Karl Barth's Warning to Natural Theology?', in Alistair Kee and Eugene Thomas Long (eds), *Being and Truth* (London: SCM, 1986), p. 404; Richard H. Roberts, *A Theology on its Way? Essays on Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), esp. pp. 1–93; and Hans Frei suggests that the label may be appropriate in 'Analogy and the Spirit in the Theology of Karl Barth' (cited 10 Feb. 2005: <http://www.library.yale.edu/div/Freiindex.htm>) and remain common among American evangelicals (e.g. J. I. Packer, 'Hermeneutics and Biblical Authority', *Themelios* 1/1 (1975), pp. 3–12; Richard Muller, *The Study of Theology: From Biblical Interpretation to Contemporary Formulation* (Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation, 7; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), pp. 130ff.; and Gordon R. Lewis, 'Is Propositional Revelation Essential to Evangelical Spiritual Formation', *JETS* 46/2 (2003), p. 269–98).

¹⁰ Barth's theology is thus understood to involve 'narrowing' everything to christology such that it vitiates creaturely history and agency of real meaning (von Balthasar, *Theology of Barth*, p. 242; cf. also Arnold Bruce Come, *An Introduction to Barth's 'Dogmatics' for Preachers* (London: SCM, 1963), pp. 152–7; Robert E. Willis, *The Ethics of Karl Barth* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), pp. 236ff; Alister McGrath, *The Making of Modern German Christology: From the Enlightenment to Pannenberg* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 105–6; Rachel Muers, 'A Question of Two Answers: Difference and Determination in Barth and von Balthasar', *Heythrop* 40/3 (1999), pp. 268–9; Daniel Lee Deegan, 'Christological Determination in Barth's Doctrine of Creation', *SJT* 14 (1961), pp. 119–35; and Nigel Biggar, *The Hastening that Waits: Karl Barth's Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), p. 5). Colin Gunton suggests that the problem is an imbalance in Barth's theology caused by inadequate trinitarian and pneumatological views and a certain level of unsophistication in his development of human freedom ('The Triune God and the Freedom of the Creature', in S. W. Sykes (ed.), *Karl Barth: Centenary Essays* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), pp. 55ff.).

¹¹ Cf. Robert S. Crawford, 'Theological Method of Karl Barth', *SJT* 25 (1972), p. 327; Daniel D. Williams, 'Brunner and Barth on Philosophy', *JR* 27 (1947), p. 253; Gary

perspective, Barth's christological concentration involves a methodological christomonism that precludes any significant engagement with non-theological disciplines.¹²

More recently an alternative reading of Barth's christocentrism has arisen as scholars have attempted to understand the relationship between Barth's theology and postmodernism.¹³ Rather than understanding the centre of Barth's theology as a determinative centre that encompasses all creaturely reality within its totalizing framework, this approach prefers to understand the centre of Barth's theology indeterministically. These theologians tend to emphasize Barth's awareness of the necessary finiteness of humanity and human language and thus the generally indeterminate nature of theological discourse. According to William Stacy Johnson, then, there is a strongly 'theocentric' strand to Barth's theology that focuses on 'the hiddenness and mystery of God'.¹⁴ Consequently, Barth's theology is understood to be largely 'nonfoundational' and 'decentred' in the sense that the centre of Barth's theology is like the 'opening at the center of a wheel'.¹⁵

Dorrien, 'The Postmodern Barth', *Christian Century* 114 (1997), pp. 338–43, cited 5 April 2005: <http://www.search.epnet.com>; John Milbank, 'Introduction: Suspending the Material: The Turn of Radical Orthodoxy', in John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (eds), *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 2; Stephen H. Webb, *Re-Figuring Theology: The Rhetoric of Karl Barth* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 504, n. 25; and Roberts, 'The Ideal and the Real in the Theology of Karl Barth', in *A Theology on its Way?*, pp. 59–79. Bruce Marshall thus identifies Barth's apparent isolationism as the most common complaint against his theology ('Review of *A Theology on its Way? Essays on Karl Barth*, by Richard H. Roberts', *JTS* 44 (1993), p. 445). J. K. Riches notes that the term *christocentric* itself has come to be associated with an anti-intellectual rejection of natural theology and human reason ('What is "Christocentric" Theology?', pp. 223–4).

Q2

¹² Cf. John B. Cobb, Jr., *God and the World* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), cited 15 April 2005: <http://www.religion-online.org>.

¹³ For example, Isolde Andrews, *Deconstructing Barth: A Study of the Complementary Methods in Karl Barth and Jacques Derrida* (New York: Lang, 1996); Graham Ward, 'Barth and Postmodernism', *New Blackfriars* 74.877 (1993), pp. 550–6; idem, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995); Walter Lowe, 'Barth as a Critic of Dualism: Re-Reading the Römerbrief', *SJT* 41 (1988), pp. 377–95; idem, *Theology and Difference: The Wound of Reason* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Steven Smith, *The Argument to the Other: Reason beyond Reason in the Thought of Karl Barth and Emmanuel Levinas* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983); Johnson, *Mystery of God*; and Geoff Thompson, "'Our Lines and Concepts Continually Break Apart": Language, Mystery and God in Barth', in Geoff Thompson and Christiaan Mostert; Hindmarsh (eds), *Karl Barth: A Future for Postmodern Theology?* (Hindmarsh: Australian Theological Forum, 2001), pp. 191–209.

Q3

¹⁴ Johnson, *Mystery of God*, p. 1.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 3–5; cf. CD, I/2, p. 867. While this essay will make some evaluative comments with respect to such postmodern readings of Barth's christocentrism,

While there may be a measure of truth in each of these different interpretations of Barth's theology, the sheer distance between these two proposals suggests that greater clarity is needed. Clearly, then, any attempt at understanding the nature of Barth's christocentrism must come to terms with the ambiguity that pertains to it despite its apparent clarity. Barth himself was well aware of some of these problems and he rarely used the term himself,¹⁶ even warning against a theology that is *too* christocentric.¹⁷ It would seem, then, that further clarification is necessary before the term *christocentric* can be used in a meaningful way to characterize Barth's theology.¹⁸

Defining Barth's christocentrism

This leads us to the question with which this article is primarily concerned: what exactly do Barth's interpreters mean when they describe him as a christocentric theologian? To answer this question I will adopt and expand a definition of christocentrism offered by Bruce McCormack. According to McCormack, Barth's particular form of christocentrism can be defined as:

the attempt . . . to understand every doctrine from a centre in God's Self-revelation in Jesus Christ; i.e. from a centre in God's act of veiling and unveiling in Christ . . . 'Christocentrism', for him, was a methodological rule . . . in accordance with which one presupposes a particular understanding of God's Self-revelation in reflecting upon each and every other doctrinal topic, and seeks to interpret those topics in the light of what is already known of Jesus Christ.¹⁹

it will not attempt to evaluate it more broadly with respect to its adequacy as a way of understanding Barth's theology. For some studies on this topic see Graham Ward, 'Barth and Postmodernism'; Bruce McCormack, 'Beyond Nonfoundational and Postmodern Readings of Barth', *Zeitschrift für dialektische Theologie* 13 (1997), pp. 67–95; and Thompson and Mostert, (eds), *Barth: Future for Postmodern Theology?*

¹⁶ Riches, 'What is "Christocentric" Theology?', p. 223.

¹⁷ GD, p. 91.

¹⁸ The term 'christocentric' has, of course, been applied to many different theologies but a definition general enough to encompass that entire range of theologies runs the risk of losing any real descriptive or analytic force. Consequently, this essay will focus on understanding the precise manner in which Barth's theology may, or may not, be properly understood as a christocentric theology. For a broader study of christocentric theologies see Henry Vander Good (ed.), *Creation and Method: Critical Essays on Christocentric Theology* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981).

¹⁹ TeSelle points out that christocentrism can be applied to epistemological, anthropological or ontological concerns (*Christ in Context*, p. 1). Barth's theology can properly be considered christocentric on all three points.

Q4

Three things about this definition stand out as being particularly important for understanding the unique form of Barth's christocentrism: a veiling and unveiling in Christ, a methodological orientation, and the particular understanding of God's self-revelation. In addition, we will need to consider the implications for Barth's christocentrism of trinitarian orientation and his emphasis on incorporating both divine and human realities into any properly Christian theology. These five qualifications will help us understand more clearly what it means to attribute 'christocentric' to Barth's theology.

Veiling and unveiling

First, McCormack notes that this christocentrism is one that involves both 'veiling and unveiling in Christ'. As Barth repeatedly argues, God's Word is never merely given, as though it were then the possession of human beings and under their control, but is an *event* whereby God manifests or unveils himself to human beings while remaining veiled in the sovereignty and mystery of his being.²⁰ Though Barth firmly asserts that the incarnate Christ is the revelation of God in a human being and thus the *unveiling* God, he nevertheless denies that this humanity is intrinsically revelatory but is so by the gracious act of God.²¹ Thus, the incarnation is the supreme manifestation of the *deus revelatus* who at the same time remains the *deus absconditus*.²² As a result, Barthian christocentrism rejects (1) an entirely apophatic approach to theology that voids it of any meaningful content (thus denying the 'unveiling' of God's self-revelation) and (2) an illegitimate systematization of theology based on some theological concept from which the rest of the system can be logically deduced (thus denying the 'veiling').²³

Webster argues that it is at this point that '[m]uch of the material which seeks to relate Barth to postmodernism has often lost its way' in that it overemphasizes the negative aspects of this presentation to the detriment of his 'churchly positivity'.²⁴ His concern, then, seems to be that many postmodern readings of Barth focus on the hiddenness of God emphasized by his language of veiling but are not adequately balanced by an equal treatment of the givenness and objectivity of 'God's freely taking form in the incarnation of the Son' which 'bestows upon Christian dogmatics a specific kind of positivity'.²⁵ Although he is even somewhat critical of Johnson's

²⁰ Cf. I/1, pp. 169, 174, 315–25; II/2, pp. 54–7, 179–203.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 173, 323–324; *GD*, pp. 1, 157.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 320ff.

²³ Cf. I/2, pp. 868ff.

²⁴ Webster, 'Barth, Modernity and Postmodernity', p. 15.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18. Webster thus argues that 'It is given' sums up 'virtually the whole of what I want to say about Barth's relation to postmodernism' (*ibid.*, p. 19).

study, suggesting that he presents ‘a rather strained reading’ which tends to overemphasize the ‘mystery’ motif in Barth’s theology,²⁶ Johnson at least recognizes the importance of affirming its positive dimensions in addition to its ‘countermelody’, i.e. mystery.²⁷ Any tendency to overemphasize the latter is probably the result of Johnson’s attempt to counter the significantly more common overemphasis on the all-consuming determinateness of Barth’s christological concentration. Regardless, Webster criticisms do point out the potential for mistakes that arises whenever either pole of Barth’s christocentric theology, the revelatory veiling or unveiling, is emphasized to the neglect of the other.

A methodological rule

Secondly, McCormack’s definition presents Barth’s christocentrism as ‘a methodological rule’. This, of course, is not to argue that it is merely a methodological rule, since Barth is well aware that this rule is itself based on the ontological reality of the incarnation and the constitutive nature of Jesus’ eternal election.²⁸ Rather, here I simply acknowledge the significance of the methodological role that Barth’s christocentrism plays. Two important aspects of Barth’s christocentric methodology require our attention. First, he argues that the directionality of all theological thinking must move primarily from Christ to any given theological formulation. Barth recognized that the directionality of theological thinking has important consequences for the content of our theologies and consistently maintained that theological

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

²⁷ Johnson, *Mystery of God*, p. 1. One can rightly question, however, whether Johnson’s use of the terms theocentric and christocentric is the most appropriate way of identifying the hiddenness and givenness of Barth’s theology.

²⁸ For studies on Barth’s doctrine of election and the constitutive significance of the incarnation see Mary Cathleen Cunningham, *What is Theological Exegesis: Interpretation and Use of Scripture in Barth’s Doctrine of Election* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995); Bruce McCormack, ‘Grace and Being: The Role of God’s Gracious Election in Karl Barth’s Theological Ontology’, in John B. Webster (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), pp. 92–110; *idem*, ‘The Sum of the Gospel: The Doctrine of Election in the Theologies of Alexander Schweizer and Karl Barth’, in David Willis-Watkins, Michael Welker, and Mattias Gockel (eds), *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 470–93; F. Stuart Clark, ‘Christocentric Developments in the Reformed Doctrine of Predestination’, *Churchman* 98/3 (1984), pp. 229–45; John Colwell, *Actuality and Provisionality: Eternity and Election in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: Rutherford, 1989), and Michael O’Neill, ‘Karl Barth’s Doctrine of Election’, *Evangelical Quarterly* 76/4 (2004), pp. 311–26.

thought must always begin with christology.²⁹ Second, this methodological principle not only affirms the *directionality* but the *universality* of christological thinking. As indicated above, Barth maintained that properly theological thinking, whether addressing doctrine or some other mode of discourse, must begin with christology.

This methodological christocentrism, however, cannot be interpreted as necessitating the theological isolationism with which Barth is often associated. If one wants to focus exclusively on the proper *point of departure* for theology, then it must be conceded that Barth is christomonistic, but only in this narrow sense. This does mean, however, that his theology is therefore methodologically isolated from other disciplines. A number of useful studies have recently appeared arguing that Barth's theology is quite open to interacting with and learning from a broad spectrum of non-theological disciplines.³⁰ Indeed, John McDowell argues that Barth's clear affirmation of his presuppositions and commitments enables a more effective and meaningful engagement.³¹ Rather than precluding meaningful conversation with other perspectives, then, Barth's christocentrism can actually serve to foster such dialogue. A closer examination of Barth's extended dialogues with science and philosophy in *CD*, III/2, would reveal that Barth's christological starting point does not prohibit him from recognizing the value of these other perspectives and the necessity of learning from and incorporating the insights they provide while at the same time offering a critique that is driven by logical and methodological arguments in addition to those developed from within his christological framework.³² Barth's christocentric methodology, then, provides the starting point that is essential for any rational discourse

²⁹ Cf. Kathryn Tanner, 'Creation and Providence', in John B. Webster (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge Companions to Religion; Cambridge: CUP, 2000), p. 11.

³⁰ See esp. John C. McDowell, 'Theology as Conversational Event: Karl Barth, the Ending of "Dialogue" and the Beginning of "Conversation"', *Modern Theology* 19/4 (2003), pp. 483–510; Johnson, *Mystery of God*; Joseph L. Mangina, 'Mediating Theologies: Karl Barth between Radical and Neo-Orthodoxy', *SJT* 56/4 (2003), pp. 427–43; and idem, *Karl Barth*, pp. 48–53). John Webster makes a similar argument with respect to Barth's openness to historical dialogue ('"There is No Past in the Church, so there is No Past in Theology": Barth on the History of Modern Protestant Theology', in John C. McDowell and Mike Higon (eds), *Conversing with Barth* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 14–39). Several have argued, though, that this openness was more of a theoretical than an actual reality (e.g. Johnson, *Mystery of God*, pp. 8–9, and D. F. Ford, 'Conclusion: Assessing Barth', in Sykes (ed.), *Karl Barth: Studies of his Theological Method*, p. 196).

³¹ McDowell, 'Theology as Conversational Event', pp. 490ff.

³² Cf. *CD*, III/2, pp. 71–131.

without necessarily precluding interaction with those adopting alternative starting points.

A particular christology

Finally, McCormack's definition stipulates that Barth's christocentrism operates on the basis of 'a particular understanding of God's self-revelation'. Barth's rejection of any attempt to ground theology on a particular principle or idea is well known. He asserted that truth is not 'an idea, principle, or system Nor is it a structure of correct insights, nor a doctrine, even though this be a correct doctrine of the being of God, that of man, their normal relationship to one another and the establishment, restoration and ordering of this relationship'.³³ Barth's christological concentration centres theology not on 'a principle from which a system can be deduced', according to Eberhard Jüngel, but on 'the concrete existence of Jesus Christ'.³⁴ So Barth understood his christocentrism to centre on 'an actual encounter with the reality to which theological presentation can only point'³⁵ which, for Barth, meant primarily 'the divine act of the atonement'.³⁶

³³ CD, IV/3.1, p. 375. Similarly in III/2, he states, 'In Jesus God is not just a word or a systematic principle, but the reality and *prima veritas* which of itself sets itself at the head of all other thoughts and gives them a specific direction and content' (p. 552). This was the basis of his disagreement with Berkouwer's evaluation of his theology in *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (London: Paternoster, 1956). Barth objected to Berkouwer's title and subsequent exposition on the basis that he was 'not concerned here with the precedence, victory or triumph of a principle, even though this principle be that of grace. We are concerned with the living person of Jesus Christ' (CD, IV/3.1, p. 173). '(C)hristological thinking', for Barth, 'in this sense is a very different process from deduction from a given principle' and he thus contends that the theology does not develop from 'a Christ-principle' but from 'Jesus Christ Himself as attested by Holy Scripture' (*ibid.*, p. 175). Therefore, Barth rejected Berkouwer's characterization of his theology on the basis that *any* principle used systematically to determine God's revelation is an illegitimate imposition on the divine freedom. Robert E. Cushman describes it as an imposition of 'man-made constructs on that which transcends man' ('Doctrine of God and Man', p. 11).

³⁴ Eberhard Jüngel, *Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), p. 128.

³⁵ CD, III/2, p. 553.

³⁶ As Barth describes it, the 'heart of the Church's dogmatics . . . has a circumference, the doctrine of creation and the doctrine of the last things, the redemption and consummation. But the covenant fulfilled in the atonement is its centre' (CD, IV/3.1, p. 3). This actualistic centring of theology on the atonement has particular significance for this project as it indicates that theology cannot remain 'only a doctrine of God' but must involve the relationship between God and man (CD, II/2, p. 5; cf. John B. Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark,

As with the discussion of veiling and unveiling above, then, the postmodern interpretation of Barth can, at times, fall short on this point. Although Barth does describe his theology using his famous metaphor of 'the opening in the centre of a wheel',³⁷ he does not mean to suggest that this centre is indeterminate or without particular content but that knowledge of the centre can only be provided through the revelatory *event* and cannot be possessed by conceptual knowledge.³⁸ Barth's christocentrism thus involves 'a particular understanding of God's self-revelation' that reveals the centre of theology to be the relationship between God and man revealed in Jesus Christ through his concrete existence.

Stephen Sykes, however, finds Barth's argument inconsistent on this point. According to him, Barth denies that any 'central doctrine, concept, or idea' lies at the centre of theology', an approach he associates with Barth's rejection of neo-Protestant attempts to define the 'essentials' of Christianity.³⁹ Thus, Barth's focus is not on 'the centrality of a doctrine of the Atonement, but the centrality of the act of the Atonement in which God is God'.⁴⁰ But Sykes thinks Barth is unaware that this actualistic centre 'demands a special Christology, which, although it is comparatively unspecific compared with the degree to which two-nature Christology was eventually developed in the post-patristic era, is none the less identifiably non-Docetic, non-Ebionistic, and non-Arian'.⁴¹ Therefore, he argues that the centre of Barth's theology is a particular christological doctrine and not merely the divine act itself. Barth's assertions to the contrary are 'unconvincing rhetoric' that disguise the reality of this conceptual core.⁴² Sykes, by contrast, agrees with Barth's actualism but argues that theologians should explicitly utilize some concept or idea

1998), pp. 79–80, and Johnson, *Mystery of God*, p. 13). On this theme Barth is thus very much in line with, and perhaps influenced by, Eastern Orthodox anthropologies (cf. Panayiotis Nellas, *Deification in Christ: The Nature of the Human Person* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's, 1987), p. 120).

³⁷ CD, I/2, p. 867.

³⁸ Cf. Johnson, *Mystery of God*, pp. 11–66. Barth thus contends that the conceptuality of doctrine can 'participate in' the truth of the Word but that the Word 'cannot be enclosed or confined in any doctrine . . . not even the most correct Christology', since he is the Lord as well as 'the measure and criterion' of all doctrine (CD, IV/3.1, p. 376).

³⁹ Stephen W. Sykes, 'Barth on the Centre of Theology', in Sykes (ed.), *Karl Barth: Studies of his Theological Method*, p. 25; cf. also idem., 'Schleiermacher and Barth on the Essence of Christianity: An Instructive Disagreement', in James O. Duke and Robert F. Streetman (eds), *Barth and Schleiermacher: Beyond the Impasse* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 41; see also McGrath, *Making of German Christology*, p. 107.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 51.

‘corresponding to, but in no way replacing the actuality of God’s revelation, which seeks to render conceptually what is there enacted really’ at the centre of theology.⁴³

Sykes’s criticisms, however, can be responded to on three points. First, even though he acknowledges that Barth’s concern is primarily with ‘unauthorized systematization’ he unaccountably fails to consider the significance of Barth’s understanding of an ‘authorized systematization’.⁴⁴ Theology, for Barth, can be systematic so long as it is an expression of the *ratio* of its object, i.e. God revealed through Christ.⁴⁵ While Barth rejects any attempt to place a principle or idea at the centre of Christian theology, he fully affirms that the story of God’s encounter with humanity in the incarnation can and must play this role.⁴⁶ As John Webster argues, Barth’s theology ‘is, then, striking above all for its narrative density, its ceaseless vigilance against conceptual takeover, its refusal to go beyond the simple “It came to pass . . .”’.⁴⁷ Because of ‘the absolute and self-positing character’ of this divine–human event ‘Barth locates the bridge between Jesus’ history and our own not in some cognitive or interpretative or experiential processes, but in the self-manifestation of the risen Jesus in the power of the Spirit, as a reality which we can only acknowledge’.⁴⁸ Thus, Barth is fully aware that the actualistic centre of his theology has its own *ratio* from which a system can be developed. Second, Sykes fails to bring into the discussion Barth’s awareness of the inseparability of form and content in any discussion of methodology.⁴⁹ This inseparable relationship makes it questionable at best to charge Barth with being unaware that the formal centre of his theology could not be divorced from its material content. Finally, although Sykes is well aware of Barth’s concerns that any

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 46–8; see CD, I/2, pp. 868–9.

⁴⁵ On the development of Barth’s use of the *ratio* concept through his interaction with Anselm see Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to his Early Theology 1910–1931* (London: SCM, 1962), pp. 182–93.

⁴⁶ Cf. D. F. Ford, ‘Barth’s Interpretation of the Bible’, in Sykes (ed.), *Karl Barth: Studies of his Theological Method*, p. 74.

⁴⁷ John Webster, *Barth’s Ethics of Reconciliation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), pp. 83–4; quoting from CD, IV/1, p. 223; cf. also *idem*, ‘The Grand Narrative of Jesus Christ: Barth’s Christology’, in Thompson and Mostert (eds), *Barth: Future for Postmodern Theology?*, pp. 41–3.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 87–8.

⁴⁹ As Stuart McLean observed, for Barth ‘form and content are bound up together and should be separated only for the purpose of speech. Even then, speech itself must constantly attempt to reveal that they are together’ (*Humanity in the Thought of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1981), p. 12; see also von Balthasar, *Theology of Barth*, pp. 47–55 and McCormack, ‘Sum of the Gospel’, pp. 476–7).

attempt to conceptualize the centre of theology will result in the theologians attempting to control the object of theology – he even notes that the history of theology bears out these concerns – but he casually dismisses Barth's actualistic methodology without providing in his alternative approach any substantive response to this concern.⁵⁰

It may be that at times Barth does not differentiate clearly enough between the illegitimate systematization that seeks to develop an entire theological system on the basis of an idea or principle with the pragmatic adoption of some given conceptual perspective that is necessary for any given theological formulation. But Barth clearly recognizes the legitimacy of this latter move, stating that

truth certainly can and should be reflected in such a doctrine, and secondarily attested in this form. It demands to be taught as such, i.e., to be grasped, considered and understood with the greatest possible consistency, and to be expressed in tolerably correct, clear and logical thoughts, words and sentences.⁵¹

But we must recognise the limitations of these conceptualizations in that 'even in the doctrine which is most correct, and most conscientiously attained and fashioned, we are already or still in the sphere of man and not yet or no longer in that of the truth of God which encounters him'.⁵²

Contrary to both Sykes and some postmodern readings of Barth, then, Barth is fully committed to both the actualistic centre of theology and its material particularity. The two can be differentiated for heuristic reasons but should never be separated as though they can be independently critiqued.

A trinitarian orientation

Besides the three principles brought out by McCormack's definition of Barth's christocentrism, two other points should be addressed. It seems that the most likely reason Barth thought the concept of christocentrism should be used carefully in theology is because Barth's christocentrism was always intended, as Geoffrey Bromiley observes, 'to point to (and not away from) the centrality of the triune God'.⁵³ Similarly, Johnson says,

It is commonplace to interpret Barth as a 'christocentric' theologian. Yet this simple designation does not end the matter. One cannot focus on

⁵⁰ Sykes, 'Barth on the Centre', pp. 50–1.

⁵¹ CD, IV/3.1, pp. 375–6.

⁵² Ibid., cf. also I/2, p. 731.

⁵³ Geoffrey William Bromiley, *An Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. xi; cf. Johnson, *Mystery of God*, p. 13.

Jesus Christ in himself, according to Barth, without understanding his life as caught up in a more dynamic Trinitarian movement of God's Word and Spirit.⁵⁴

This trinitarian orientation was at the heart of Barth's own concerns about the term,⁵⁵ indeed, the significance of the Trinity is reflected in the entire structure of the *Church Dogmatics* and its individual expositions.⁵⁶ Unlike some contemporary theologians who seek to place christocentric and theocentric in opposition to one another,⁵⁷ Barth would regard any such move as singularly inappropriate. Rather, Barth always intended the christocentric orientation of his theology to lead to and support his primarily trinitarian concerns. As John Thompson noted, for Barth, 'Christology and Trinity are distinguishable but inseparable'.⁵⁸ A christocentric theology that was in tension with, let alone

⁵⁴ Johnson, *Mystery of God*, p. 13. Hartwell likewise states: 'In view of Barth's teaching on the Triune God, creation and the Holy Spirit it may even be doubted whether his theology can be classified as wholly christocentric, seeing that to both the Father and the Holy Spirit a prominent place is assigned in it' (*The Theology of Karl Barth* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 1964), p. 16).

⁵⁵ *GD*, p. 91.

⁵⁶ At this point one must acknowledge the extensive discussions that have taken place regarding the adequacy of Barth's pneumatology and its implications for understanding his christocentrism. John Thompson argues that, despite the apparent paucity of pneumatological material, the very structure of the *Dogmatics* suggests an inherently trinitarian and, thus, strongly pneumatological orientation (*The Holy Spirit in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick, 1991), p. 42; cf. also George Hunsinger, 'The Mediator of Communion: Karl Barth's Doctrine of the Holy Spirit', in Webster (ed), *Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, pp. 127–42). Torrance even goes so far as to say that no one has given the Trinity a greater role in theology than Barth (*Karl Barth*, p. 176). Others have been more critical, citing weaknesses in Barth's theology as underlying apparent weaknesses in his understanding of gender (Eugene F. Rogers, 'Supplementing Barth on Jews and Gender: Identifying God by Anagogy and the Spirit', *Modern Theology* 14/1 (1998), pp. 43–82); human freedom and history (Rosato, *The Spirit as Lord*; see also Willis, *Ethics of Karl Barth* and Gunton, 'The Triune God and the Freedom of the Creature', pp. 46–68), and the relationship between Christ's humanity and ours (Ivor Davidson, 'Theologizing the Human Jesus: An Ancient (and Modern) Approach to Christology Reassessed', *IJST* 3/3 (2001), pp. 129–54) among others. But it should be noted that most of these arguments have more to do with the manner in which Barth presented his pneumatology and do not in any way weaken Thompson's point that the structure and intention of Barth's theology reflects an inherently pneumatological interest. In addition, the proposed fifth volume on redemption, which was to have focused on pneumatological issues, may well have ameliorated some of these concerns.

⁵⁷ For example, Paul F. Knitter, 'Theocentric Christology', *ThTo* 40 (1983), pp. 130–49.

⁵⁸ John Thompson, 'On the Trinity', in John Thompson (ed), *Theology beyond Christendom: Essays on the Centenary of the Birth of Karl Barth, May 10, 1886* (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick, 1986), p. 13.

in opposition to, its trinitarian locus would ultimately fail to be Christian theology.

A divine-human relation

Finally, as Barth's christocentrism does not reflect a denigration of the Trinity, nor does it indicate a promotion of christological concerns at the expense of creaturely realities. Barth was very clear that theology cannot be about God alone but must include humanity as well:

A very precise definition of the Christian endeavour in this respect would really require the more complex term 'the-anthropology'. For an abstract doctrine of God has no place in the Christian realm, only a 'doctrine of God and of man', a doctrine of the commerce and communion between God and man.⁵⁹

The significant attention that Barth devoted to human concerns (for example, ethics, culture, agency, etc.) demonstrates the keen interest in creaturely realities Barth exhibited through his christocentric perspective.⁶⁰ Some have argued that this openness to creaturely reality is a fairly late development that does not surface until volumes III and IV of the *Dogmatics*. According to Webster, however, it is more appropriate to speak of a richer expression in these later writings of a concern that has its roots in the earliest phases of Barth's theological development.⁶¹

As we have seen, however, many interpreters contend that this aspect of Barth's theology actually involves some form of ontological or epistemological christomonism that denigrates and subsumes creaturely realities – despite the fact that Barth's rejection of christomonism could not have been clearer. In the posthumously published fragment IV/4 he asserted that 'a true Christocentricity will strictly forbid us' from pursuing christomonistic lines of thought.⁶² Even more clearly, he argued in a late discussion article that '[t]he Gospel defies all isms' which fail to unite God and man and that 'sound theology' eschews christomonism as a failure to appreciate the affirmation and union of both God and humanity.⁶³ These concerns have also been effectively responded to by a number of recent studies demonstrating rather convincingly that such criticisms revolve

⁵⁹ Karl Barth, 'Evangelical Theology in the 19th Century', in *The Humanity of God*, tr. John Newton Thomas and Thomas Wieser (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1960), p. 11.

⁶⁰ See Joseph L. Mangina, *Karl Barth on the Christian Life* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001).

⁶¹ Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology*, pp. 3 and 37–8.

⁶² CD, IV/4, p. 19.

⁶³ Karl Barth, 'A Theological Dialogue', *Theology Today* 19/2 (1962), cited 10 Feb. 2005: <http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/jul1962/v19-2-article2.htm>.

primarily around a failure to appreciate the dialectic involved in Barth's redefinition of human reality, particularly human freedom, as a determinate correspondence to God.⁶⁴

Additionally, several scholars have argued that the christomonist objection that Barth subsumes humanity under christology fails to appreciate Barth's understanding of the 'enhypostatic' nature of humanity's relationship to Jesus.⁶⁵ Thus, as Jesus' human nature exists enhypostatically in union with the Word so all human nature exists enhypostatically in union with Jesus. Barth's christocentricity, then, is more properly understood as the proper ground rather than the subsumption of creaturely reality.

Conclusion

Given these caveats, one might begin to wonder whether it is still appropriate to speak of Barth as a christocentric theologian. Since it is necessary to qualify the term so carefully, maybe we would be better served by finding some other descriptor that is less susceptible to such confusion. While it is true that the breadth and depth of Barth's theology make it amenable to a variety of descriptions, there remains, nonetheless, a particular aptness to this label. As indicated at the beginning of this article, Barth clearly emphasized that Christian theology must be determined at every stage by the incarnation. He thus argued that:

within theological thinking generally unconditional priority must be given to thinking which is attentive to the existence of the living person of Jesus Christ... so that *per definitionem* Christological thinking forms the unconditional basis for all other theological thinking... It is thus quite out of the question to start with certain prior decisions (for example, concerning God, man, sin, grace etc) and then to support these christologically... The only decisions which can have any place are those which follow after, which are consistent with thinking which follows

⁶⁴ Cf. McLean, *Humanity in Thought of Barth*, pp. 60–2; McCormack, 'Grace and Being', p. 106; Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology*; and idem, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*.

⁶⁵ Cf. Ingolf U. Dalferth, 'Karl Barth's Eschatological Realism', in Syks (ed.), *Barth: Centenary Essays* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), p. 29; Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology*, pp. 88–9; Ivor Davidson, 'Theologizing the Human Jesus', pp. 129–54; and Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), pp. 56–8. See Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology*, p. 89, n. 39, for resources on the enhypostatic/enhypostatic formula.

Him, which arise in the course of Christological thinking and the related investigations, definitions and conclusions.⁶⁶

The consistency with which Barth carried the christological determination of theology suggests that, despite the potential for confusion and mischaracterization, the christocentric label may still be justly, though carefully, applied. Indeed, one might well respond to Barth's critics by asking, along with Barth, if the incarnation is a reality, if the sovereign God of the universe has in fact become incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ, can theology be anything but christocentric?⁶⁷

From this discussion we can see that calling Barth a christocentric theologian means that his theology was christologically determined in both its formal and material aspects. But *christocentric* is not a generic label that can be usefully applied irrespective of the unique particularities of individual theologians. Any attempt to describe Barth as a christocentric theologian must therefore bear in mind that his unique brand of christocentrism always involved (1) both a veiling and unveiling of knowledge in Christ, (2) a methodological orientation, (3) a particular christology, (4) a trinitarian focus, and (5) an affirmation of creaturely reality. We may continue to describe Barth's theology as a christocentric theology so long as we bear these caveats in mind.

⁶⁶ CD, IV/3.1, p. 175. A number of other concerns have been raised about the apparent epistemological exclusivity of Barth's christocentrism which will be addressed elsewhere.

⁶⁷ This would seem to be an apt response to those who are concerned about the 'well-nigh incredible consistency' of Barth's christology (Hans Frei, *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, ed. G. Hunsinger and W. C. Placer (New York: OUP, 1993), p. 175); a concern that apparently led to Colin Brown's criticism that Barth developed a speculative theology that is 'more christocentric than the Bible' ('Barth, Karl', in J. D. Douglas (ed.), *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974, 1978), p. 108). Contrary to Brown, as we have seen, the consistency of Barth's christocentrism is not based on systematic speculations but on a commitment to the reality-defining significance of the incarnation. Brown's comment also betrays a lack of sensitivity to Barth's christological hermeneutic, a hermeneutic based not on forcing christological meaning into particular texts but on seeing each portion of the biblical text as part of a larger christological whole (for good comments on this aspect of Barth's hermeneutic see Christina A. Baxter, 'The Nature and Place of Scripture in the Church Dogmatics', in John Thompson (ed.), *Theology beyond Christendom: Essays on the Centenary of the Birth of Karl Barth* (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick, 1986), pp. 33–62, and Mike Higton, 'The Fulfilment of History in Barth, Frei, Auerbach and Dante', in John C. McDowell and Mike Higton (eds), *Conversing with Barth* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 120–41).

