Foreword

Barth studies may very well be at an impasse. The "new paradigm" that interprets him favorably in terms of Kantian epistemology, Hegelian ontology or philosophical idealism in general, is the inverse of those critics who interpret him unfavorably because of his putative indebtedness to Kantian epistemology, Hegelian ontology or philosophical idealism. The debates between the two cannot move forward as long as they have such broad agreement as to what Barth was doing; only the evaluation differs. A theologian's affirmation or rejection of Barth, and/or Barthianism, will depend upon correlative commitments to Kantian epistemology, Hegelian ontology and philosophical idealism, and especially "modernity." Does Barth complete modernity theologically? Does he work within it to find a place for theology? Is he doing theology under its conditions?

In one sense, all theology now takes place within "modernity," however we define that rich and important, albeit contested and always contestable term. "Modernity" is the theological partner that we cannot live with, and without which we would not be living. To that extent, the "new paradigm" is a necessary and salutary feature of Barth studies. It is the "conditions" that causes pause. That we must and should be modern does not entail how we are. Modernity does not delineate inescapable conditions of progress that capture us, intentionally or unintentionally, like flies in a bottle. It does not render everything we have known or done up to this point as obsolete, despite

the default position of the "new and improved." It does not put an end to metaphysics.

Kirkland performs a valuable service in the work that follows. He challenges the "prevailing narrative" of the new paradigm by carefully setting forth Barth's "historiography of modernity." Through attention to this historiography, he persuasively demonstrates that Barth, far from working within the limits of Kantian epistemology, "interrupted" them. Barth found in them a "rational Pelagianism" that he referred to as "Enlightened Absolutism." Kirkland identifies the political critique Barth's theology brought to the tendency toward absolutism in modernity. He turns to an interesting source in order to make his argument, Gillian Rose. He does not overstate his argument. He makes no strong causal connection between Rose and Barth. Nor does he get caught up in the minutiae of Barth studies that asks when Barth read what and for what purpose in order to chart the historical progression of Barth's thought along with the trajectory by which Barth scholars should now develop it. Kirkland has more substantive concerns. He is less worried about Barth and more concerned with what Barth was concerned about. In this sense, his work is Barthian in the best sense of that term. Rose assists Kirkland in unearthing the difficulties neokantianism bequeathed "modern moral discourse," especially as it pertains to the subject. Rose's diagnosis sets the stage to understand better Barth's vision of the weaknesses modernity produced with respect to the moral and political subject. By bringing Rose and Barth into conversation, Kirkland offers much more than one more apology for Barth either for or against modernity; his work, as he puts it, is "an essay in the reconstruction of the subject." His analysis of Barth serves this purpose.

Kirkland begins by carefully taking the reader through Barth's lectures, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*. Often neglected by Barth affirmers and critics, these lectures offer Barth's most incisive analysis and critique of modernity. Its emphasis on the "basic will to absolute form" leads to nihilism. If Kirkland is correct in his interpretation, and I think he is, then Barth's analysis of modernity

begins to resemble that of Charles Taylor's. Kirkland does not make this connection, but his careful review of Barth's lectures opens up new possibilities for understanding Barth and modernity.

Kirkland supplements his reading of Barth's lectures with his "Fate and Theology" essay, and then with these lectures and essay as the background, he asks us to re-read *Church Dogmatics*. In so doing it appears less as an exercise in epistemology, and more as a "thick description of human thought and action." The result is what makes this work so important. Barth's work is less concerned with theological epistemology, a concern that would make it work within the conditions of modernity, and more about discipleship and human agency. Barth's teaching on the Trinity also emerges in a new light. The reader should discover for her or himself the nuances of the argument, but its important is found in Kirkland's statement: "The doctrine of the Trinity, therefore, functions not simply as a mode of speaking of God, but a mode of speaking of the shape of Christian discipleship." Here is what mattered to Barth and Kirkland has done us a service by directing us to it.

Having established this important reading in the first chapter, Kirkland shows its pay-off in the second. The best Barth scholars remain divided on Barth's teaching of the *logos asarkos*, and how we should understand the relationship between the Son's incarnation and election. Kirkland's reading of Barth as reconstructing the subject helps make sense of the confusion Barth himself caused. Unlike many who find in Barth a rejection of divine immutability or simplicity, Kirkland shows how Barth avoids any sense of change or potentiality in God. What matters most is God's receptivity of human creatures into participating in the divine life through the kenosis of the Son in human history. Far from changing God, this gives us insight into who God always is as Holy Trinity. Much like von Balthasar, receptivity and obedience become divine perfections that do not imply any lack or potential in God that then gets actualized.

At this point in his argument, Kirkland turns to Gillian Rose's criticism of neo-kantianism and relates it to Barth's account of Christ's

judgment. Rather than the stable Kantian subject, autonomous, confident in its epistemological humility and its knowledge that only the will is good, Jesus's judgment on us does not lock us into an immanent, political space, secured by the power of our own will. It is instead a "pedagogy of discipleship." Kirkland notes its importance: "The kind of political space imagined here is a deeply fragile one, committed to the stretching of human being as all are included, to openness, difficulty, and to sacrifice. It is a community that is predicated upon divine presence sustaining the process of learning by sustaining the community in its own life as historically given for us."

What Kirkland accomplishes, and its importance should not be underestimated, is that Barth's reconstruction of the subject challenges one of the fundamental divisions created by the production of the neokantian subject—a division of theological labor into distinct ethical and dogmatic loci. Here is what is at stake in resisting the new Barthian paradigm that reads his work in terms of questions posed by Kantian epistemology. It leaves this division, a division Barth rejected, unchallenged. Drawing upon Dostoevsky, and placing Barth in conversation with Rowan Williams and John Milbank, Kirkland's final chapter critiques a post Hegelian Barthianism that makes the fall the condition for divine entanglement with the world that justifies God but colludes with death. If this is the case, then human agency loses any potential for a participation in God other than by some miraculous intervention in which God acts only at the end of history. Kirkland offers an alternative reading by attending to the importance of "divine judgment." The judgment does not sanction death, but life for the judgment is inseparable from Resurrection.

Kirkland takes us, with Barth and Scripture, "into the far country" in order to bring back together what was sadly divided, and what has been overlooked, in much of Barth studies – the importance of overcoming the division between doctrine and ethics. Kirkland's argument helps make sense of an important letter Barth wrote to Karl Stoevesand in 1930 which he first noted his plan to develop a "five part work that includes an ethics dispersed over the doctrinal

loci."[1] He did not offer an independent ethics, nor one that emerged only after dogmatics was properly presented. He challenged the very division. In speaking well about God's odd victory in Jesus and its gracious judgment upon the world, human agency was empowered and encumbered with a new human subject here and now. By developing what mattered most to Barth, Kirkland points in a fruitful direction not only for Barth studies, but for theology and ethics as well.

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1. Cited in Gerhard Sauter, "Vorwort zur Neuausgabe," to *Die Christliche Dogmatik*, xvi.