Categorical Rejection *and* Calculated Reformulation

A Demythologizing Reappraisal of Karl Barth's "Mythological" Rejection of the *Pactum Salutis*

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Abstract

Karl Barth's well-known "mythology" criticism of the *pactum salutis* has itself achieved a mythological status insofar as it is repeatedly cited by friend and foe alike as a straightforward rejection of the seventeenth-century doctrine. However, when viewed in light of Barth's entire excursus on Reformed federal theology, it becomes clear that he does more than merely disparage the doctrine; rather, he reformulates it along the lines of his view of election in Jesus Christ. Thus his treatment of the *pactum salutis* should be viewed as not only a categorical rejection but also a calculated reformulation.

I. Introduction

The eminent Swiss Reformed theologian, Karl Barth (1886–1968), is well known among historians of Reformed theology for his repudiation of classical federal theology. This is rightly so; for, within his *Church Dogmatics* Barth devotes a lengthy excursus to polemicizing energetically against several of federal theology's allegedly aberrant core features such as its historicist approach to interpreting the Bible, its undue rejection of universalism due to its incorrect doctrines of election and limited atonement, and its egregious confessional codification of a law-grace dualism —the distinction between a *foedus operum* and a *foedus gratiae*. Furthermore, he levels a peculiarly strong polemic against that which he views to be the zenith of this fallacious federal theology—the *pactum salutis*. At one point in this polemic he employs a now famous rhetorical flourish to decry the *pactum* as "mythology, for which there is no place in a right understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity. . . ."[1]

In light of Barth's extensive polemic, it is clear that he had no intention to perpetuate this allegedly "mythological" federal theology. Rather, using his unique formulation of election[2] and strictly Christological approach[3] as his starting point and theological method respectively, he

1. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2004), IV/1, 54–66; quote at 65.

2. Assessments of Barth's formulation of election are both legion and beyond our present scope. For a recent analysis of his formulation vis-à-vis Calvin's, see David Gibson, *Reading the Decree: Exegesis, Election and Christology in Calvin and Barth*, T&T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology (London: T & T Clark, 2009).

3. Regarding Barth's so-called "Christomonism," see David L. Mueller, *Foundation of Karl Barth's doctrine of Reconciliation: Jesus Christ Crucified and Risen*, Toronto Studies in Theology 54 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1990), 419–23; Carl Trueman, 'Calvin, Barth, and Reformed Theology: Historical Prolegomena', in *Calvin, Barth, and Reformed Theology*, ed. Carl Trueman and Neil B. MacDonald, Paternoster Theological Monographs (Eugene, OR:

radically reformulates covenant theology in mono-covenantal terms (i.e., an exclusive and all-inclusive covenant of grace) instead of perpetuating the bi-covenantal (i.e., covenant of works, covenant of grace) and tri-covenantal (i.e., covenant of works, *pactum salutis,* covenant of grace) schemas found within the Reformed orthodox tradition. Moreover, he pursues this reformulation under the guise of restoring the pure covenant theology of Calvin; for, according to Barth, Calvin's formulation of the covenant of grace has been corrupted by his scholastic successors who introduced a dualism—the covenant of works, which Barth interprets as a purely law-based relationship that undergirds the covenant of grace—into Reformed federal theology. He therefore views his reformulation as a rejoinder to the dualistic legalism that not only has crept in to Reformed theology behind Calvin's back but also has attained confessional status in the Westminster Standards. For these reasons Barth's excursus on Reformed federal theology is commonly described as the root of the neo-orthodox branch of modern Reformed theology that denies the covenant of works-covenant of grace schema as a dualistic, legalistic imposter and insists upon an exclusive mono-covenantal federal theology instead.[4]

Wipf & Stock, 2008), 14.

4. John Halsey Wood, 'Merit in the Midst of Grace: The Covenant with Adam Reconsidered in View of the Two Powers of God', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 10, no. 2 (4, 2008), 133–48; Cornelis Venema, 'Recent Criticisms of the 'covenant of works' in the Westminster Confession of Faith', *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 9, no. 2 (1993), 165–98; Peter A. Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology*, Texts & Studies in Reformation & Post-Reformation Thought (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 17–26, 277 and 310–11; Richard A. Muller, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 175–89; J. Mark Beach, 'The Doctrine of the *Pactum Salutis* in the Covenant Theology of Herman Witsius', *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 13 (2002), 101–42, es101–18; Beach, *Christ and the Covenant: Francis Turretin's Federal Theology as a Defense of the Doctrine of Grace*, Reformed Historical Theology 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 21, 53, 61, 212, 335 and 338; Douglas J. W. Milne, 'A Barthian Stricture on Reformed Theology: The Unconditionality of the Covenant of Grace', *Reformed*

However, despite all of the scholarly attention placed upon Barth's seminal role in the development of neo-orthodox covenant theology, scant scholarship has been devoted to his actual critique of classical Reformed federal theology in general, and even less to his arguments against the *pactum salutis* in particular. Regarding the latter, for example, although several studies briefly reference the famous "mythology" passage wherein Barth rejects the *pactum* in no uncertain terms,[5] none of them analyze the extensive reasoning behind his rejection nor the intimate connection between his rejection and his overall polemic against classical federal theology. A thorough analysis of Barth's excursus with the primary purpose of explicating his critique rather than leveling rejoinders against his intentional departure from classical federal theology therefore remains outstanding.

Theological Review 55, no. 3 (S-D 1996 1996), 121–33; Willem Jan van Asselt, *The Federal Theology of Johannes Cocceius: (1603–1669)*, trans. Raymond Andrew Blacketer, Studies in the History of Christian Thought (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2001), 8–10. Against these primarily negative historical analyses of Barth's reformulation of covenant theology, Arthur C. Cochrane elucidates the main theological points of "Barth's corrective to Reformed covenantal theology of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries" approvingly; see 'Karl Barth's Doctrine of the Covenant', in *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 108–16; quote at 116.

5. A. T. B. McGowan, 'Karl Barth and Covenant Theology', in *Engaging with Barth: Contemporary Evangelical Critiques*, ed. David Gibson and Daniel Strange (New York and London: T & T Clark, 2008), 124; Andreas J. Köstenberger and Scott R. Swain, *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity and John's Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 169, 170 n. 31; David VanDrunen and R. Scott Clark, 'The Covenant Before the Covenants', in *Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry: Essays by the Faculty of Westminster Seminary California*, ed. R. Scott Clark (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2007), 176–77; Bruce L. 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), 103–04; Carl Trueman, 'From Calvin to Gillespie on Covenant: Mythological Excess or an Exercise in Doctrinal Development?', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11, no. 4 (2009), 379; Beach, 'The Doctrine of the *Pactum Salutis* in the Covenant Theology of Herman Witsius', 105–06; Beach, *Christ and the Covenant*, 167–68 and 168 n. 45; J. L. Scott, 'Covenant in the theology of Karl Barth', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 17, no. 2 (June 1, 1964), 188–89; van Asselt, *The Federal Theology of Johannes Cocceius*, 233 n. 11; Alan Spence, 'John Owen and Trinitarian Agency', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 43, no. 2 (1990), 171.

We will begin our analysis of Barth's rejection of the *pactum salutis* by surveying the main lines of his excursus on federal theology. Then, we will demonstrate that he does not merely delete the *pactum* doctrine altogether; rather, in a characteristically Barthian fashion,[6] he carefully subsumes what he views to be the dogmatic intent inherent in the *pactum* within his own reformulation of federal theology, a reformulation which presupposes and applies his formulation of election. If our analysis is valid, then Barth's critique of the *pactum* will need to be reassessed as *both* a categorical rejection *and* a calculated reformulation, and use of his "mythology" quote as a summary of his view of the *pactum salutis* will need to be reassessed as reductionistic accordingly.[7]

II. Barth's Critique

Barth's critique of the *pactum salutis* is embedded within his lengthy excursus on Reformed federal theology at the end of §57.2 in the *Church Dogmatics*. The purpose of this excursus,

6. "The *Church Dogmatics* is doubtless a gold mine of materials from the history of Christina doctrine—but all too frequently, rather than actually building on the foundation of these gathered materials, Barth uses them as a foil for his own formulations and fails to convey either the meaning or the direction of the materials themselves." Richard A. Muller, 'What I Haven't Learned from Barth', *Reformed Journal* 37, no. 3 (1987), 17. See also Muller, *After Calvin*, 99–100, wherein he rejects as "heavy-handed anachronism" Barth's allegation that a *Deus nudus absconditus* problem exists in Reformed orthodox formulations of election. That Barth treats Reformed federal theology in a similarly anachronistic manner is the consensus of the scholarship cited above. However, the same scholarship admits that Barth does in fact display nuanced historical analyses of some points. For example, see Richard A. Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1986), 9; Trueman, 'Calvin, Barth, and Reformed Theology: Historical Prolegomena', 11–14. Thus "characteristically Barthian" implies a complex and idiosyncratic relationship with classical Reformed orthodoxy.

7. G. C. Berkouwer, following Woelderink, suggests that Barth does not merely repudiate the *pactum salutis* but rather fashions his doctrine of election after it and hence subsumes the former within the latter; see *Divine Election*, trans. Hugo Bekker, Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960), 164, 166–67; es167; cf. van Asselt, *The Federal Theology of Johannes Cocceius*, 199ff. Additionally, Cochrane, 'Karl Barth's Doctrine of the Covenant', 108, notes that Barth's formulation of covenant theology is comprised of two basic parts: "election as the sum of the gospel, and the divine commandment."

according to Barth, is to present "an illustration of what we have just said," which, if taken generally, refers to the underlying argument of §57.2 regarding the covenant as the presupposition of reconciliation. If taken more specifically, however, Barth has literally "just said":

> All this depends on a right recognition of the presupposition of the atonement in the counsel of God, and especially on the fact that we perceive and maintain the content and form of the eternal divine counsel exactly as it is fulfilled and revealed in time.[8]

The excursus thus serves to illustrate his own "right recognition" of the doctrine of the covenant in the counsel of God vis-à-vis allegedly wrong formulations of the same by Reformed federal theologians. Barth provides this illustration by "make[ing] certain distinctions in relation to what was and was not said in the course of this doctrinal tradition of the older Reformed Church"[9] with respect to five topics: historicism, universalism, dualism, the riddle of dualism, and the *pactum salutis*. We will examine each of these topics below.

Before we begin our survey, however, it is important to note two formal features of Barth's argument. First, in this introductory statement, he announces the norm that he will apply throughout—his own dogmatic formulations (i.e., "what we have just said"). He is therefore clearly not attempting a historical analysis with the goal of letting the primary sources speak for themselves and judging them on their own terms. Rather, he presupposes the correctness of his own dogmatic formulations regarding the counsel of God, election, the atonement, the necessity of an exclusively Christological method, and so forth, as his norm, and he then applies this norm throughout as the ground for his stiff repudiation of classical federal theology. Second, he employs

8. Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 54.

9. Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 55.

Johannes Cocceius' (1603–1669) theory of covenantal abrogations as his primary foil throughout. Several questions arise from his reliance upon a single source such as: Is his interpretation of Cocceius' theory accurate?[10] Does the lack of primary source citations throughout the excursus indicate that he never actually read Cocceius' writings for himself?[11] Is Cocceius' abrogations theory an adequate paragon for Reformed federal theology in general or for the *pactum salutis* in particular?[12] Although we cannot pursue these questions here, we should take into account both Barth's fascination with Cocceius' theology and the significant limitation that his exclusive use of Cocceius' theory as the paragon of federal theology places upon his excursus; for, according to this method, as goes Cocceius, so goes the entire history of Reformed federal theology.

With these caveats in mind, we proceed now to the five prongs of Barth's polemic against the *pactum salutis* and the federal theology upon which it depends.

A. Historicism

Barth appreciates the federal theologians' attempt to move away from the static formulations

10. Van Asselt, *The Federal Theology of Johannes Cocceius*, 9 n. 20, raises this question in one footnote and then hints at a negative answer in two others (233 n. 11 and 246–47 n. 22).

11. Brian J. Lee, *Johannes Cocceius and the Exegetical Roots of Federal Theology: Reformation Developments in the Interpretation of Hebrews 7–10*, Reformed Historical Theology 7 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 19 n. 18, avers that Barth's presentation of Cocceius' theory is based largely upon Gottlob Schrenk's *Gottesreich und Bund im alteren Protestantismus* rather than upon Cocceius' own writings. However, van Asselt, *The Federal Theology of Johannes Cocceius*, 9 n. 20, asserts that "Barth was occupied with Cocceius over the whole span of his life—Cocceius caused this twentieth century church father man a sleepless night! Often visitors would find Barth reading Cocceius." For an example of such an occasion, see Trueman, 'Calvin, Barth, and Reformed Theology: Historical Prolegomena', 11.

12. Recent historical scholarship suggests that Cocceius should not be seen as the father of the *pactum salutis* formulation, but as one formulator—albeit a significant one—among many others, several of whom precede Cocceius. See Richard A. Muller, 'Toward the *Pactum Salutis*: Locating the Origins of a Concept', *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 18 (2007): 11–65; Van Asselt, *The Federal Theology of Johannes Cocceius*, 227–29.

of medieval and Protestant scholasticism toward more dynamic, historically-oriented formulations. In his view, Cocceius transformed the *loci* method from a logical arrangement of abstract doctrines into an historical, sequential arrangement of "individual movements in a movement."[13] This methodological transformation changed the nature of theology such that the content of revelation became "the history of redemption," and Christian doctrine became the description of individual movements with the overall movement between creation and judgment day accordingly (55).

Despite his appreciation for the dynamic methodological advancement of Cocceius' federal theology over against static scholasticism, Barth severely criticizes several aspects of this federal theology nonetheless. First, it isolates events which belong together in Scripture. Second, it historicizes God's acts and revelation. Third, it turns the Bible into "a divinely inspired source-book" by which the reader can, step by step, master the story of redemption (55–56). Fourth, it misses the fact that every scriptural event is an attestation of "a single event, which in every form of the attestation, although they all relate to a whole, is the single and complete decision on the part of God which as such calls for a single and complete decision on the part of man" (56). Fifth, it omits the fact that this single event is wholly unique and therefore must be understood "in a special way," a way that precludes isolating single events and the reassembling them into a single whole (56). Sixth, its dynamic method goes beyond Scripture and hence misses its real content just as much as does the static method of scholasticism. Seventh, it views the atonement no longer as the history of the covenant but as merely one stage in the history of the world. Eighth, it reads the

13. Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 55; hereafter cited in text.

atonement in light of the covenant idea rather than reading the covenant in light of the atonement. Ninth, it became a theological historicism and thus the fountain of what would later be called biblicism. "It is clear," concludes Barth, "that we cannot follow this theology even in its first and formal statement" (55–56).

B. Universalism

Barth considers one aspect of Zwingli's and Bullinger's formulations of covenant theology to be both its "most remarkable feature" and a close adumbration of his own position, namely, the "universalism" of their respective formulations. In other words, Barth holds that, for these seminal Reformed theologians, from the very beginning the covenant is open to the whole human race (56–57; quotes at 57). Comparing his formulation to theirs, Barth argues:

> If the covenant is understood as the presupposition of the atonement accomplished in Jesus Christ as it is revealed in that event, then necessarily the concept does have this universal orientation: not in the sense that all men are members as such and without further ado—if that were the case it would no longer be a covenant of the free grace of God—but in the sense that as the promise and command of God it does seriously apply to all men and is made for all men, that it is the destiny of all men to become and to be members of this covenant. (57)

He then confirms this point by citing John 1:9 as a proof text and by reasoning in a highly idiosyncratic manner that since the true light (i.e., the covenant) lightens every man, every man is therefore claimed by the covenant (57).

However, Cocceius and his followers overturned this most crucial aspect of covenant theology, argues Barth. He insists that they incorrectly followed Calvin's logic regarding double predestination and hence incorrectly concluded that Christ died only for the elect:

> It was deduced that the covenant, at any rate the covenant of grace (beside which they now believed they could discern another covenant) is from all eternity and in its temporal fulfillment a kind of separate

> arrangement between God and these particular men, the *electi*, which means in practice the true adherents of the true Israelitish-Christian religion. (57–58)

In Barth's estimation this loss of the covenant's universalism in favor of election's particularism wreaked havoc in federal theology in three ways. First, biblical history become multiple biblical histories. Second, the atonement itself was no longer viewed as the revelation of the covenant. Third, Scripture was no longer viewed as the witness to the singular event of the atonement but as a practical-theological historical record (58).

> In this way the conception of the covenant led into a blind alley in which it could not embrace and apply to all but only to some: those who could be regarded as the elect in virtue of their personal relationship with God as determined one way or another—as though this is not necessarily contradicted by the calling and attitude of all genuine hearers of the Word of God and partners in His work; as though in relation to the God active and revealed in Jesus Christ we cannot, and must not, see that all other men are under the sign of the covenant set up by Him, so that far from any particularism we have to look on them with hope. (58)

In a word, since this type of covenant theology looked beyond Christ exclusively for its foundation, it lost its ability "to think inclusively," and Barth therefore concludes that this "gloomy," "pessimistic," and "unfriendly" version of "historicism" must be rejected (58).

C. Dualism

According to Barth, the failure to think of the covenant inclusively (i.e., exclusively in terms of Christ's atonement) led to the aberrant transformation of the covenant's meaning. He claims that whereas Zwingli, Bullinger, Calvin, and Olevian thought of the covenant as essentially a covenant of grace, Musculus, Szegedin, Ursinus, Cocceius, Gomarus, Polanus, and Wollebius introduced a dualism wherein the one covenant is divided into a "covenant of works" and a "covenant of grace," a dualism which received confessional status in Article 7 of the Westminster

Confession of Faith (58–59).[14] After introducing his allegation that dualism has taken root in Reformed federal theology, Barth presents a lengthy critique of the formulation that he views as the foremost example of this dualism—Cocceius' theory of a fivefold abrogation of the covenant of works—and it is within this critique that Barth presents his rejection of the *pactum salutis*.[15]

Three things are important to note regarding his assessment of Cocceius' theory: his critique proceeds in three successive steps spread throughout topics 3–5; each of the steps contribute to Barth's overall critique of the *pactum salutis;* and his overall critique of the *pactum salutis* presupposes the allegation of dualism immediately preceding these three steps. If we keep these thoughts things in mind, then we can see more easily how Barth's repudiation of the *pactum* is rooted in his critique of Cocceius' theory in particular and Reformed federal theology in general.

In step one of his critique Barth summarizes Cocceius' fivefold abrogation theory. He introduces the *pactum* in relation to Cocceius' second abrogation—the institution of the covenant of grace. According to Barth, the second abrogation

> is understood by Coccejus as the unfolding of a pre-temporal occurrence, an eternal and free contract (*pactum*) made between God the Father and God the Son, in which the Father represents the righteousness and the Son the mercy of God, the latter adopting the function of a Mediator and pledge in the place of men. (60)

In step two of his critique, which continues on into the fourth topic, Barth criticizes Cocceius' theory. He focuses particularly upon the second abrogation since it, unlike the others, is not

14. Cf. his remark that the "covenant of works" was "alien to the Reformers." Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 61.

15. "We relate our question concerning the essence and character of the covenant to this sketch of Coccejus because for all his individuality in relation to his predecessors and successors Coccejus represents the Federal theology in a form which is not only the most perfect, but also the ripest and strongest and most impressive." Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 60.

historical but eternal, "like a scene in heaven in the religious plays of the Middle Ages" (61). He views this shift from the temporal realm to the eternal realm as an inconsistent dualism in Cocceius' position that he inherited from his predecessors' insistence upon interpreting the covenant of grace against the backdrop of a covenant of works. Barth avers that, although Cocceius strongly asserts that the character and meaning of the covenant is truly a covenant of grace, insofar as Cocceius attempts to hold together both halves of the dualism, he is forced to explain the graciousness of the covenant exclusively via a series of antitheses vis-à-vis the covenant of works. Barth rejoins that if the covenant of grace begins in an eternal *pactum*, then it must be explained exclusively in light of that *pactum* and not in terms of the covenant of works:

> Coccejus could find no similar eternal pact between God the Father and God the Son to correspond to the covenant of nature or works. In presenting the institution of the covenant of grace in this way, did he not contradict his own historicism and say that in this covenant we have to do with a *Prius* and not a *Posterius* in relation to that which he and his predecessors had sought to characterise and describe as a special and supposedly first *foedus naturale* or *legale* or *operum*? (61)

According to Barth, the preeminent question regarding this alleged inconsistency in Cocceius' thought—and by extension in the thought of Reformed federal theology in general—is this: how did Cocceius, who himself emphasized so strongly that the covenant is in essence a covenant of *grace*, come to formulate this covenant upon the basis of a supposedly prior covenant of *works* with all of its alleged interconnections between the natural law, the image of God, the prelapsarian estate of humanity, prelapsarian sacraments, and so forth? In other words, how did the covenant of works become the sole schema within which the covenant of grace is expounded (61–62)? According to Barth, there can be only one answer:

> This is that biblical exegesis had been invaded by a mode of thought in which this history, however extraordinary the course it took, could only unfold itself and therefore only begin as the history of man and

> his works, man who is good by nature and who is therefore in covenant with God—a God who is pledged to him by virtue of his goodness. To this mode of thinking it became more and more foreign to think of the history as conversely the history of God and His works, the God who originally turns to man in grace, and therefore as from the very first the history of the covenant of grace. (62)

Try as he might, argues Barth, Cocceius could not swim against the tide of this extra-biblical invasion. Hence in Cocceius' thought, and in Reformed federal theology in general, the dualism created by the innovation of the covenant of works formulation took full control of federal theology: grace was swallowed by law insofar as the covenant of grace was expounded within the context of the covenant of works, and humanity's relation to God became exclusively, relentlessly, and necessarily a matter of *do ut des* (62–63).

D. The riddle of the dualism

In a striking passage primarily comprised of nineteen critical questions in rapid-fire succession, Barth returns to the crux of the alleged inconsistency in Cocceius' formulation, namely, that if the *pactum salutis* is the eternal ground for the covenant of grace, then it is inconsistent with this eternal foundation to explicate the covenant of grace vis-à-vis the temporal covenant of works. Barth thus launches an incessant barrage of questions in order to expose a panoply of problematic inferences that follow from Cocceius' position and hence from Reformed federal theology in general such as: (1) the covenant of works becomes superfluous once the *pactum salutis* is brought into view; (2) the covenant of works lacks a corresponding eternal *pactum* to ground it in the same manner as the covenant of grace is grounded by the *pactum salutis;* (3) humanity is placed in a prelapsarian estate in which he does not need a mediator; (4) humanity is not seen exclusively in terms of election in Christ; (5) sin's true heinousness cannot come into its own; and so forth (63–

64).

In Barth's view, the relation of the *pactum salutis* and the covenant of works is both the crux and the chief riddle of Cocceius' theory. He concludes this fourth topic accordingly with a question that serves as a summary of this riddle and as a transition into the fifth topic:

> How was it possible to know of the eternal basis of the covenant of grace and then not to think exclusively in the light of it, to understand and present it as the one covenant of God, as though there were some other eternity in God or elsewhere, an eternity of human nature and its connexion with God and its law and the works of this law? (64)

The nuance of his question is important to see here; for, he does not assert that it is wrong to search for an eternal ground for the covenant of grace. Rather, he rejects the apparent inconsistency that attains once that eternal ground has been secured in the *pactum salutis*, namely, the insistence on the one hand that the covenant of grace must be interpreted in terms of the temporal covenant of works and on the other that the covenant of grace must be interpreted in terms of its eternal ground in the *pactum salutis*.

E. The *pactum salutis*

Having examined one side of the riddle—the covenant of works—in the fourth topic, Barth turns his attention to the other side in the fifth topic. Thus the third and final step of Barth's critique of Cocceius' covenant theory is an analysis of the *pactum salutis*. He levels three weighty objections against it, each of which is intended to be totally devastating.

In the first place, Barth rejects what he views as the presupposition of the *pactum salutis*, namely, that God is righteous *in abstracto.* He explains that, since proponents of the *pactum* presuppose that God's righteousness and mercy are at odds in his hidden divine life, a trinitarian

pact regarding God's relationship to humanity is necessary in order to unify God's righteousness and mercy and hence to enable God to show mercy to humanity. He further reasons that, on this view, God's righteousness and his mercy remain two separate things in his hidden essence despite the *pactum*, and he thus insists that the *pactum* produces not assurance of God's mercy but great anxiety on the side of humanity. Additionally, he wryly suggests that the *pactum salutis* is to blame for the development of the covenant of works doctrine insofar as the former produces overwhelming anxiety that humanity must assuage by its works (64–65). He concludes that this whole mess is based upon an invalid presupposition and therefore should have been avoided:

> This anxiety and therefore this proposition of a covenant of works could obviously never have arisen if there had been a loyal hearing of the Gospel and a strict looking to Jesus Christ as the full and final revelation of the being of God. In the eternal decree of God revealed in Jesus Christ the being of God would have been seen as righteous mercy and merciful righteousness from the very first. It would have been quite impossible therefore to conceive of any special plan of a God who is righteous *in abstracto*, and the whole idea of an original covenant of works would have fallen to the ground. (65)

If this first objection is rooted in the unity of the divine attributes, then, in the second place, Barth levels a further objection on the basis of the unity of the divine persons. After claiming that the *pactum salutis* presents two of the three divine persons as legal subjects who negotiate a contract which includes mutual obligations between the Father and the Son, he presents what has become his most frequently cited passage regarding the *pactum*:

> This is mythology, for which there is no place in a right understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity as the doctrine of the three modes of being of the one God, which is how it was understood and presented in Reformed orthodoxy itself. God is one God. If He is thought of as the supreme and finally the only subject, He is the one subject. And if, in relation to that which He obviously does amongst us, we speak of His eternal resolves or decrees, even if we describe them as a contract, then we do not regard the divine persons of the Father and the Son as partners in this contract, but the one God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—as the one partner, and the reality of man as distinct from God as the other. (65)

Barth further claims that, when the Reformed federal theologians based the covenant of grace

upon the *pactum salutis* between the Father and the Son, they created an even "wider dualism" in the Godhead (i.e., presumably a wider dualism than the one that was created by the presupposition that God is righteous *in abstracto*); for, according to him, since the *pactum* introduces "not merely different and fundamentally contradictory qualities, but also different subjects," it therefore casts doubt upon not only whether God's will is one but also whether there is one God (65). In other words, the *pactum* presupposes tritheism.

Barth presses this alleged tritheism further by implying that the covenant of works presupposes tritheism. He reasons that, if the Father has a different will than the Son, then it necessarily follows that the Father relates to humanity according to a different law and covenant than the Son's law of grace and covenant of grace (i.e., presumably via the law-based covenant of works). In this way Barth implicitly connects the covenant of works with the Father and the covenant of grace with the Son, and thus he strongly insinuates that the *pactum salutis* is tritheistic. He concludes that this tritheism destroys humanity's hope of assurance; for, if the Father and the Son have different wills and thus relate to humanity according to different covenants and different laws, then Christ's covenant of grace is no longer secure but is ever in danger of being overtaken by the Father's distinct law and covenant (65–66).

In the third place, Barth levels a critique at what he considers to be the "decisive point," namely, that the *pactum* is "much too uplifting and sublime to be a christian thought" (66). What he means by this sarcastic remark is that the *pactum* lacks the most basic requirement of a divine-human covenant—two parties! Since the *pactum*, he reasons, is a *purely trinitarian* covenant, it is therefore one-sided and hence too sublime to be Christian insofar as humanity is nowhere to be

found!

F. A brief reformulation

If Barth had written nothing further than what we have surveyed thus far, then aside from the hint of approval noted above regarding his qualified praise of Cocceius' attempt to ground the covenant of grace in eternity, we may be led to believe that he offers nothing positive to say about the *pactum salutis*. However, this is not the case. Notably, after leveling his three-part critique against the *pactum*, Barth immediately submits a counter proposal to the effect that what the Reformed federal theologians improperly attempted to achieve with their formations of the *pactum* (i.e., to establish a conceptual framework for viewing Christ as the eternal *testamentum, sponsio,* and *pactum* between God and humanity) is in fact properly achieved with Barth's own formulation of election. He subsumes what he understands to be the true meaning and intent of *pactum* within his definition of election accordingly:

> This is what we can call a decree, an *opus Dei internum ad extra*, and therefore a pact: God's free election of grace, in which even in His eternity before all time and the foundation of the world, He is no longer alone by Himself, He does not rest content with Himself, He will not restrict Himself to the wealth of His perfections and His own inner life as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. (66)

In his estimation, his own formulation of election overcomes one of the major problems that plagues the *pactum salutis:* the problem of not having the two covenanting parties (i.e., God and humanity) present in eternity. He thinks that this problem is solved in his formulation since in the act of election humanity's existence is presupposed. He further holds that within the act of election the Logos is present not only as the eternal Logos but also as the God-man whom he will become in time; therefore, in Barth's formulation of election, the Mediator of the temporal covenant is also

the foundation of the eternal covenant (66). He concludes therefore that his formulation of election properly achieves what the *pactum salutis* fails to accomplish, namely, in God's act of election:

> He who in Scripture is attested to be very God and very man is also the eternal *testamentum*, the eternal *sponsio*, the eternal *pactum*, between God and man. This is the point which Coccejus and the Federal theology before and after Coccejus missed. (66)

Barth further confirms the correctness of his own formulation of election over against the *pactum salutis* by briefly recapitulating the three overarching themes that he has employed throughout his excursus on Reformed federal theology: he asserts that if the federal theologians had employed Barth's formulation of election instead of formulating the *pactum salutis*, then they would have avoided their dualism regarding the covenant of works, their abandonment of universalism regarding the covenant of grace, and their radical historicism (66). Of course, he does not make this assertion in such baldly anachronistic terms. Nevertheless, given his premise that we noted at the beginning of his excursus, it is hard to avoid the anachronistic assumptions behind his reasoning.

By concluding in this way, he not only ties together the threads of his three-part repudiation of the *pactum salutis* with his five-pronged polemic against Reformed federal theology but also he brings his entire excursus full circle. For, he begins the excursus upon the premise that his formulations regarding God's decrees are correct; then he relates various aspects of his formulation of election to all three of the polemics that he levels against Reformed federal theology (i.e., historicism, universalism, and dualism); and then he concludes with a brief reformulation of the *pactum salutis* in terms of his starting premise, namely, that his formulation of election properly

achieves what the *pactum* improperly attempts to do.

G. Summary

Barth's rejection of the *pactum salutis* is fully integrated with his rejection of Reformed federal theology. Using Cocceius' theory of abrogations as both his primary foil and paragon, Barth rejects Reformed federal theology for one formal reason (i.e., historicism) and two material reasons (i.e., a lack of universalism and a problematic dualism). In connection with these two material reasons, he critiques the *pactum* with respect to its relationship with the covenant of works; specifically, he thinks that if the *pactum* is truly the eternal ground for the covenant of grace, then either the temporal covenant of works is superfluous or it is used improperly as the backdrop for the covenant of grace. With respect to the *pactum salutis* formulation itself, Barth levels three objections against it: (1) it incorrectly presupposes that God is righteous *in abstracto;* (2) it is based upon tritheism rather than monotheism; and (3) it fails to include humanity as a covenant partner. He does not, however, simply delete the *pactum*; rather, he insists that his own formulation of election properly achieves the goals which the federal theologians allegedly failed to achieve *via* the *pactum salutis*. For him, therefore, the true *pactum salutis* is subsumed within his formulation of election.

III. Barth's critique mythologized

Now that we have surveyed the five prongs of Barth's polemic against Reformed federal theology and have seen that his critique of the *pactum salutis* is an intimately intertwined yet subsidiary aspect of this larger polemic, we are now in a position to evaluate recent assessments of

Barth's repudiation of the *pactum*. We noted earlier that his repudiation has been treated almost exclusively in terms of mere passing citations of Barth's "mythology" quote. Thus we only need to analyze some representative examples in order to demonstrate that such assessments are reductionistic. The two most recent examples will suffice.

Carl Trueman uses Barth's famous "mythology" quote as both the leitmotif and the bookends for his essay on Patrick Gillespie's (1617–1675) treatise on the *pactum salutis*.[16] For the first bookend, Trueman introduces Barth's treatment of the *pactum* as the antipode of Reformed orthodox formulations exemplified by Gillespie's. Beyond referencing Barth's "mythology" quote, however, the sole substantiating evidence that Trueman alleges for this caricature is Barth's assertion that the *pactum* fallaciously involves "a legal contract between the Father and Son as separate, contracting parties" (379). Furthermore, he implies, again without substantiation, that Barth fails to recognize that the *pactum* is

> [i]ntimately connected to the ideas of the Trinity, of federal headship, of predestination, of Christology, of merit, of imputation, and thus of the connection of the doctrine of God to the whole economy of salvation. . . . (379)

The implicit critique within this first bookend becomes explicit in the second—the conclusion to Trueman's essay—wherein he recapitulates Barth's "mythology" quote:

> Positively connected to debates about Christology, about the nature of God and necessity, about linguistics and exegesis, and about the nature of salvation itself, it [i.e., the *pactum salutis*] is thus far more than the

16. Note the play on Barth's quote in the subtitle: "Mythological Excess or an Exercise in Doctrinal Development?" See Trueman, 'From Calvin to Gillespie on Covenant'; hereafter cited in text. His overt polemic against Barth's treatment of the *pactum* is significantly lessened, though not entirely removed, from his expanded republication of this article; see Trueman, 'The Harvest of Reformation Mythology? Patrick Gillespie and the Covenant of Redemption', in *Scholasticism Reformed: Essays in Honour of Willem J. van Asselt*, ed. Maarten Wisse, Marcel Sarot, and Willemien Otten (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 196–214.

> 'mythology' which Barth claimed. Rather, it represents a significant attempt to synthesize all of these issues in a specifically Protestant context, and to reinforce a theology which seeks to preserve a distinctive Protestant soteriology which yet takes seriously the theological questions raised by patristic trinitarian and christological formulas while at the same time addressing contemporary polemical, theological and pastoral concerns. (396)

The fact that Trueman employs Barth's mythology motif three more times in his closing paragraphs further suggests that he intends to present Barth as the pure antipode of Gillespie (397).

His use of Barth's "mythology" quote in this fashion, however, is clearly reductionistic. In the first place, he oddly omits any references to Barth within the body of the essay. Hence his allegations against Barth's repudiation of the *pactum* and his implicit and explicit contrasts between Barth and Gillespie are unsubstantiated despite whether they are partially accurate. In the second place, as we saw in our survey above, the mythology quote is only a tiny fraction of Barth's complex and detailed three-part critique of the *pactum*, which critique is further intertwined in an even larger five-pronged critique of Reformed federal theology. Trueman unduly reduces all of Barth's arguments to one word—"mythology"—as if that word accurately represents Barth's position on the *pactum* and as if Barth failed to see any interconnections between the *pactum* and other doctrines, both of which are patently false assumptions. In the third place, since Trueman fails to acknowledge the fact that Barth attempts to subsume a modified version of the *pactum* within his formulation of election rather than deleting the *pactum* altogether, his presentation of Barth as Gillespie's antipode is inaccurate; for, on the very next page after the one upon which his mythology quote is found, Barth insists upon viewing his formulation of election as an eternal pact that functions in a similar way as does the *pactum salutis*, namely, it provides the dogmatic ground

for viewing Christ as "the eternal *testamentum*, the eternal *sponsio*, the eternal *pactum*, between God and man."[17] Thus it is inaccurate to describe his formulation as a wholesale antipode of Gillespie's, and, by extension, of the entire Reformed orthodox tradition with respect to the *pactum salutis,* notwithstanding Barth's intentional distancing himself from that tradition at obvious points. For these reasons Trueman's presentation of Barth's position—and the several others that follow the same line of argumentation—are clearly reductionistic.[18]

If a bit of reductionism is to be expected in studies that are only indirectly related to Barth's formulation of covenant theology, then when we look at directly-related scholarship we might expect to find otherwise. However, in scholarship specific to Barth's covenant theology we find the same—his repudiation of the *pactum* is presented almost exclusively in terms of the "mythology" quote with little or no analysis of his underlying arguments. Such is the case with A. T. B. McGowan's otherwise sound overview of Barth's formulation of covenant theology. In fairness to McGowan, he begins his essay with a caveat regarding the fact that since the covenant theme is "interwoven into every aspect of [Barth's] thinking," it is impossible to cover all of Barth's points. Nevertheless, he also states that he will "focus more specifically on [Barth's] analysis and critique of covenant theology."[19] Additionally, he devotes a portion of his essay to an analysis of the same excursus on federal theology in Barth's *Church Dogmatics* that we surveyed above.

Regarding Barth's repudiation of the *pactum salutis*, McGowan makes only one brief remark

17. Barth, *CD*, IV/1, 66.

18. Cf. the studies by Köstenberger and Swain, David VanDrunen and R. Scott Clark, Williams, Beach, van Asselt, and Spence cited above in note 5.

19. McGowan, 'Karl Barth and Covenant Theology', 113.

before quoting the famous "mythology" passage and then moving on to discuss another topic:

> Barth's most serious criticism of Cocceius, however, is that his understanding of the covenant of grace led to the necessity for an inter-trinitarian covenant, which, in later covenant theology, would be called the covenant of redemption. . . . Barth's trinitarian theology will not allow him even to contemplate such a notion. He is quite dismissive of such a theology.[20]

He thus implies that Barth's sole dislike for the *pactum* has to do with an alleged trinitarian problem that undermines the doctrine. Although this assertion is partially true, it does not reveal the Barth's specific trinitarian criticism of the *pactum* (i.e., tritheism). Furthermore, it fails to elucidate both the two additional allegations that Barth levels against the *pactum* (i.e., that God's righteous is considered *in abstracto* and that humanity is not included in the arrangement) and the fact that Barth connects his three arguments against the *pactum* with his larger polemic against Reformed federal theology. Moreover, McGowan's assessment omits Barth's attempt to reformulate the *pactum* in terms of election. For all of these reasons, his study, like Trueman's, unduly reduces Barth's repudiation of the *pactum salutis* to a mere citation of his "mythology" passage. This same reductionistic tendency can be seen in similar studies.[21]

IV. Barth's critique demythologized

Barth does not merely reject the *pactum salutis*. He no only cautiously praises Cocceius' attempt to ground the covenant of grace in eternity but also he follows suit by presenting, albeit briefly, a reformulation of the *pactum* in terms of his formulation of election in Jesus Christ. It is inaccurate therefore to describe Barth's criticism of the *pactum* solely as a categorical rejection;

20. McGowan, 124.

21. Cf. the studies by McCormack and Scott cited above in note 5.

rather, it also must be described also as a calculated reformulation.

Barth's famous "mythology" quote has itself become a myth in the surrounding literature; for, this single quote is repeatedly presented as an alleged summary of Barth's full argument against the *pactum* with no apparent regard for either its immediate context or the overall argument of the excursus within which the quote is located. However, when such decontextualized usages are contrasted with Barth's actual three-part argument against the *pactum*, which argument forms a subsidiary component of his overall polemic against Reformed federal theology, it is immediately evident that, on its own, Barth's "mythology" quote does not accurately represent his position. A reassessment of such reductionistic assessments is therefore warranted.