BEESON DIVINITY SCHOOL: SAMFORD UNIVERSITY

DISUNITY AS ECCLESIOLOGICAL IMPOSSIBILITY: A BARTHIAN ANALOGY

SUBMITTED TO JOSHUA E. STEWART,
ETS SOUTHEASTERN REGIONAL CO-CHAIRMAN

BY
JOSHUA P. STEELE
JANUARY 20, 2015

ABSTRACT

Just as sin is ontological impossibility, disunity is ecclesiological impossibility. The tension between the undeniable reality of sin and Karl Barth's theological definition of sin as an impossible possibility parallels the tension between the obvious reality of a fractured church and the theological definition of the church as the one body of the one Christ. In order to describe in Barthian terms what it means for church disunity to be possible only as sin is possible, the purpose of this paper is to correlate Barth's anthropological concept of sin as ontological impossibility with its parallel ecclesiological concept: disunity as ecclesiological impossibility. I then conclude by locating this discussion within Barth's own ecumenical vision – with an eye toward informing and motivating further ecumenical efforts.

INTRODUCTION

Just as sin is ontological impossibility, disunity is ecclesiological impossibility. The tension between the undeniable reality of sin and Karl Barth's theological definition of sin as an impossible possibility parallels the tension between the obvious reality of a fractured church[1] and the theological definition of the church as the one body of the one Christ. Two excerpts from the Barthian corpus legitimize this connection. First, in his prepared remarks to the 1937 Second World Conference on Faith and Order in Edinburgh, Karl Barth maintained that

> we have no right to explain the multiplicity of the churches at all. ***We have to deal with it as we deal with sin***, our own and others', to recognize it as a fact, to understand it ***as the impossible thing which has intruded itself***, as guilt which we must take upon ourselves, without the power to liberate ourselves from it. We must not allow ourselves to acquiesce in its reality; rather we must pray that it be forgiven and removed, and be ready to do whatever God's will and command may enjoin in respect of it.[2]

Second, almost two decades later, Barth described as "impossible" that which he had earlier declared "unthinkable"[3] – that certain Christian communities should "stand in relation to other groups of equally Christian communities in an attitude more or less of exclusion," by claiming that "their confession and preaching and theology are mutually contradictory" (CD IV/1, 676).[4] It is furthermore impossible "that the adherents of the one should be able to work together with those of the other in every possible secular cause, but not to pray together, not to preach and hear the Word of God together, not to keep the Lord's Supper together" (CD IV/1, 676) Barth insists that, "in view of the being of the community as the body of Christ [, the disunity of the church] is – ontologically, we can say – quite ***impossible; it is possible only as sin is possible***" (CD IV/1, 677; emphasis added).

In order to describe in Barthian terms what it means for church disunity to be possible only as sin is possible, the purpose of this paper is to correlate Barth's anthropological concept of sin

---

[1] As Bender notes, "the referent for Barth's term [whether 'community' or 'church'] must be determined by context," whether it refers to the local congregation, the institution, or the universal body of Christ. See Kimlyn Bender, *Karl Barth's Christological Ecclesiology* (Hampshire/Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2005; repr. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 13. I have followed Bender's approach in that, throughout this study, "church" is only capitalized in quotations, when Barth himself did so.

[2] Karl Barth, *The Church and the Churches* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1936; repr., 2005), 22-3. Emphasis added.

[3] Note the similarities: "It is then ***unthinkable*** that to those multiplicities which are rooted in unity we should have to add that which tears it in pieces; ***unthinkable*** that great entire groups of communities should stand over against each other in such a way that their doctrines and confessions of faith are mutually contradictory…. that the adherents of the one should be at one with those of another in every conceivable point except that they are unable to pray together, to preach and hear God's word together, and to join together in Holy Communion." Barth, *The Church and the Churches*, 24.

[4] The reference is to Vol. IV, pt. 1 of Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics.* (eds. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance; trans. G.W. Bromiley; 5 vols in 14 parts; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936-77; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010). All references to the *Church Dogmatics* appear parenthetically in the following form: "CD I/1, 1."

as ontological impossibility with its parallel ecclesiological concept: disunity as ecclesiological impossibility. I will then conclude by locating this discussion within Barth's own ecumenical vision – with an eye toward informing and motivating further ecumenical efforts.

SIN AS ONTOLOGICAL IMPOSSIBILITY

In considering human sin, we must begin with what it means to be human. Although various attempts have been made to define humanity in the spheres of natural science, idealist ethics, existentialist philosophy, and theistic anthropology, Barth claims that these are merely descriptions of the *phenomena*, and not the essence, of humanity (CD III/2, 71-132). Against these provisional anthropologies, Barth insists that true humanity – true human personality – is only found in one place, the encounter between God and man, and not in the reaches or intricacies of human emotion, intellect, or will. Therefore, on his own, "man is not a person, but becomes one on the basis that he is loved by God and can love God in return" (CD II/1, 284). This is because God "is not the personified but the personifying person – the person on the basis of whose prior existence alone we can speak (hypothetically) of other persons different from Him" (CD II/1, 285). Most importantly, "the One, the person, whom we really know as a human person, is the person of Jesus Christ, and even this is in fact the person of God the Son, in which humanity, without being or having itself a person, is caught up into fellowship with the personality of God" (CD II/1, 286). Christology determines anthropology, and not the other way around (CD I/1, 131).

Christological Anthropology

Although Barth grounds the definition of humanity in Christology, he is always careful to preserve a qualitative distinction between Christ's humanity and humanity in general:

> Christology is not anthropology. We cannot expect, therefore, to find directly in others the humanity of Jesus, and therefore His follow-humanity, His being for man, and therefore that final and supreme determination, the image of God. Jesus is man for His fellows, and therefore the image of God, in a way which others cannot even approach, just as they cannot be for God in the sense that He is. He alone is the Son of God, and therefore His humanity alone can be described as the being of an I which is wholly from and to the fellow-human Thou, and therefore a genuine I. (CD III/2, 222)

Instead of framing this distinction between Christ and other humans in terms of a vague moral perfection, Barth portrays Christ as distinctly *more human* than humans in general – existing both *for God* and *for other humans* in a way which is unparalleled. Christ's existence for other humans is "the direct correlative of His being for God," and this reveals a correspondence between the existence and love of God *ad intra* – between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and the existence and love of God *ad extra* to humanity (CD III/2, 220).

Humanity only exists within this Christological correspondence, this *analogia relationis* (CD III/2, 218-20, 225-6). Specifically, Barth grounds the humanity of individual humans in the notion of a shared sphere with Christ: "the ontological determination of humanity is grounded in

the fact that one man among all others is the man Jesus" (CD III/2, 132). Therefore, "to be a man is to be with God," for no matter what else each individual is, "he is on the basis of the fact that he is with Jesus and therefore with God" (CD III/2, 135). Because the incarnation is the fullest expression of the Creator's summons to the creature into relationship, it is the ground of the human creature's being and personality – distinguishing humanity from the other non-human spheres which Christ did not inhabit (CD III/2, 137).

Sin is the Impossible Possibility

However, the incarnation is also the source of sin's absurdity. Because humanity "is not without God, but with God," true "Godlessness, is not, therefore, a possibility, but an ontological impossibility for man" (CD III/2, 136). When it comes to sin, Barth simultaneously removes it from the definition of what it means to be human, and emphasizes its absurdity as part of human existence – for, although sin undeniably exists, "our being does not include but excludes sin. To be in sin, in godlessness, is a mode of being contrary to our humanity" (CD III/2, 136).

Nevertheless, to make some provisional sense of sin's existence, Barth claims that the distinction between Creator and creation necessarily entails the *possibility* of creaturely conflict with God. As opposed to the inherent impossibility of a conflict between God and himself *ad intra*,[5] "it is a mark of created being as distinct from divine that in it conflict with God and therefore mortal conflict with itself is not ruled out, but is a definite possibility even if it is only the impossible possibility, the possibility of self-annulment and therefore its own destruction" (CD II/1, 503). Positively, this reinforces the creature's identity as simply that: a creature, owing its existence to God. In fact, "creature freed from the possibility of falling away would not really be living as a creature. It could only be a second God – and as no second God exists, it could only be God Himself" (CD II/1, 503). This distinction does not necessitate *actual sin*, however, for "sin is when the creature ***avails*** itself of this impossible possibility in opposition to God and to the meaning of its own existence" (CD II/1, 503; emphasis added). And, given the Christological and theological basis of human existence, it makes no sense for a human to actualize this possibility, for "if he denies God, he denies himself" and "chooses his own impossibility" (CD III/2, 136). In Barth's evaluation, this one absurd decision underlies all actions which are usually considered sins, for "every offence in which godlessness can express itself, e.g., unbelief and idolatry, doubt and indifference to God, is as such, both in its theoretical and practical forms, and offence with which man burdens, obscures, and corrupts himself" (CD III/2, 136).

For Barth, therefore, sin is not merely moral – it is both ontological and incomprehensible: the inherent contradiction of a nothingness which opposes God as the very ground of all existence and reality (CD II/1, 532; III/3, 351). The value of this definition is its absurdity. Responding to the challenge (from Berkouwer) that defining sin as "nothingness," an "impossible possibility," or an "ontological impossibility" seems "to suggest or imply a denial of the reality of evil," Barth

[5] "It is a mark of the divine nature as distinct from that of the creature that in it a conflict with Himself is not merely ruled out, but is inherently impossible. If this were not so, if there did not exist perfect, original and ultimate peace between the Father and the Son by the Holy Spirit, God would not be God. Any God in conflict with Himself is bound to be a false God" CD II/1, 503.

maintains that "it is of a piece with the nature of evil that if we could explain how it may have reality it would not be evil. Nor are we really thinking of evil if we think we can explain this" (CD IV/3, 177). His subsequent clarification is especially instructive for this discussion:

> When I speak of nothingness, I cannot mean that evil is nothing, that it does not exist, or that it has no reality. I mean that it exists only in the negativity proper to it in its relationship to God and decisively in God's relationship of repudiation to it. It does not exist as God does, nor as His creatures, amongst which it is not to be numbered. It has no basis for its being. It has no right to the existence which to our sorrow we cannot deny to it. Its existence, significance and reality are not distinguished by any value nor positive strength. The nature underlying its existence and activity is perversion. Its right to be and to express itself is simply that of wrong. In this sense it is nothingness. (CD IV/3, 178)

Similarly, the phrase "impossible possibility" is designed to reflect "the absurd possibility of the absurd," and "ontological impossibility" to state that "the nature of evil as the negation negated by God disqualifies its being, and therefore its undeniable existence, as impossible, meaningless, illegitimate, valueless and without foundation" (CD IV/3, 178). Easily understood definitions of evil are perhaps evil themselves, obfuscating sin's inherent incomprehensibility.

Given the definition of humanity and the absurdity of sin, there is a tension between humanity's Christological being/essence and its sinful act/form. As Barth puts it, "perhaps the fundamental mistake in all erroneous thinking of man about himself is that he tries to equate himself with God and therefore to proceed on the assumption that he can regard himself as the presupposition of his own being" (CD III/2, 151). However, if there is one presupposition allowed in Barth's epistemological non-foundationalism, it is the anthropological presupposition of God and his Word as the ground of human being – divine election as the frontier beyond which we cannot look for a human being "not yet summoned" (CD III/2, 151). Just as there is no God behind God, there is no humanity beyond the divine summons, beyond existence in the same sphere inhabited by Christ. It is therefore unthinkable that humanity should try to be the source of its own existence, and yet this is precisely that which occurs.

For Barth, this absurdity takes on the character of improper judgment: "all sin has its being and origin in the fact that man wants to be his own judge" (CD IV/1, 220). Although "not all men commit all sins," everyone commits "this sin which is the essence and root of all other sins" (CD IV/1, 220). Self-justification and the damnation of the others characterize sin as "the arrogance in which man wants to be his own and his neighbour's judge," wanting "to be able and competent to pronounce ourselves free and righteous and others more or less guilty" (CD IV/1, 231). Sinful humanity tries to ground its own existence by carving-out its own improper position as judge.

Atonement's Intensification of Sin's Absurdity

Yet sin becomes an even further absurdity in light of the atonement. In fact, the tension between humanity's Christological essence and its sinful form is a driving force in the doctrine of reconciliation, for "the incompatibility of the existence of Jesus Christ with us and us with Him, the impossibility of the co-existence of His divine-human actuality and action and our sinfully

human being and activity" must be addressed before we can rest assured "that Jesus Christ belongs to us and we belong to Him, that His cause is our cause and our cause is His" (CD IV/1, 348). As an answer to this predicament, "the event of redemption in Jesus Christ not only compromises this position [of improper human judgment], but destroys it" (CD IV/1, 232).

This displacement of humanity by Christ is the source of both its abasement and liberation, the former because, although self-justification always results in a verdict of my own innocence, "He who has acted there as Judge will also judge me, and He and not I will judge others" (CD IV/1, 233). However, it is also the source of freedom from the wearisome and "intolerable nuisance to have to be convincing ourselves that we are innocent, we are in the right" (CD IV/1, 233). With relevance to our subsequent ecclesiological discussion, Barth adds that it is similarly

> an affliction always to have to make it clear to ourselves so that we can cling to it that others are in one way or another in the wrong, and to have to rack our brains how we can make it clear to them, and either bring them to an amendment of their ways or give them up as hopeless, withdrawing from them or fighting against them as the enemies of all that is good and true and beautiful. (CD IV/1, 233-4)

Christ liberates us from the tiresome task we were never meant to complete.

Furthermore, in taking our improper place as judge, he also takes away from us the just sentence we merited by taking up that position in the first place. Christ "takes from us our own evil case, taking our place and burdening himself with it," and "it [therefore] ceases to be our sin" (CD IV/1, 236). Due to this exchange, he "is the unrighteous amongst those who can no longer be so because He was and is for them" (CD IV/1, 237), because he has delivered "sinful man and sin in His own person to the non-being which was properly theirs" (CD IV/1, 253). Christ destroys human faithlessness by taking it to its absurd conclusion: annihilation.

Because of this, humans "have no other ground to do evil now that the ground has been cut out from under our feet" (CD IV/1, 243). Considering Christ's work both for us and in us, Barth maintains that "unfaithfulness to God is a disallowed possibility which can no longer be actualised. It is seen to be the wholly impossible possibility on which we can no longer count, which we see to be eliminated and taken from us by God's omnipotent contradiction set up in us." (CD IV/4, 22). In light of the doctrine of reconciliation, repentance from sin is the only viable human response. Only by ignoring Christ and his accomplished atonement, only by denying the source of our own existence can we presume to have the freedom to sin, to reject God, and to be our own judges.

DISUNITY AS ECCLESIOLOGICAL IMPOSSIBILITY

Humanity's Christological definition results in sin as an absurdity which is intensified by the atonement. The church's Christological definition similarly results in disunity as an absurdity which is intensified by the atonement. As we began with what it means to be human, so we begin with what it means to be the church.

Just as Barth resists an anthropology that is based upon the mere phenomena of humanity, he resists an ecclesiology that is based upon the mere phenomena of the church. Although the church is "a phenomenon of world history which can be grasped in historical and psychological and sociological terms like any other" (CD IV/1, 652), what the church actually is, "the character, the truth of its existence in time and space, is not a matter of a general but a very special visibility" (CD IV/1, 654). And just as grasping the Christological essence of humanity allows for a true appreciation of humanity's historical form,[6] understanding the Christological essence of the church allows the community to "act confidently on the level of its phenomenal being" (CD IV/1, 660). This includes ecumenical pursuits.

Christological Ecclesiology

For Barth, Christology determines both anthropology and ecclesiology, and there is therefore no "abandonment of the sphere of the [Apostles'] creed" when the transition is made from the second to the third article.[7] He offers a conceptual map at this juncture:

> The Christology is like a vertical line meeting a horizontal. The doctrine of the sin of man is the horizontal line as such. The doctrine of justification is the intersection of the horizontal line by the vertical. The remaining doctrine, that of the Church and of faith, is again the horizontal line, but this time seen as intersected by the vertical. The vertical line is the atoning work of God in Jesus Christ. The horizontal is the object of that work; man and humanity. (CD IV/1, 643)

There is therefore a Chalcedonian pattern,[8] not only to Christ's person, but also to his work. This unavoidably includes the Holy Spirit's work, awakening and forming the church, which is itself the subjective realization of the eternal election of Jesus Christ (CD IV/1, 667).[9] In Barth's terms:

---

[6] Consider Barth's positive, yet provisional, appraisal of the phenomena-based anthropologies: "In this way and in this sense, then, a knowledge of man which is non-theological but genuine is not only possible but basically justified and necessary even from the standpoint of theological anthropology…. It cannot, of course, lead us to the knowledge of real man. But it may proceed from or presuppose a knowledge of real man" CD III/2, 200-2.

[7] "It is significant that at this point, the transition from the second to the third article, the word *credo* is specifically mentioned. It tells us that we can know the man who belongs to Jesus Christ only in faith." CD IV/1, 644.

[8] Bender credits George Hunsinger with identifying this theme, based upon Barth's own description of the ecumenical councils' doctrinal decisions as "guiding lines for an understanding of [Christ's] existence and action, not to be used, as they have been used, as stones for the construction of an abstract doctrine of His 'person'" (CD IV/1, 127). See Bender, *Christological Ecclesiology*, 3.

[9] As Bender helpfully notes, "there is, then, not only a direct Christological analogy between Christ and the community, but an indirect Trinitarian and pneumatological one, in that, as the Spirit binds together the Father and the Son (in the Trinity); and as the Spirit binds together the Word and flesh of Christ (in the incarnation); so also the Holy Spirit binds together Christ and the community." Bender, *Christological Ecclesiology*, 205. However, in touching so lightly upon the work of the Holy Spirit in this paper, I share Barth's exclamatory sentiment: "How gladly we would hear and know and say something more, something more precise, something more palpable concerning the way in which the work of the Holy Spirit is done!" (CD IV/1, 649).

Furthermore, despite the brief mention of election, it is significant that Barth grounds the unity between Christology and ecclesiology, not in the event of Pentecost, preaching, or the sacraments, but in the election of Jesus

"the one reality of the atonement has both an objective and a subjective side in so far as – *we cannot separate but we must not confuse the two* – it is both a divine act and offer and also an active human participation in it" (CD IV/1, 643; emphasis added).

For this reason, "the history which we consider when we speak of the Christian community and Christian faith is enclosed and exemplified in the history of Jesus Christ" (CD IV/1, 644). Barth takes seriously the New Testament language of the church as Christ's "body," and claims that "the community is the earthly-historical form of existence of Jesus Christ himself" (CD IV/1, 661). As Christ is the head of his body, the church, he is the ground of its particular existence. Just as the incarnation grounds human existence, it determines ecclesiological existence. And because Christology and ecclesiology are inseparably intertwined, the Chalcedonian pattern which unites the church with the person of Christ also applies to the relationship between the church's being and its act – between its invisible essence and its visible form.

Disunity is the Impossible Possibility

This union, however, parallels the aforementioned tension between humanity's essence and its form, given its Christological definition and the absurdity of sin. As Bender notes, "Barth's dialectical understanding of the church as both an invisible and visible reality, an event of the Holy Spirit and a historical entity, leads naturally to his dialectical understanding of the marks of the church: the church as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic."[10] Within the context of the first mark, there is a tension between the church's being/essence as *one*, and its act/form as *many*.

Credo unam ecclesiam entails that there is "only one Church. This means that it belongs to the being of the community to be a unity in the plurality of its members, i.e., of the individual believers assembled in it, and to be a simple unity, not having a second or third unity of the same kind side by side with it" (CD IV/1, 668). This follows not just a Christological pattern, but a Trinitarian one as well, for

> In all the riches of His divine being the God who reconciled the world with Himself in Jesus Christ is One. Jesus Christ, elected the Head of all men and as such their Representative who includes them all in Himself in His risen and crucified body is One. The Holy Spirit in the fulness and diversity of His gifts is One. In the same way His community as the gathering of the men who know and confess Him can only be one. (CD IV/1, 668)

This is the source of the church's unity, in the midst of legitimate plurality, between the visible and invisible church and between the *ecclesia militans* and the *ecclesia triumphans* (CD IV/1, 669).[11] The only other legitimate church plurality is the existence of "geographically separated and

---

Christ from all eternity. The church "became His body, they became its members, in the fulfillment of their eternal election in His death on the cross of Golgotha, proclaimed in His resurrection from the dead" (CD IV/1, 667).

[10] Bender, *Christological Ecclesiology*, 181.

[11] It is also the source of the unity between Israel and the Church, which Barth describes as the "two forms and aspects (CD II, 2, § 34, 1) of the one inseparable community in which Jesus Christ has His earthly-historical form

therefore different congregations." (CD IV/1, 671). If the church is to exist "in essential accordance with its commission it has to take place in many localities," then this necessarily entails a differentiation which corresponds to "its environment and history and language and customs and ways of life and thought as conditioned by the different localities, and also to its personal composition" (CD IV/1, 671). Because it is grounded in God's Triune unity, the church's unity does not necessitate homogeneity, and Barth grants that each local congregation should exist within the particularities of its own context.

However, this cannot entail any sort of basic or essential difference between one local congregation and another, for "each in its own place can only be the one community beside which there are no others. Each in and for itself and with its local characteristics can only be the whole, as others are in their own locality" (CD IV/1, 672). No other legitimate plurality within the church exists, for "any other plurality means the co-existence of Churches which are genuinely divided" – churches that, at best will kindly "tolerate one another as believing differently, and at worst they will fight against one another, mutually excluding each other with some definiteness and force" (CD IV/1, 675).

And yet this is exactly the scandalous reality of the church. Although there are myriad reasons for ecclesiological divisions throughout the ages, Barth's distillation of myriad human sins to improper judgment as "the essence and root of all other sins" helps to make sense of the scandal of the fragmented church. Just as humans demonstrate the sinful tension between their essence and form by improperly justifying themselves and damning others, the church demonstrates the sinful tension between its unified being and its divided act when individual Christian communities justify their own existence *over against* the existence of other Christian communities. Because this is the case, Barth is even willing to claim that the church's formal division has *essential* implications: "in its visible and also in its invisible being, in its form and also in its essence, the one community of Jesus Christ is not one" (CD IV/1, 679). While it is expected that every Christian community would claim an individual encounter with its Lord which justifies its own existence, this can quickly become a perverse insistence that the "Yes" of Christ has been exclusively spoken to them. This "claim to be identical with the one Church in contrast to the others, and in this sense to be the only Church" entails a delegitimation, whether implicit or explicit, of every other community's claim to stand under the "Yes" of Christ (CD IV/1, 683-4). The local congregation, instead of existing in harmony with and as a manifestation of the one church, becomes a ghetto by restricting the cosmic boundaries of Christ's church to its own four walls.

While there may be legitimate human explanations for such divisions, there are no acceptable theological ones, Barth claims, for a "plurality of Churches in this sense means a plurality of lords, a plurality of spirits, a plurality of gods" – a practical denial of the church's theoretical confession of the singular unity of the Triune God (CD IV/1, 675). Just as it is absurd for humans to oppose God as the very ground of their existence, it is equally absurd for the church to divide in denial of the unity of God.

---

of existence, by which He is attested to the whole world, by which the whole world is summoned to faith in Him." CD IV/1, 669-70.

Atonement's Intensification of Disunity's Absurdity

Just as the atonement intensifies the anthropological absurdity of sin, it intensifies the ecclesiological absurdity of disunity. As Barth puts it, the previously-described exclusive claim of a Christian community to be the only church "has been dashed out of hand by the One who is the unity of the Church" (CD IV/1, 684). In making an end of the nothingness of human sin, Christ has also delivered up disunity to destruction, for "in Him it was all humanity in its corruption and lostness, its earthly-historical existence under the determination of the fall, which was judged and executed and destroyed, and in that way liberated for a new determination, for its being as a new humanity" (CD IV/1, 663). The unity which is necessarily implied in Barth's Christological description of election is realized in the church. Members of the community "were one in God's election (Eph 1:4), were and are one in the fulfilment of it on Golgotha, are one in the power of His resurrection, one in Jesus Christ…His body together in their unity and totality" (CD IV/1, 664). Most succinctly, "there is only one Christ, and therefore there is only one body of Christ" (CD IV/1, 666). Disunity in the church is therefore absurd, because it denies the definition of the church as Christ's body, and the reality of reconciliation as Christ's work.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD A BARTHIAN ECUMENISM

I have endeavored to demonstrate the significance of Karl Barth's remark that disunity in the church "is only possible as sin is possible," by showing the structural parallels between his anthropological claim that sin is ontological impossibility and the claim that disunity is ecclesiological impossibility. Yet the value of this correlation for ecumenism is not readily apparent until it is situated within Barth's own ecumenical vision.

For Karl Barth, the Chalcedonian pattern of both Christology and ecclesiology applies when addressing the tension between the church's essence and form.[12] On one hand, the solution to ecclesiological disunity must not entail a docetic escapism which unifies the church at the expense of its earthly-historical form. No matter how frustrated ecumenists become, they must not abandon their ecclesiological traditions to create a formless Christianity whose only members are themselves. Because the church's external divisions result from essential, inward fractures, "neither individuals nor the whole Church can overcome it by a flight to the invisible, but only by a healing of both its visible and its invisible hurt" (CD IV/1, 678). On the other hand, because "what is demanded is the unity of the Church of Jesus Christ, not the externally satisfying co-existence and co-operation of different religious societies," Barth is suspicious of ebionitic approaches to church unity which approach the unification of the church as the unification of any other human communities, looking for the least common denominators upon which to build pragmatic associations (CD IV/1, 678).

Instead, Barth maintains that the pursuit of church unity must be an indirect pursuit – not an end in itself, but an unavoidable consequence of each Christian community sincerely pursuing the call of its Lord, and each individual doing so from a sober and humble loyalty to one's

[12] I am indebted to Bender's helpful description of Barth's critical use of a docetic/ebionitic framework. See Bender, *Christological Ecclesiology*, 7.

particular confession (CD IV/1, 679).[13] Barth asserts that "if only each church will take itself seriously, 'itself and Christ within it,' then even if there be no talk of union movements in it, even if there be no change at all in its order and its way of worship, the one Church would be in that single church a present reality and visible."[14] Because Christ, not Christians, is the ground of the church's unity, an individual community can exhibit the unity of the church, even within a fractured ecclesiological landscape, "if in its ordinances it is zealous for Christ."[15]

And yet this is the most difficult ecumenism of all, for it entails rigorous self-examination within each community, which must be willing to ask itself constantly whether it has legitimate reasons to exist as a particular, differentiated Christian community, or whether it should redefine (or abandon) its boundaries for the sake of church unity (CD IV/1, 680-1). I believe the correlation between sin as ontological impossibility and disunity as ecclesiological impossibility is necessary precisely at this point in the ecumenical equation, for each community's self-examination and pursuit of Christ's unifying summons will only be as rigorous as its understanding of the absurdity of church fragmentation. Just as sinful humanity denies the ground of its own existence, so also a divided and divisive church denies its identity as Christ's body and the reality of the atonement. Unless the disunity of Christ's body is seen as an unacceptable scandal, the schisms will remain, and each community's confession, "*credo unam ecclesiam*," will mean nothing more than "we believe ourselves."

[13] See also Barth, *The Church and the Churches*, 51-2.

[14] Barth, *The Church and the Churches*, *55.*

[15] Barth, *The Church and the Churches*, 56.