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“Peace through the Cross”

The Salvation of Jews and Gentiles

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Abstract

Central to Markus Barth's work as a New Testament exegete was the pursuit of an ever more responsible interpretation of the letters of the apostle Paul that combined rigorous historical and theological concerns into a form of “biblical theology.” The culmination of this endeavour is unarguably his two-volume commentary on Ephesians. This essay explores the central claims advanced in that commentary with an especial focus on Barth's claim that Ephesians 2:11–22 represents a high point in Paul's witness concerning Jews and Gentiles. It goes on to demonstrate how Barth understood justification as the ‘sociohistorical’ outworking of God's reconciling act in Jesus Christ. It concludes by examining some of the consequences of Barth's contentions for orienting Christians toward the important task of Jewish-Christian relations in the present.

Keywords

Ephesians – Jewish-Christian relations – justification – Paul – ecumenism

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For Paul is a messenger of a great event that has taken place,
and not a promoter of principles.

MARKUS BARTH, “The Challenge of the Apostle Paul,” p. 75.

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Writing in the *Festschrift* published to mark Markus Barth's sixty-fifth birthday, Paul L. Lehmann lauded the then Basel New Testament professor's "passion for theology" and his "practice of the theology of non-conformity." These, Lehmann stressed, demanded pursuit of "theology at once self-critical and critical of the times in which and against which theology is called to undertake its critical reflections upon the church's language about God."¹ As is made evident in other essays in this special issue, Barth exercised this passionate and critical non-conformity on a number of fronts. It is also fully on display in his treatment of the question of the interrelation of Jews and Gentiles in the testimony of the apostle Paul, not least on the pages of what is arguably his great contribution to theological scholarship, his two volume *Ephesians* commentary in the Anchor Bible series.² This essay considers the abiding significance of Barth's interpretation of Ephesians 2:11–22. As I will argue, formally, his interpretation of these verses exemplifies Barth's own understanding of the theological service of the exegete. Materially, it suggests that the matter of the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile is essential to the telling forth of the gospel of justification by grace because it is centrally ingredient in the realization of the reign of the God whose Christ "makes peace through the cross."

The essay unfolds in three steps. It begins with some brief consideration of the genre of Barth's work, considering what it might mean to read him in accordance with his own self-understanding as a biblical theologian. A second section then explores Barth's arresting claim that Ephesians 2:11–22 represents a high point in Paul's witness concerning Jews and Gentiles, and that its substance is and ought to be programmatic for Christian thinking about what he called the 'sociohistorical' form and force of God's reconciling act in Jesus Christ, and just so also decisive for any Christian understanding of the relation of Jews and Christians today. The third and concluding section briefly suggests some of the wider theological and ethical consequences of Barth's contention that the Christian life faithfully owns and publicly serves the One who "is our peace" because he has "broken down the dividing wall of hostility" in virtue of the labor of his cross (Eph 2:14).

1 Paul L. Lehmann, "Continual Invocations of Saint Augustine: Reinhold Niebuhr in American Theology," in *Intergerini Parietis Septum. Essays Presented to Markus Barth on His Sixty-fifth Birthday*, edited by D.Y. Hadidian (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1981), 156.

2 Markus Barth, *Ephesians 1–3* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974) and *Ephesians 4–6* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

1 Markus Barth as Biblical Theologian

Charles Dickinson has argued that Markus Barth can and should be understood as an advocate and practitioner of the kind of biblical theology that came to prominence in the decades following the end of the Second World War.³ While the term itself admits a wide range of possible—and contested—meanings, what it picks out in this case is the self-consciously theological horizon and interests of Barth’s technical biblical scholarship and, within this, his central commitment to engaging the Bible as a library of texts whose reality and meaning are ultimately determined—and so also understood—by their place and service within the economy of divine salvation. Its interest in the words of the Bible arises from its ultimate interest in the One whose Word is spoken in it. On such a view, exegesis rightly pursues *normative* interpretations. It exposes the exegete to the claims of the text itself and is thus ambitious to discern, precisely by way of rigorous linguistic, textual, and historical scholarship, the concrete promises and claims that issue forth from the text of yesterday for us today. We might think of Barth’s style of work as an instance of the kind of “descriptive–authoritative” biblical theology with which James Barr famously took issue and for which Brevard Childs famously advocated: namely, sustained exegetical work that “shares the interest of dogmatics in that it sees itself to have a kind of normative function.”⁴

Yet, such observations do not exhaust the most distinctive elements of Barth’s practice of biblical theology. Indeed, they might threaten to occlude the particularly strong emphasis Barth places upon the diversity, freedom, and spirited character of the biblical witness and its interpretation. These concerns come across clearly and programmatically in Barth’s book, *Conversations with the Bible*.⁵ Its argument builds from historical and textual observations about the nature of the biblical texts themselves into a theological account of the nature and authority of the Bible as scripture for the church, “the voice of an

3 Charles Dickinson, “Markus Barth and Biblical Theology: A Personal Re-view,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 17, no. 1 (1995): 96–116. Much of Dickinson’s essay surveys the developments and debates about the idea of ‘biblical theology’ during this period.

4 Dickinson, “Markus Barth and Biblical Theology,” 102 cites the phrase “descriptive–authoritative” from James Barr, *Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 273–274. See Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), especially 3–29. I myself find the most ready comparisons between the work of Markus Barth and that of his contemporary, Hans-Joachim Kraus and perhaps also a little more distantly, of Kornelius Miskotte.

5 Markus Barth, *Conversation with the Bible* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964).

address or dialogue.”⁶ Central to this is Barth’s claim that across its many and varied books and in its many and varied voices, the Bible is a book of *testimony*, that is, a collection of texts that bear witness, in this way and then that, to the reality of God’s intentions and acts and the human responses that they provoke.⁷ Likening biblical texts to an “unsystematic and manifold” collection of signposts—on appeal to the lexical roots of *torah*, meaning to guide, point, or direct—Barth explains that “it is the task of the witness to give a faithful and convincing account of all he saw and heard at a certain moment. God’s biblical witnesses give testimony to specific mighty acts which have been performed once in God’s history with his people, but which must be made known to many because of their universal and perennial relevance.”⁸

The vision here is of a diverse array of storied *precedents* of “sufficient clarity, poignancy, and exemplification to instruct one generation after another in all that pertains to the community between God and [humanity],” and taken together they amount to a “*magna carta*,” namely, a vital and eloquent divine authorization of human freedom to live as covenant partners of the one, true, and living God.⁹ The biblical witness is thus an instrument in the hands of the Spirit of God to create, invite, and enjoin the kinds of joyful, grateful, free, faithful, and active human living that aptly embrace the liberties of the children of God.¹⁰ Barth suggests that a kind of *typological* interpretation is the mode of understanding and application that is most fitting here: its ubiquity within the Bible itself reflects its capacity to honor the unyielding concreteness of particular events in the past, while discerning and displaying their power as precedents able to illumine the conversation between God and humanity in other times and places and circumstances as well.¹¹

6 Barth, *Conversation with the Bible*, 299. As Barth explains, “The principle, *sola Scriptura*, is rightly understood only when it is received as a counsel to submit oneself to both the Word and the Spirit of God,” 295.

7 Developing this theme is the particular concern of chapter 2 of Barth, *Conversation with the Bible*, 69–99. This may be one of the few substantive points of overlap with Gerhard Ebeling’s oft-cited essay, “The Meaning of Biblical Theology,” in *Word and Faith*, trans. J.W. Leitch (London: SCM, 1963), 79–97.

8 Barth, *Conversation with the Bible*, 72, 75.

9 Barth, *Conversation with the Bible*, 196.

10 Barth, *Conversation with the Bible*, 196–197, and 293 f. which treats of the Spirit as one who, “concerned to know God and to make him known (1 Cor 2:10–16),” is the *sine qua non* of the “enjoyment” of the freedom to which the Bible attests and to which it calls.

11 Barth, *Conversation with the Bible*, 269 f. Barth remarks upon the importance of this practice within the Old Testament, between the New and Old Testaments, as well as in rabbinical and early Christian interpretation.

What this means, in Barth’s view, is that theological doctrine drawn out from exegesis of the Bible is always *halakhic* in form, in other words, lessons won from out of dialogue and debate that point the way toward the Lord, practical instructions emerging from faithful conversations that serve to help women and men walk in the way of God; and the authority of such teaching is chiefly evidenced by the trust it inspires and the obedience it wins.¹² As Barth makes clear elsewhere, this comports with the character of the gospel itself as a “message by which all [people] live,” that is ever “news from God,” always being “learned day by day,” never properly possessed, and always eluding capture in theological systems.¹³

Of the many things Barth has to say in elaborating the practice of such exegesis, perhaps three are of particular importance for present purposes. First, the primary task of biblical interpretation is always what he styles “exposition,” by which Barth means the “act of unpacking, unfolding, displaying, the manifold contents and the one or several senses of the text.”¹⁴ Barth stresses that this content is always already the result of interpretation, as every biblical text is composite of interpretative tradition, but one at the base of which stands “God’s own interpretation” of the human condition. The very work of exposition exposes us to the fact that we are “already involved in the history of God with [humankind],” such that “understanding and interpretation occur only in the course of active participation in the biblical dialogue” itself.¹⁵

Second, and correspondingly, exegesis always also involves the act of “giving an *answer*” to what has been exposed of the text, by “yielding” and “being moved” to provide “a living response to the living word.” Understanding here necessarily includes decision, application, and action: it involves the exercise and enjoyment of freedom.¹⁶ When Barth observes that the reason why some of the best exegetes in the tradition—he names “Origen, Augustine, Luther, and Bengel”—were incapable of producing *systematic* theology was because of their devotion to suffering this exposure to the living Word and exercising the responsive freedom it enjoins, he is surely offering a quiet *apologia pro vita sua*.

Third, and finally, is the idea that the biblical interpreter, alive to the Spirit’s superintention and patient upon the work of the Word among others, “will not

12 Barth, *Conversation with the Bible*, 72, 194.

13 Markus Barth, “What is the Gospel?,” *International Review of Missions*, 53, no. 212 (1964), 447–448.

14 Barth, *Conversation with the Bible*, 301.

15 Barth, *Conversation with the Bible*, 302–303.

16 Barth, *Conversation with the Bible*, 304–305.

pretend to master the whole biblical canon” but “will be open to the witness of neglected parts of the canon that may be brought to his attention through fellow Bible students.”¹⁷ This claim is notable for two reasons: on the one hand, it bespeaks the necessarily extended, social, and communal character of biblical interpretation as Barth recognizes and recommends it—the Bible is read together or it is not well read or read at all. On the other hand, it authorizes exegetes to give sustained attention to books and passages that, while perhaps overlooked or bypassed by many interpreters, are yet voices in our “conversation with the Bible” that may in fact deliver invaluable witness (again) today. Barth’s lifelong devotion to the study and interpretation of Philemon, Colossians, and Ephesians—the latter two texts long considered the “early Catholic” stepchildren of the authentic Pauline letter corpus—represents the exercise of just this freedom.

We do well to keep all this in view as we turn to examine Barth’s interpretation of the evangelical witness of Ephesians 2:11–22.

2 Ephesians 2:11–22 as Paul’s Pinnacle and Programme

Because Paul’s journey was a lengthy one, even after Damascus, a true follower of Paul, as distinguished from a mere Paulinist, does not linger at this or that stopping place because of his fascination with various especially strong pronouncements of the Apostle; he rather travels on with Paul on the further journey.¹⁸

Barth’s interpretation of Paul generally—and his assessment of Paul’s view of the relationship between Jew and Gentile, Israel and church, in particular—stands in tension with a long tradition of Pauline interpretation that stresses the antithesis between the righteousness that comes by faith and that to be achieved by means of the law, and so also between the divine grace that creates the former and the human striving that pursues the latter. At the sharp end of this tradition is the view, firmly articulated by Ernst Käsemann, that “the apostle’s real adversary is the devout Jew, not only as the mirror image of his own past—though that too—but as the reality of the religious man.”¹⁹ In

17 Barth, *Conversation with the Bible*, 297.

18 Markus Barth, “St. Paul—A Good Jew,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology*, 1, no. 1 (1979): 24.

19 Ernst Käsemann, “Paul and Israel,” *New Testament Questions Today*, trans. W.J. Montague (London: SCM Press, 1969), 183–187 (184). On this statement see the extraordinary endnote 2 to Barth’s “St Paul—A Good Jew,” 38.

pushing against this tradition as he does, Barth anticipates many aspects of the “new perspective on Paul” associated with James Dunn and Ed Sanders, even as Barth’s own specifically *theological* investments are perhaps more conspicuous.²⁰

Barth accounts for the evident tensions between Paul’s sharp polemics against his fellow Jews in such texts as 1 Thessalonians 2:14–16 and Galatians 4:30—assaults that are akin to the “painful complaints of Jeremiah and some of the psalms of revenge in the Old Testament”—and the more irenic claims of Romans 9–11 and Ephesians by appealing to the development of Paul’s doctrine: the early barbed claims can hardly to be considered the apostle’s “timeless teaching” as “all of Paul’s letters are occasional writings in which he deals with concrete situations as a missionary, pastor and overseer of the church.”²¹ What is represented across the letter corpus is an “evolution” in Paul’s thinking about Israel that reflects his own learning over the course of his ministry and—crucially for our purposes—“peaks” in Barth’s view in what Paul has to teach about the people of God in Ephesians.²²

Barth is bold to suggest that “it might well be that the Epistle to the Ephesians rather than Romans contains the summary of Paul’s message” as “Paul himself may have written it” to the Gentile members of that congregation “a considerable time after Romans.”²³ If “Ephesians after all comes from Paul and represents much more than Romans a kind of ‘last will and testament,’” Barth remarks, then late in life the apostle seems to have been “able to present his gospel irenically and almost entirely without polemic, under the sign of the ‘peace’ incorporated and proclaimed in Jesus Christ.”²⁴ Barth insists that

20 See E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM Press, 1977) and James D.G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), which collects his key essays from 1983 and after.

21 Barth, “St Paul—A Good Jew,” 21, 23.

22 Markus Barth, *The People of God*, JSNT Supplement Series 5 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1983), 9–20. Cf. also Markus Barth, “Was Paul an Anti-Semite?,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 5 (1968): 97–102 for a concise telling of the course of this development as Barth sees it. This developmental claim also comports with Barth’s insistence upon the occasional and topical character of Paul’s letters, writings in which the apostle eschews creating any “system of faith.”

23 Markus Barth, “The Challenge of the Apostle Paul,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 1 (1964): 76. Barth’s lengthy discussion of the contested question of the authorship of Ephesians, and his case for Paul himself as its author is set out in *Ephesians*, 36–52. Cf. *Ephesians* 1–3, 3–4, 11.

24 Barth, “St Paul—A Good Jew,” 11. Cf. Ephesians 2:14, 17; 4:3; 6:15. Cf. Barth, *Ephesians* 1–3, 11: “Why should not Paul, toward the end of his ministry, have elaborated upon an irenic presentation of the peace established by Christ between Jews and Gentiles?”

responsible reading of Paul demands that interpreters “follow the apostle and progress with him on the road which leads him to affirm that there is only one people of God, Israel, and that—by the grace shown through Israel’s Messiah—Gentiles have become members even of this people.”²⁵

This theme—namely, “how the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (3:6)—is the singular “mystery” of which the letter speaks. Explicating the form and dynamics of this mystery is the business of Ephesians 2:11–22, a passage Barth takes to be “the key and high point of the whole epistle.”²⁶ Distinctively, Paul here proclaims a gospel of *peace* in a world riven by hostility (2:14, 17; 6:15). Barth’s full explication of this passage is extended, detailed, and closely argued: here we lift up for mention only a few of the most important theological themes and structures to which he draws specific attention.

First, as noted, Christ and his work are cast here almost exclusively in terms of *peace*: Christ “is our peace,” the one who “preached peace” to Gentiles and Jews alike, and who in his body, in his person, and in his blood “makes peace.” This is first and foremost peace between “those who were far off” and “those who were near,” between strangers “alienated from the commonwealth of Israel” and those at home in “the covenants of promise”; it is only then a peace that wins “access in one Spirit to the Father.” Neither Jew nor Gentile receives peace save “when the Messiah comes to save and unite both of them.”²⁷ The passage tells *first* of the horizontal reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles *before* it tells of the vertical reconciliation of those same people with God.²⁸ Barth thinks this sequence distinctive and important.

Second, the work of Christ that secures this peace is twofold. On one hand is the destructive work of “breaking down the dividing wall of hostility,” of “ending the enmity” of Jew and Gentile “in his body through the cross,” and of “abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances.” After canvassing several possible interpretations of the “wall of hostility,” Barth concludes that

25 Barth, *The People of God*, 20. Later in that work Barth observes how the interpretation of Romans 9–11 is “drastically changed when Ephesians is received and respected as authentically Pauline, or when Eph 2, even if written by a disciple of Paul, is considered to be a competent explanation and continuation of Rom. 9–11 ... It is necessary and wise to regard the later epistle, Ephesians, as a key to the interpretation of the earlier, Romans,” 48. Cf. Barth, “Was Paul an Anti-Semite?,” 102: “To learn from Paul, as from any biblical author, means to move with Paul, and not against him. Otherwise Paul’s letters would become as deadly as may any other scripts.”

26 Barth, *Ephesians* 1–3, 275.

27 Barth, *Ephesians* 1–3, 291.

28 Barth, *Ephesians* 1–3, 33–34.

understood retrospectively—that is, as “that which has been broken down” by Christ—its meaning is fourfold, encompassing the “fact of separation between Israel and the nations,” the divisive effect of “the law and its statutes and interpretations,” the enmity between Gentile and Jew as such, and finally the common enmity Jew and Gentile share toward God.²⁹ Much turns on the claim that with the curious phrase “the law, [that is only] the commandments [expressed] in statutes”—as Barth renders it—Paul specifically has in view the separating function and effect of the law as a barrier between Israel and the nations. As he writes, when we allow the meaning to be controlled by the local context, “Christ has abrogated the divisive function of the law—and therefore not God’s holy law itself ... [but] its divisiveness was terminated when Jesus Christ died on the cross.”³⁰

On the other hand is the constructive work of Christ’s “coming,” “declaring,” “making one,” “making peace,” “creating,” and “reconciling,” verbs that variously characterize God’s saving work as a sovereign act of pacification and unification from which the formerly inimical parties have “nothing but gain.”³¹ These gains are threefold: the expansion and upbuilding of the household of God by the inclusion of its new “citizens”; access in the Spirit to the Father in the celebration of the church’s worship; and finally, the creation of “the one new man in place of the two.”³² Barth’s understanding of this third “fruit of peace” bears some consideration.³³ Paul speaks of Christ’s peace-making through the cross as an act of “creation” [κτίσις] to distinguish it from mere improvement or amelioration, as well as to attribute divine dignity and novelty to it. Strikingly, the crucified Christ is the subject of the verb. What is brought into being is “the one new man,” an eschatological category Barth argues can only refer to the church as the bride and partner of Christ. Critical to his reading is Paul’s claim that Christ creates this “one new man ... *out of the two*”: creation here is not *ex nihilo* but rather out of the mutual enmity of people “dead in their sins.” Barth concludes that “Ephesians alone calls God’s covenant partner ‘one new man’ and emphasizes that this man consists of two, that is, of Jews and Gentiles” drawn together in “an organic body consisting of distinct members, not an amalgamation.”³⁴ This last point is important to Barth because it sees the meaningful

29 Barth, *Ephesians 1–3*, 282–287, also 306 on the “destructive” work of Christ.

30 Barth, *Ephesians 1–3*, 287–291, esp. 290–291; cf. also 306.

31 Barth, *Ephesians 1–3*, 307.

32 See Barth, *Ephesians 1–3*, 311–322 for Barth’s full account of the first two of these “fruits of peace.”

33 For what follows here see Barth, *Ephesians 1–3*, 308–311.

34 Barth, *Ephesians 1–3*, 310, where Barth also refuses the idea that the Christian is a *genus tertium* beside and beyond Jews and Gentiles.

differences between Jew and Gentile maintained within the unity of the body of the church, because the new covenant partner created by the cross is ‘a social being’ that enjoys its ‘unity in diversity.’ To explicate this claim, Barth often invokes parallels with the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32), noting how full communion with the Father or Lord is possible only when the hostility between the older and younger brother, i.e., the segregation between Jews and Gentiles, is terminated while the distinctive histories of the son who was “far off” and the one who remained “near” remain.³⁵ The upshot of all this is to solidify Barth’s overarching claim that, in Ephesians, community with Israel, “is not just a possible or desirable consequence of the eternal plan of God, of the making of peace through the cross of Christ, and of the revelation of his mystery through the Spirit. What God has planned, performed, and revealed has no other content and character than precisely this full community of the Gentiles with Israel.”³⁶

At this juncture is it worth remarking on several further distinctive aspects of Barth’s interpretation of these verses.

First, Barth’s case for the centrality of the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile here does not come at the expense of an affirmation of *sola gratia*—quite the opposite, in fact. God’s faithfulness to his covenant promises is the sole ground of hope for the salvation of Israel, and so the salvation of the Jews is precisely a testimony to the sheer gratuity of God’s saving will and action. As he stresses at several points, Gentile hope in salvation turns on the truth of Israel’s witness and reality at just this point: either the salvation of Israel in virtue of the abiding strength of divine grace alone stands as the decisive precedent for the future of the church of Jews and Gentiles, or else that church is properly hopeless. Käsemann claimed that the reality of justification of the ungodly meant that the apostle’s “real adversary is the devout Jew.” Barth claims that the reality of the justification of the ungodly means that the apostle’s hope for Gentiles hangs upon them being brought near and encompassed together with Israel by “peace through the cross.” Said strongly, that we are saved by grace alone is “a fact which can be demonstrated and acknowledged only when the Christian’s solidarity with Israel is observed.”³⁷ Barth suggests that integral to the mission

35 See, e.g., Barth, *Israel and the Church*, 104: “To recognize that Jesus Christ is *their* king before he is *ours*; that the Holy Writings were theirs before they also became ours; that the Jews, despite dispersion, persecution, and mass murder, were and are kept alive by God’s grace; that their toiling and working in the Father’s house is what we prodigals should have done—to accept all this is not only fitting but necessary for Christians.” Cf. *Ephesians* 1–3, 311.

36 Barth, *Israel and the Church*, 92.

37 Barth, *Israel and the Church*, 101.

and service of Israel is its capacity to exhibit the truth of saving divine grace before the eyes of the nations. He explains:

So the Jews reveal what a surprising God the Lord is, and what an amazing action is the salvation of man by God. If, despite their mutterings and rebellion, the Jews’ salvation is the type and exemplar of man’s salvation, then nothing is left but to say that we are saved by grace (Eph 2:5, 8). Anti-Semitism—whether in churchly or pagan form—is therefore always a display of work-righteousness and self-redemption.³⁸

Second, a further hallmark of Barth’s interpretation is the way in which it connects the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile with what we might call the “cosmic” scope and horizon of Paul’s gospel. Barth insists that “Paul is not rightly understood when all his statements are passed through an anthropological bottleneck.”³⁹ Barth is alert to the prominence of Paul’s discourse of the “powers and principalities,” suggesting that these categories pick out the structures and institutions “that surround [us] with enticing or repulsive, with reasonable or unbearable claims” that bid for our allegiance.⁴⁰ Importantly, texts like Ephesians 1:20–23 signal that the salvation at issue in Paul’s telling of the gospel extends beyond the troubled human soul to the *kosmos* itself. For the sovereign reconciling work of Christ comprehends “the function of all structures and energies that operate in nature, history, society and the psyche” and thus establishes a new human freedom to live in their midst.⁴¹ Undoubtedly, just what is involved in overcoming the antinomy between ‘near’ and ‘far’ and the divisive enmity of Jew and Gentile—and so also all the social, political, and other concrete forms in which these are reiterated, enforced, and expressed—is illumined when the peace of Christ’s work and rule is acknowledged to include a new ordering of the basic structure of things. Indeed, as Barth himself says, “the act of judgment by which God graciously justifies miserable sinners, Jews

38 Barth, *Israel and the Church*, 103. Cf. *Ephesians* 1–3, 32: “God’s grace alone, even overflowing grace, is the cause, the nerve, the means of salvation from sin and death.”

39 Barth, “The Challenge of Paul the Apostle,” 68.

40 Barth, “The Challenge of the Apostle Paul,” 67. Barth suggests elsewhere that Paul acquired an “ability to think in cosmic terms from apocalyptic writers”; see “Was Paul an Anti-Semite?,” 96.

41 Barth, “The Challenge of the Apostle Paul,” 69. On this radical reordering of the structuring ‘antinomies’ of the cosmos as a hallmark of Paul’s thinking, see J. Louis Martyn, “Apocalyptic Antinomies” and “Christ and the Elements of the Cosmos,” in *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 111–124, 125–140.

and Gentiles alike, is an act of world-wide, cosmic judgment by which a total new order, even the very renewal of heaven and earth is begun."⁴²

In light of these two aspects, we must observe, third and finally, Barth's important claims concerning the priority of what he styles the "socio-historical character of justification." In an essay comparing Galatians and Ephesians, Barth explains that

[t]he doctrine of justification unfolded in Galatians as well as in Romans and Philippians is a sermonic and pastoral expression of the one great act of God: the advent, the person, the work, and especially the cross of Jesus Christ. In Ephesians the meaning and effect of the death of Christ on the cross is praised in other words, just as emphatically as in Galatians with an emphasis upon the salvation of human beings *sola gratia* and *sola fide* (esp. Eph 2:4–10, 13–19), yet additionally with a special accent upon the community creating power of God.⁴³

As we have seen, in Ephesians—and not merely in Ephesians—Paul lays specific emphasis upon the inclusion of Gentiles as citizens within God's reign.⁴⁴ Barth contends that the public and social character of this message is essential, rather than accidental, since "the life together of former insiders and outsiders and the distinct ethics of that life are the very purpose and result of that judgment of God which Paul has to announce."⁴⁵ Or as he says in another place, "if it is peace from and with God, then it also peace among men," for "only by changing [human] social relations does God also change man's individual life."⁴⁶ With this emphasis, Barth says, Paul shows himself "a pragmatist rather than a dreaming idealist" wanting to point to the way in which Christ's saving work is itself a matter of divine *action* able to produce concrete effects in the world.⁴⁷ Ephesians advances a "political, social, public concept of the working of God's grace" that makes manifest that "the much-praised peace of the soul looks like a ridiculous mini-achievement beside the peace and order brought to the world."⁴⁸

42 Barth, "The Challenge of the Apostle Paul," 70.

43 Markus Barth, "Die Einheit des Galater- und Epheserbriefs," *Theologische Zeitschrift* 32, no. 2 (1976): 90. Cf. *Ephesians* 1–3, 45–47.

44 In addition to Ephesians 2:11–22, cf. indicatively Galatians 1:1–16, 2:1–14 and Romans 1:16–17, 3:21–31, 9, 11, 15:15–26.

45 Barth, "The Challenge of the Apostle Paul," 76.

46 Barth, *Ephesians* 1–3, 278.

47 Barth, *Israel and the Church*, 98.

48 Barth, *Ephesians* 1–3, 45.

Barth is anxious to resist the temptation to conceive of justification individualistically. As he explains, justification is always in common, always the justification of the neighbor and me *together*, always *co*-justification, because “no man is ever made righteous for himself; justification by faith is a reality only in community with those fellow-men whom God elected for common justification.”⁴⁹ Bound together in the grim solidarity of sin, we are all the more bound together in virtue of being implicated in the acquittal of one another by grace.

In another register, this point concerns the assurance of faith. Barth contends that if “there is no personal justification by God without justification of [our fellows] by God,” then there is also “no faith in the justifying God without acceptance of the witness given by a neighbour.”⁵⁰ The need for the testimony of others to the grace of God by which I am justified amplifies the social quality of the event of salvation: we find certainty of salvation in the fact that our neighbors are those who have received grace. As Barth says, “the words *pro me* can be uttered with certainty only when they are supported by the realization that God already gave others his righteousness”—in the context of Paul’s witness, the Jew and Gentile are then “primary neighbours” for one another in just this way, so much so, in fact, that Barth concludes that “justification by faith and the unity of Jew and Gentile, are for [Paul] obviously not only inseparable but in the last analysis identical.”⁵¹

As previously noted, Barth stresses that the social reality of justification means not an erasure of difference—the production of “a boring uniformity or artificial equality”⁵²—but, rather, the bringing together of such differences in a necessary, fruitful, and mutual service. “There is no justification by grace without the miracle that not only Gentile Christians, but also Jews, and not only Jewish Christians but also Jews, and not only Jewish Christians but also Gentiles, have been justified by God, and will be justified.”⁵³ If we are reconciled to God only in and as we are reconciled by God to one another, then the neighbor always stands forth as the chief witness to the reality of divine grace: I see and trust grace as I see and trust it in the lives of those others whom God is making righteous around, before, and with me. In this, Jews are the prototypical neighbors not by Gentile choice, but rather because they “have become children of

49 Barth, “Jews and Gentiles: The Social Character of Justification in Paul,” 245.

50 Barth, “Jews and Gentiles: The Social Character of Justification in Paul,” 245.

51 Barth, “Jews and Gentiles: The Social Character of Justification in Paul,” 258–259.

52 Barth, “Jews and Gentiles: The Social Character of Justification in Paul,” 252.

53 Barth, “Jews and Gentiles: The Social Character of Justification in Paul,” 263.

God, only by having been made” their neighbors by inclusion in the household of God at God’s own pleasure.⁵⁴

In short, the salvation designated by the phrase ‘peace through the cross’ in Barth’s account here is at once utterly gracious, fully cosmic in scope and character, and specifically sociohistorical in its form and consequences. The messianic creation of the “new human” that peaceably encompasses previously estranged Jews and Gentiles “in his body” is God’s unassailably gracious, sovereign, and good act.

3 “Peace through the Cross”—The Politics of Justification

Writing in his late commentary on *Colossians*, Barth makes the following claim:

As in the epistle to the Ephesians, so also in the epistle to the Colossians, the gospel is distinguished by the message that, through the Messiah, non-Jews have attained access to the God of Israel and to a share in the Jewish inheritance ... The history of the church is [thus] *participation* in the OT Judaic history, just as the theology of the church is participation in the OT Judaic theology. The community and unity of Jews and gentiles is to glorify the magnitude of God’s love for his people. This love reaches deeper and farther than the men and women in the account of the Hebrew Bible ever expected (cf. Col 1:26).⁵⁵

To call the Christian church to hear, and heed, and reckon with *this* voice in the midst of our “conversation with the Bible” is one of Markus Barth’s signal contributions to Christian and theological existence in the last half century. If his voice is perhaps no longer so distinctive—no longer so ‘nonconformist’—because no longer as angular in relation to the conversation about Paul, about the contours of the gospel, and about Jews and Christians as it once was, then this itself is a testament to Barth’s scholarly acumen, prescience, and power to instruct.

In an application of his own principles of biblical theology noted above, Barth himself was keen to discern in Paul’s treatment of the justification of Jew and Gentile together in Ephesians a crucial apostolic *precedent* that might serve

54 Barth, *Israel and the Church*, 104–105.

55 Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *Colossians. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 250–251.

to inform, illuminate, and adjudicate crucial aspects of contemporary Christian existence. Indeed, Barth is bold to claim that Paul’s testimony to the unity of Jew and Gentile as justified in Christ bears directly upon the present reality of world and church.⁵⁶

Writing in *Katallagete*, the organ of the Committee of Southern Churchmen, in 1966 Barth emphasized “bluntly” that justification in Christ is “a moral matter” such that “union and solidarity with Christ in death and life can only be affirmed when there is also union and solidarity with brothers [and sisters].”⁵⁷ He explained that “the peace won for Jews and Gentiles through the cross is, for Paul, the foundational social reconciliation from which the hope for the overcoming and healing of all other divisions flows: this reconciliation stands as the prototype, paradigm and biblical analogue of all human reconciliation.” Indeed, for Barth “there is no limit set to the relevance of what has happened to Jews and Gentiles in Jesus Christ.”⁵⁸ At another place, he remarks that “the union of Jews and Gentiles created in Jesus Christ is also the basis, prototype, and criterion for ... the whole of social ethics.”⁵⁹

Cast in this way, the tragic failure of Christians to receive, own, and live out the peace won for Gentiles and Jews together through the cross is not only a moral failure, though it is certainly that. It is also a *dis-evangelion*, a false counter testimony to the gospel of reconciliation itself. To neglect the purchase and force of this apostolic precedent—whether by willful ignorance or active suppression—by comfortably continuing to acquiesce in the manifold disharmonies of our political, social, and ecclesial life is thus at one and the same time a moral and spiritual matter. Such conduct is not only tasteless and inhuman; it is an absurd outworking of our sin and a betrayal of the gospel of peace.

Paul’s *paraenesis* offers “indications in what direction Christians were to move at his time” but Barth says, “they are not binding casuistic laws”; rather, in every age Christians “should muster the courage to make *analogous* decisions!”⁶⁰ Barth himself exercised such courage on many occasions, venturing to think and to speak *per analogiam* about racial conflict in the United States, tensions between the capitalist West and the communist East, the exploitative relations of developed North with the developing South, as well as relations of

56 Barth, “Jews and Gentiles: The Social Character of Justification in Paul,” 264.

57 Markus Barth, “Jew and Gentile; White Man and Negro: An Exegesis of Gallatians [sic] 2:11–2,” *Katallagete* 1, no. 2 (1966): 28.

58 Barth, “Jew and Gentile; White Man and Negro,” 30.

59 Barth, “St Paul—A Good Jew,” 36.

60 Barth, “The Challenge of the Apostle Paul,” 70. Cf. *Ephesians* 1–3, ix: the exegete “tries carefully to listen to the past, he also has to respond daringly in terms of the present world.”

Arabs and Jews in the Middle East.⁶¹ In all these cases, concrete hope lies in discerning where the grace of God that judges, justifies, and reconciles enemies is winning—perhaps unknowingly—witnesses and is breaking up the ‘givens’ of the present so as to open up a future of reconciliation that will reflect the peace won through the cross. Barth wagered such political and social interventions in faith that “the content of the gospel is the realistic politics of God who knows how justice is created” and when he did so, the text of Ephesians was regularly to hand.⁶²

Let me submit, finally, that it is significant that Barth should have published several of his most substantive essays on aspects of the theme we have been considering in the newly founded *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* during the 1960s. This suggests not only that he recognized its ecumenical significance for the divided churches, but also reflects his view that the abiding division of church and synagogue remained *the* prototypical ecumenical problem.⁶³ He offers this provocative and programmatic statement of the task as he sees it:

Too often the doctrine of the people of God—which should properly be called “laology”—is overshadowed or replaced by ecclesiology ... [I] call for the unfolding of a “Messianic laology” which embraces all Jews, not merely the “remnant” which believes in the Messiah already come. False decisions and attitudes, taken with reference to the unity of God’s people, have the theological weight of Christological heresies ... In the Christians’

61 See, e.g., Barth, “Jews and Gentiles: The Social Character of Justification in Paul,” 264–267; “Jew and Gentile; White Man and Negro,” 29–31; “Israel and the Palestinians,” in *Jesus the Jew*, trans. F. Prussner (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1978), 41–96, esp. 81–96.

62 Barth, “Israel and the Palestinians,” 91. Running up to this claim we read there: “But the manner and way in which, according to Paul, Jews and non-Jews become reconciled to one another consist[s] therein that out of *both* there is made a new human being, that all take off the old human nature and put on the new one (Eph 2:15, 4:22–24). This seems to me to be thought and said perfectly. It concerns the whole human being and, therefore, deals with one’s religion as well as with one’s politics and one’s everyday behaviour.”

63 In this he concurred with his father, Karl Barth; see *Ad Limina Apostolorum. An Appraisal of Vatican II*, trans. K.R. Crim (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968), 35–37 and 30 where the elder Barth asks, “why is the most grievous, the fundamental schism—the opposition of Church and synagogue—not dealt with” in the Decree on Ecumenism, as “there is in the end only one really great ecumenical question: our relations with Judaism” (cf. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 225). Markus Barth’s parallel concern with the direction of discussions at Vatican II that led to the statement on the relation of the church and the Jews becoming a paragraph in *Nostra Aetate* (the Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions) finds its most intense expression in his editorial, “Salvation from the Jews!,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 1 (1964): 323–326.

relation to the Jewish Saviour their relationship with Jews is decided. In the relationship with Jews their relation to Jesus Christ is verified—or falsified.⁶⁴

At a minimum, Markus Barth’s reading of Ephesians lifts out one notable element of the polyphonic testimony of the New Testament to suggest that *this* voice and precedent invites our hearing, seeks our acknowledgement, and timeously claims and directs the exercise of Christian freedom today. Maximally, Barth invites us to align ourselves unreservedly with the mature culmination of the apostle Paul’s very own witness to the pacifying work of the cross and redolent meaning for the salvation of Jews and Gentiles together. In either case, what Barth himself said during the debate surrounding the Second Vatican Council’s *Nostra Aetate* still holds true today: “It is the common unsolved task of the great and the small Christian congregations to set to work and to learn to respect and boldly confess the special mystery of Israel,” not least because “the mystery of Israel, the mystery of the Suffering Servant, and the mystery of God’s grace and righteousness for all [people] are identical.”⁶⁵

64 Markus Barth, “One God, One Christ, One People,” *Ex Audito* 4 (1988): 21–22, which reproduces with some few alterations a passage from Barth, *The People of God*, 48–49.

65 Markus Barth, “Salvation Is from the Jews!,” 326 and 323. For a suggestive, early exploration of the central claim made here see Markus Barth, “The Christ in Israel’s History,” *Theology Today* 11 (1954): 342–353. For two contemporary nonconformist theological essays committed to pursuing this “common unsolved task” in close conversation with Paul, see Walter Lowe, “On the Tenacity of Christian Anti-Judaism,” *Modern Theology* 22, no. 2 (2006): 277–294, and Douglas Harink, “Paul and Israel: An Apocalyptic Reading,” *Pro Ecclesia* 16, no. 4 (2007): 359–380.