

## STARING AT THE SUN: THE THEOLOGIAN'S PURSUIT OF HOLINESS AND HIS OBLIGATION TO THE CHURCH

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**Abstract:** *This paper explicates Gregory's emphasis on spiritual contemplation and explores its implications on the theologian's relationship to the local church. Over and against an intellectualized vision of the theological task that would separate the topics of scholarly contribution and personal piety as unrelated areas of concern, this paper endorses, with Gregory, an integrated approach to the theological task. Identifying the theologian as occupying a space within the collection of gifts, which Christ gives to the church for her edification (cf., Eph 4:11–16), this paper argues that for a theologian to live up to his name, he must perform his task within and for the church, with a reverence and devotion that befits the assembly of the saints. This paper will provide theological and biblical rationale for this principle, as well as a contrasting case study in the person of Karl Barth (1886–1968).*

**Key Words:** Theological Methodology, Spiritual Consecration, Gregory of Nazianzus, Karl Barth, Ecclesiology

### INTRODUCTION

“Then: ‘Blessèd ones, till by flame purified no soul may pass this point. Enter the fire and heed the singing from the other side.’”<sup>2</sup>

These are the words Dante Alighieri (AD 1264–1321) reports hearing toward the close of his *Purgatorio*. Having traveled through the nine circles of Hell and up the mountain of Purgatory, led by his guide, Virgil, Dante finds himself coming to the precipice of heaven. The climb up the mountain has been arduous but rewarding: he has experienced the painful and joyful process of sanctification, losing in succession the vices of pride, envy, wrath, sloth, avarice, and gluttony. He desires to leave earth's mountain behind in his ascent to heavenly beatitude among the starry host, but before he can enter Paradise, he must walk through Purgatory's wall of fire, where the seventh and final vice, lust, will melt away. Before entering the realm of heaven, Dante must be made to be fit for heaven.

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<sup>2</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: The Inferno, The Purgatorio, The Paradiso*, trans. John Ciardi (New York, NY: New American Library, 2003), *Purgatorio*, Canto XXVII.10–12.

In his first theological oration, Gregory of Nazianzus (AD 325–390) writes at length on a very similar theme: *spiritual consecration*. He warns against treating theology as a trivial matter. Gregory insists that theology, contemplation of the things of God, is not fitting for those who are not devoted to Christ at the level of spiritual reverence. “Discussion of theology is not for everyone,” he says, “but only for those who have been tested and have found a sound footing in study, and, *more importantly, have undergone, or at the very least are undergoing, purification of body and soul*. For one who is not pure to lay hold of pure things is dangerous, just as it is for weak eyes to look at the sun’s brightness.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, Gregory stresses caution. The truth of God is *not* something to be trifled with. This paper explicates Gregory’s emphasis on spiritual contemplation and explores its implications on the theologian’s relationship to the local church. Over and against an intellectualized vision of the theological task that would separate the topics of scholarly contribution and personal piety as unrelated areas of concern, this paper endorses, with Gregory, an integrated approach to the theological task. Identifying the theologian as occupying a space within the collection of gifts that Christ gives to the church for her edification (cf., Eph 4:11–16), this paper argues that for a theologian to live up to his name, he must perform his task within and for the church, with a reverence and devotion that befits the assembly of the saints. I will provide theological and biblical rationale for this principle, as well as a contrasting case study in the person of Karl Barth (1886–1968). While we might consider Barth’s theological contribution (or lack thereof, depending on one’s view of him) on the merits of his work alone, this paper will focus uniquely on the impact that Barth’s tolerated habitual sin had on his theology.<sup>4</sup>

### Consecration in Gregory’s First Theological Oration

Gregory’s *Oration 27* is his introduction sermon on a series of polemic homilies

<sup>3</sup>Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 27*, §3 (Emphasis added). English translation cited: Gregory of Nazianzus, *On God and Christ* (Yonkers, NY: SVS Press, 2002).

<sup>4</sup>Admittedly, there is a certain of level arbitrariness in choosing Barth as an example here. Other theologians could have certainly been examined in his stead, but I have chosen Barth for two simple reasons. First, his acclaim and influence on modern theology makes him conceptually accessible to a wide readership. Barth is famous (or infamous) in many theological circles, which makes the example of his life consequential far and wide. If the theological principle Gregory lays out in his *Oration 27* applies to anyone, it *should* apply to Barth. As one of the most preeminent modern theologians, Barth is an excellent test case to compare the modern vision of theology with the ancient one as explicated by Gregory. Second, I have chosen Barth because his life and theology stands out to me, personally, as a cautionary tale that uniquely punctuates Gregory’s thesis. This, I trust, will become clear below.

against the Eunomians.<sup>5</sup> As such, it is full of sharp and biting rhetorical remarks. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that Gregory's tactic is to malign his opponents and overwhelm them with insults. A careful reading of this oration reveals a sincere exasperation on the part of Gregory: he is deeply concerned not only by the blasphemous conclusions the Eunomians reach in their theology proper, but also by the manner in which they reach their conclusions. In his estimation, their manner of theologizing bespeaks a flippancy in the theological task, which to Gregory is flabbergasting. The sharp rhetoric should therefore be read as a proverbial shock of ice-cold water: he desires for his opponents—and his audience—to be alert and wide awake at the high stakes involved in theology. In order for us to appreciate the importance of consecration in Gregory's theological methodology, we must get a broad outline of the sermon before us.

Gregory begins the sermon by accusing the Eunomians of prideful insincerity: according to Gregory, his opponents are “mere verbal tricksters.”<sup>6</sup> His first objection, therefore, is not aimed directly at the content of their theological musings, but in their posture in the theological task. “But in fact they undermined every approach to true religion by their complete obsession with setting and solving conundrums.”<sup>7</sup> Theology, for Gregory's opponents, was a mere game, and this was intolerable for him. “The great mystery’ of our faith,” he says, “is in danger of becoming a mere social accomplishment.”<sup>8</sup> Gregory will go on in his oration to rhetorically ask, “Can it be that nothing else matters for you, but your tongue must always rule you, and you cannot hold back words that, once conceived, must be delivered?”<sup>9</sup> There is a kind of vain and unbecoming need to be the center of attention that is, according to Gregory, completely at odds with the proper and reverent approach to theology. Theological discussions should not be pursued as an effort to prop up oneself. This kind of vainglory is given no quarter by Gregory: “Well,” he says, “there are plenty of other fields in which you can win fame. Direct your disease there, and you may do good.”<sup>10</sup>

This is why Gregory goes so far as to say that “discussion of theology is not for everyone, I tell you, not for everyone—it is no such inexpensive or effortless pursuit.”<sup>11</sup> Theology should not be pursued and taught with casual flippancy. It is

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<sup>5</sup> Eunomianism was a fourth-century heresy, which denied the divinity of the Son, and taught that the Son was instead a created being.

<sup>6</sup> *Oration 27*, §1.

<sup>7</sup> *Oration 27*, §2.

<sup>8</sup> *Oration 27*, §2.

<sup>9</sup> *Oration 27*, §9.

<sup>10</sup> *Oration 27*, §9.

<sup>11</sup> *Oration 27*, §3.

rather for those “who have been tested and have found a sound footing in study, and, more importantly, have undergone, or at the very least are undergoing, purification of body and soul.”<sup>12</sup> Without this kind of purification, the kind of theological discussion Gregory has in mind here is akin to staring directly at the sun without prior adjustment: “For one who is not pure to lay hold of pure things is dangerous, just as it is for weak eyes to look at the sun’s brightness.”<sup>13</sup> It is striking that Gregory goes out of his way to say that undergoing purification of body and soul is *more important* of a prerequisite for discussing theology in this way than the demonstration of sound footing in study. This should not be seen as a denigration of the importance of study, but as rather the elevation of virtue’s importance in theology.

We should bear in mind that by “discussion of theology,” Gregory does not mean to signify all questions and clarifications about God—as if to say, no one is fit to ask questions about God or think about God until having been tested and purified (indeed, the process of testing *positively requires* some kind of imperfect, raw discussion of God—working through difficult and uneducated questions of God is how one is educated to begin with). Gregory goes out of his way to clarify that he does *not* mean to prohibit all thoughts of God in this sweeping way.<sup>14</sup> By “discussion of theology,” Gregory seems to have a kind of hubris instructive declaration in mind. These discussions need not be in a formal teaching setting to apply to what Gregory is talking about (though this may be the case), he simply means the kind of discussion that presumes to propagate ill-considered opinions about God as if they were true.

If this is the case, what *are* the appropriate circumstances for discussing theology? Gregory addresses this query by asking and answering three questions: *what is the right time, who should listen, and what aspects of theology should be discussed?* In answer to the first question, Gregory writes, “Whenever we are free from the mire and noise without, and our commanding faculty is not confused by illusory, wandering images, leading us, as it were, to mix fine script with ugly scrawling, or sweet-smelling scent with slime.”<sup>15</sup> For Gregory, there is a kind of posture that is befitting for theological discussions, and it might

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<sup>12</sup>Oration 27, §3.

<sup>13</sup>Oration 27, §3.

<sup>14</sup>“Yet I am not maintaining that we ought not to be mindful of God at all times—my adversaries, ever ready and quick to attack, need not pounce on me again. It is more important that we should remember God than that we should breathe: indeed, if one may say so, we should do nothing else besides . . . by this mindfulness [we will] be molded to purity. So it is not continual remembrance of God I seek to discourage, but continual discussion of theology.” Oration 27, §4.

<sup>15</sup>Oration 27, §3.

be characterized as the antithesis of flippancy: Reverence. Other matters (“ugly scrawling”) should be pushed aside, so that theology (“fine script”) might be given one’s fullest attention. This is made clear in his response to the second question. *Who should listen to discussions of theology?* Gregory answers, “Those for whom it is a serious undertaking, not just another subject like any other for entertaining small-talk, after the races, the theater, songs, food, and sex: for there are people who count chatter on theology and clever deployment of arguments as one of their amusements.”<sup>16</sup> This is close to the heart of Gregory’s critique in this oration as a whole: opinions on the theater and songs and food may be of no significant consequence, but this is not the case with opinions on God. It is not a common subject, and should therefore not be discussed as if it were. Theological discussions should be consecrated—they should be set aside and given reverent attention. This should not be taken as a kind of haughty high-brow disrespect for common people. Indeed, Gregory is coming from a place of deep care and respect to all listeners of theology; he is not trying to keep theological discussions only among the highly educated and elite, he is rather concerned with making sure that ordinary people are not misled by irreverent teachers, a point made clear by his answer to the third question. *What aspects of theology should be investigated, and to what limit?* Gregory answers, “Only aspects within our grasp, and only to the limit of the experience and capacity of our audience.”<sup>17</sup>

Once this principle of making sure that the audience is appropriately accounted for in theological discussions is established, Gregory moves back to consider the internal condition of the theologian. “Once we have removed from our discussion all alien elements, and dispatched the great legion into the heard of swine to rush down into the abyss, the next step to take is to look at ourselves and to smooth the theologian in us, like a statue, into beauty.”<sup>18</sup> The imagery here is striking: Gregory imagines the theologian as a slab of stone or marble that is sculpted into a beautiful statue by way of chiseling away sin and impurity. This is not a passive process for Gregory. He envisions intense self-scrutiny in the process of consecrating oneself for the sacred activity of theological contemplation. “What,” he asks, “is this alarming disease, this appetite that can never be sated? Why do we keep our hands tied and our tongues armed?”<sup>19</sup> This—the condition of having one’s “hands tied and tongue armed”—is a tragedy, for Gregory. It is not fitting for one to be free in theological musings apart from a virtuous life. For

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<sup>16</sup>Oration 27, §3.

<sup>17</sup>Oration 27, §3.

<sup>18</sup>Oration 27, §7.

<sup>19</sup>Oration 27, §7.

Gregory, the work of theology is inextricably tied to acts of hospitality, “brotherly love, wifely affection, virginity, feeding the poor, singing psalms, night-long vigils, penitence,” the mortification of the body with fasting, prayer (by which we “take up our abode with God”), the subordination of inferior elements (the nature of dust) to the better (the spirit), the meditation of death, the “mastery over our passions, mindful of the nobility of our second birth,” the taming of “our swollen and inflamed tongues,” and the resistance of “pride . . . unreasonable grief . . . crude pleasures . . . dirty laughter . . . undisciplined eyes . . . greedy ears . . . immoderate talk . . . wondering thoughts” and “anything in ourselves which the Evil One can take over from us and use against us.”<sup>20</sup>

For Gregory, the work of the theologian is the attendance to all these matters. There is a clear connection between faithful theological contemplations and faithful living. Gregory will accept no separation between the life of piety and the life of the mind for the theologian worthy of the name.

### **Theological Contemplation as Participation in the Divine Mind**

It could be fair at this juncture to retort back to Gregory, “Says who?” After all, this kind of holistic insistence on marrying godly conduct and contemplation of God is by no means intuitive for those of us who live in the “malaise of modernity.”<sup>21</sup> On this very concept, John Webster notes how the “philosophical instinct [of most modern institutions] leads us to assert that the rationality which scholarship requires is independent of character and conviction. What it requires is, rather, the unhindered exercise of innate capacities for the exercise of reason.”<sup>22</sup> Webster goes on to say that

one influential understanding of education works with an ideal of ‘indifference,’ in two senses. First, the teacher may not impose a way of life and the student may not expect to be encouraged to adopt any particular vision of the world. And second, therefore, education has done its job when the student has learned the skills of critical appraisal of the particular, of ‘difference,’ by reference to reason’s universal norms.<sup>23</sup>

It is not unusual, in other words, for us to refrain from expecting piety from our

<sup>20</sup>*Oration 27, §7.*

<sup>21</sup>This phrase is famously coined by Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

<sup>22</sup>John Webster, *The Culture of Theology*, Ivor J. Davidson and Alden C. McCray, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 134.

<sup>23</sup>Webster, *Culture of Theology*, 135.

theologians, so long as they demonstrate that they have appropriate intellectual chops. Is Gregory correct, or are modern bifurcations of piety versus theology preferable for academic purposes? Essential for answering this question is the task of determining the nature of the theologian's subject matter. If theology is true to its name, God is the object of the theologian's contemplation, and his ubiquitous and holy presence rules out the possibility of thinking about him well without loving and fearing him (cf., Isa 6:1–5).

Reflecting on the nature of Psalm 14:1 (“The fool says in his heart, ‘there is no God.’”),<sup>24</sup> Christopher Holmes asks, “How do we avoid foolishness in favor of the great I AM? What kind of moral and spiritual program is necessary to speak of God as self-subsisting, as one for whom existence is not an attribute but a noun? How may we imitate the great I AM?” Holmes's answer is *not* strictly intellectual: “The reason the fool is mistaken as to God's existence is that his heart is cold and his soul callous. Lack of piety—that is the problem.”<sup>25</sup> This is consistent with what David says about the fool's unbelief in Psalm 14:3, “They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one.” Holmes goes on to say, “The fool's problems are not only intellectual. They are also spiritual and moral. It is because he is wicked that he does not believe that God exists.”<sup>26</sup>

By contrast, “those who are virtuous will not entertain improper notions about God's nature, as does the fool.”<sup>27</sup> Holmes goes on to say, “Our journey in this life is (hopefully) toward purity. Without purity of heart, it is impossible to speak truthfully of God.”<sup>28</sup> Why the impossibility? Because God is simple. His essence is identical with his existence, and his holiness is not therefore a part or aspect of him. Rather, he *is* holy. This is not merely a concept that one can accurately consider in the abstract because it is anything but an abstraction: holiness is what God is, and it cannot but burn away the dross of vice.

God's holiness, by virtue of what it is, *consumes*. In other words, to approach the holy one in any capacity (including intellectually) is to approach the one who is a Consuming Fire (Heb 12:29)—there is no approaching him without experiencing the heat of his holiness. Increasingly experiencing this heat is progressive sanctification: the believer is *holy-fied*. That which can be burnt up in the believer

<sup>24</sup> All Scripture quotations were taken from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).

<sup>25</sup> Christopher R.J. Holmes, *A Theology of the Christian Life: Imitating and Participating in God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 8.

<sup>26</sup> Holmes, *A Theology*, 8.

<sup>27</sup> Holmes, *A Theology*, 8.

<sup>28</sup> Holmes, *A Theology*, 8.

who approaches the presence of God. Virtue, for us, is the creaturely corollary to God's own holiness. "To be virtuous," says Holmes, "is to participate in God; to be virtuous is to trust in Christ—to appropriate Paul's confession, 'it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me' (Gal 2:20)—and thus be made virtuous in him through the Spirit."<sup>29</sup>

Of course, the chasm between the Creator and the creature, ontologically speaking, will never be traversed. Theologians will never cease to be creatures. They will enjoy the bliss of participation in the infinite God in an ever-increasing sense: *further up and further in*, without ever being swallowed up or annihilated by God, and also never exhausting God. The theologian is a finite creature, whose capacity for enjoyment with God will perpetually grow so as to enjoy more of him, but will never exhaust him—for the infinite cannot be circumscribed by the finite. This process of *holy-fication* will never end because God's holiness is ineffably infinite. Holmes is right to say that

We who desire God will never be satiated. Because God is infinite, we shall never become bored with God or so resemble God that we cease to seek and hunger after him. Accordingly, the manner of God's existence has consequences all the way down, doctrinally speaking.<sup>30</sup>

Simply put, God's own nature does not give us the option of contemplating him rightly in a compartmentalized sense, wherein we consider him with accuracy intellectually but with cold hearts and impure hands that are distant from him. To the degree that we contemplate God rightly, we are participating in his divine mind—we are thinking God's thoughts after him—which is so holy that it cannot do anything but make that which is in its presence increasingly holy as well. "The Father and Son promise to come to us," notes Holmes,

Their names—most especially their love—become ours through faith. What is common to them by nature is and will become common to us by grace. Grace . . . makes us virtuous. The virtues of God make us virtuous, spiritual. *What has primacy from the point of view of theology—God—has primacy from the point of view of devotion.*<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Holmes, *A Theology*, 22.

<sup>30</sup>Holmes, *A Theology*, 24. Holmes will go on to say in another place, "We will never finish with God. A God who is all that he is—such a God is supremely worthy of an eternity of devotion. So great is his glory that the more we become worthy of him by taking up the cross of Christ, the more we sense God's extraordinary grandeur. We shall see, but only as creatures, creatures that are God, yes, but only by participation" (31).

<sup>31</sup>Holmes, *A Theology*, 26 (Emphasis added).



In other words, to know God is to participate in his self-knowledge, and this self-knowledge is holy. Our manner of knowing him, therefore, must be virtuous if it is in any way to be genuine.<sup>32</sup> It is therefore “impossible” to “speak truthfully and lovingly of the perfect God without our lives imitating and sharing in the divine nature.”<sup>33</sup> This is why Webster notes that “the flourishing of the theological culture of Christian faith requires, among other things, the cultivation of persons: good theology demands good theologians.”<sup>34</sup>

While this point is profound, it need not be overly complicated. Jesus makes this point plainly in John 15:14–15 when he connects “friendship with him” to “obedience.” In a very real way, when Jesus responds to the pleading of those strangers on the last day, “I never knew you, depart from me” (Matt 7:21–23), it would be fair for us to summarize him as saying, “*You were not my friend, depart from me.*” This does not mean that we must befriend Jesus *by* our acts of obedience, however, as if to say that Jesus befriends us *because* we obey him. We are not attracting him to us by our obedience. Holmes is right when he notes, “We do not call Jesus our friend, but he does, remarkably, call us his friends.”<sup>35</sup> “In this is love,” says the apostle John, “not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 Jn 4:10). But Holmes is also right to go on to say, “We are his friends, however, only if we obey, and to obey him is to love him and our neighbor in him.”<sup>36</sup> Our loving obedience to Christ, in other words, bespeaks our friendship with Christ. There is no knowing God truly without being his friend, and there is no friendship with God where there is no virtue. Holmes, again,

The divine virtues by which God directs us to himself enable us to speak of him. Virtue is the path that the doctrine must take. These virtues are not a secondary dimension to the doctrine of God but the means by which God moves us to himself in order that we may not speak falsely about him.<sup>37</sup>

In this way, Holmes is confirming—with further theological reasoning—what Gregory states as axiomatic: a flippant and impure manner of theologizing

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<sup>32</sup>“Our participation in the God who is at once immanent to us and transcendent of us,” says Holmes, “is explained by the soul’s elevation into God’s self-knowledge. We strive to know God in line with God’s own knowledge of himself.” Holmes, *A Theology*, 31–2.

<sup>33</sup>Holmes, *A Theology*, 44.

<sup>34</sup>Webster, *Culture of Theology*, 131.

<sup>35</sup>Holmes, *A Theology*, 97.

<sup>36</sup>Holmes, *A Theology*, 97.

<sup>37</sup>Holmes, *A Theology*, 127.

will end in error by necessity. Such theologizing cannot avoid error. The reason why this kind of theologizing so often leads to heresy (as in the case of the Eunomians) is that *it is itself heretical*. It is, specifically, heretical in a *Trinitarian* sense. This kind of theologizing, wherein the theologian talks about knowing God without loving him, detaches “the Word from the Spirit, the love of the Father for the Son and the Son for the Father.”<sup>38</sup> “Just as the intellectual and affective are one in God,” says Holmes, “may they be one in us.”<sup>39</sup> In other words, to theologize in such a way that detaches intellectual contemplation of God from a pure (i.e., virtuous) love of God is to function as if the Holy Spirit (Love) is separable from the Son (Word) and Father. But the Trinity is undivided: to worship the “One God in Trinity and Trinity in unity” is a holistic pursuit.<sup>40</sup> Thus, Holmes concludes his work in this way:

One cannot consider the sublime truths of God without being engaged by them. There is no room for objective detachment. God cannot be understood without being loved. . . . Description of God is a moral and spiritual undertaking. We make claims about God’s nature, being, and manner of being. And yet we make them within the context of prayerful attentiveness to Jesus Christ and his fulfillment of the promises made to Israel. . . . There is no place for moral and spiritual laxity here.<sup>41</sup>

“Good theologians,” notes Webster, “are those whose life and thought are caught up in the process of being slain and made alive by the gospel and of acquiring and exercising habits of mind and heart which take very seriously the gospel’s provocation.”<sup>42</sup>

If all this is true, we should expect to find a tight correlation in the Scriptures between godly living and sound doctrine. And this is precisely what we find, particularly in Paul’s pastoral epistles. It is not for nothing that the qualifications for ecclesial leadership that Paul offers in these letters primarily involves one’s living up to ethical standards (1 Tim 3:1–13; Tit 1:5–9). In his First Epistle to Timothy, Paul reminds Timothy of his charge to remain in Ephesus so that he might “charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith” (1 Tim 1:3–4). This charge is simple

<sup>38</sup> Holmes, *A Theology*, 129

<sup>39</sup> Holmes, *A Theology*, 129.

<sup>40</sup> The Athanasian Creed.

<sup>41</sup> Holmes, *A Theology*, 156.

<sup>42</sup> Webster, *Culture of Theology*, 133.

enough, and it clearly has a doctrinal emphasis. However, Paul does not separate this charge from its aim, which is “love that issues from a *pure heart* and a good conscience and sincere faith” (1 Tim 1:5, emphasis added). He goes on to contrast “sound doctrine” not with *erroneous* doctrine, but with ungodly conduct (1 Tim 1:9–11). This interweaving between discussions of doctrine and conduct carries on throughout the entirety of this Epistle, and the image that emerges is clear: godly conduct coheres with sound doctrine, and ungodly conduct coheres with false teaching—to pursue sound doctrine *is* to pursue godliness, and vice versa.

Much of the same emphasis is on display in Paul’s Second Letter to Timothy as well. The close of chapter two joins (a) charges to avoid sin and (b) erroneous doctrine in a single sweep, so that the distinction between one and the other almost requires the reader to separate what Paul joins together (2 Tim 2:22–26). This theme is also alive and well in Paul’s Letter to Titus, whose instruction regarding virtuous living was famously contrasted with Cretan culture (cf., Tit 1:12–14). He will go to say explicitly that godly conduct *adorns* “the doctrine of God our Savior” (Tit 2:9).

A striking example of this principle at work in a negative way is found in Jude. While Jude initially planned to write to his audience to revel in “our common salvation,” he was compelled to write an apologetic defense of the faith in light of erroneous teaching, which had “crept in unnoticed” (Jude 3–4). The exact content of this false doctrine is unclear (though we can at least surmise that the teaching trafficked in a kind of hyper-charismatic dependence on “dreams,” per Jude 8). Regardless of the false teachings’ *content*, Jude is explicit about its effects: the doctrine perverts “the grace of our God into sensuality” (Jude 4; cf., 5–7). The false teaching served as a pretense for sexual immorality, and thus the departure of godly conduct and the departure of godly living went, for Jude’s audience, hand in hand. In these examples and others, we see that the New Testament corroborates Gregory’s central insistence: theological contemplation and the commitment to hold to sound theology cannot be separated from the pursuit of holy living. To lose one is necessarily to lose the other.

### **The Theologian as a Gift to the Church**

In considering the theologian’s formation of virtue, there are several habits we could consider (i.e., meditation, fasting, solitude, prayer), but here I wish to consider the theologian in relationship to the corporate body of Christ. The reason is that local church involvement can serve as a concrete expression of the divergent visions of piety described above. The academic theologian who sharply distinguishes between his professional vocation and his life of holiness may or may

not faithfully participate in ecclesial body life; such participation is accidental to his vocation. This is not so for the theologian who embodies Gregory's vision of a consecrated life. So, in light of everything we have established above, what implications are left regarding the theologian's place in the local church? To the degree that obeying Christ and loving him involves a corporate and ecclesial dimension, the theologian *must* attend to his place in the church. After all, there is a reason why Gregory's reflections on theology and a consecrated life in *Oration 27* were delivered in a *sermon*. There stood Gregory, the under-shepherd of Christ's flock, soberly warning against the treachery of following wolves.

In a very real sense, even asking the question of the theologian's place in the local church is a novelty that would have struck the earliest Christians as odd. The Christian life has an irreducibly corporate and communal shape. A Christian is one who is baptized by the Spirit into "one body" (1 Cor 12:5), delivered "from the domain of darkness," transferred into "the dominion of [God's] beloved Son" (Col 1:13), and a "living stone" who is, together with other Christians, being "built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet 2:4–5). In fact, the majority of the New Testament is written with instructions, not to *individual Christians*, but to local churches and their leaders for corporate instruction. In other words, to be an actual recipient of the New Testament's teaching, one must be positioned in the church, alongside other believers. This is evident from the many "one another" commands (love, exhort, rebuke, bear the burdens of, show patience and longsuffering toward, teach, admonish, rejoice with, weep with, etc.). These commands, which constitute a *massive* portion of the Christian life, can *only be followed* in a corporate, communal sense.

To be a Christian is to be a member of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic church. God is in the business of binding and loosening *in heaven*. But how does that which is bound and loosened in heaven become bound and loosened on earth? Who is responsible for declaring and legitimizing the new member's status in the Universal church? To whom does Christ hand his keys to the kingdom, to bind and loosen on earth that which is bound and loosened in heaven (Matt 16:18–19, 18:15–20)? Local churches.<sup>43</sup> The Universal church is made visible in

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<sup>43</sup> For brevity's sake, we must assume a lot here about the nature of ecclesiology. While I am not providing an adequate and thorough defense of what I say here about the relationship between the local and Universal church, such defenses have been provided elsewhere. E.g., see, Jonathan Leeman, *Political Church: The Local Assembly as Embassy of Christ's Rule* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016) and Greg Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012). For more popular articulations of the ecclesiology endorsed here, see Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2012); Dever and Jonathan Leeman,

local churches, and in *only* local churches (i.e., academic institutions cannot wield the keys to the kingdom). Her members are certainly present all over the planet, but one cannot *see* her until local churches gather. The concept of “church,” in other words, remains phantasmal and ghostly until “incarnated” and materialized with bodies, bread, wine, water, and Word.

Again, the relevance all this has on the theologian’s place in the local church may not be intuitive to many of us.<sup>44</sup> But this lack of intuition simply reveals how enmeshed the Cartesian ideal of contemplation has become in our institutional understanding of the theologian’s task.<sup>45</sup> The story of how the academy and the church became disjointed is a colorful one that goes beyond the scope of this paper, but regardless of how we arrived at this current state of affairs, the fact remains that “the Christian scholar” does not immediately conjure up the idea of a churchman in the imaginations of evangelicals today.<sup>46</sup> But if what it means to be a “Christian” is necessarily oriented by ecclesiology, this must apply to the theologian, who dons himself to be a *teacher* of God for the *people* of God. He must understand himself as conducting his work within *this* context; what Webster describes as the “culture of theology.” The church is

a mountain, the foundation of the new order; a heavenly city; an assembly. It is place, structure, and society, but place, structure, and society transformed beyond mere tangible locality by the fact that at

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eds. *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Institutional Age* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2015); Bobby Jamieson, *Going Public: Why Baptism Is Required for Church Membership* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group); and Jonathan Leeman, *Don't Fire Your Church Members: The Case for Congregationalism* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016).

<sup>44</sup>For example, Dănuț Jemna and Dănuț Mănăstireanu, argue that the bifurcation between academy and church-life is not necessarily a bad thing. The primary benefit they point to is the possibility of facilitating ecumenical dialogue between the Evangelical and Orthodox traditions in Romania. See Jemna and Mănăstireanu, “When the Gap between Academic Theology and the Church Makes Possible the Orthodox-Evangelical Dialogue.” *Religions*, (12)4, (2021): 274.

<sup>45</sup>This Enlightenment anthropology is far flatter and reductionistic than the classical and biblical model, which has been ably retrieved recently by Matthew LaPine, *The Logic of the Body: Retrieving Theological Psychology* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020).

<sup>46</sup>For more on the historical development of this separation between church and academy, see Gerald L. Hiestand, “Pastor-Scholar to Professor-Scholar: Exploring the Theological Disconnect Between the Academy and the Local Church” in *Westminster Journal of Theology* 70 (2008): 355–69; Gerald L. Hiestand and Todd Wilson, *The Pastor Theologian: Resurrecting an Ancient Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015); Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Owen Strachan, *The Pastor as Public Theologian: Reclaiming a Lost Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 69–93. Additionally, though not the topic of the work *per se*, this bifurcation is powerfully illustrated by Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson in their work, *Twentieth-Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1992).

its center is the living God, the judge, Jesus himself. The Christian community lives, acts, and suffers in *this* space—a space constituted by the personal rule and authoritative speech of Jesus.<sup>47</sup>

This makes the theologian, by definition, accountable not only to the Christian tradition, but the *living* Christian tradition manifested in the form of the local church. The theologian must think of himself as one of the gifts with which Christ has filled his church, as described by the Apostle Paul:

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and *teachers*, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, *for building up the body of Christ*, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. (Eph 4:11–14)

To the degree that theologians rightly conceptualize themselves as “teachers,” Paul has informed them of their telos in no uncertain terms: they are given to the church by Christ himself *for building up his body*. Whatever genuine theological insights they have gained in their studies are gifts that God has given to them with the express purpose of distributing to the body. This work of building up the body of Christ, which is central to the very identity of the theologian, he cannot perform from a distance. Christ fills his church with the gift of leaders (including theologians) who bless the church, as it were, *from the inside*. The theologian who does *not* make it his central ambition to build up the church finds himself in a Samson-like position: having been given by Yahweh to Christ’s Israel for her deliverance and protection and benefit, he selfishly pursues his own gratification, benefiting those he was assigned to only when it is convenient for him, when their needs overlap with his selfish pursuits (cf., Judg 13–16). But his (theological) strength does not exist for himself, and he should not behave as if it did.

This means that the typical way of conceptualizing theological transmission in terms of a superstructure that resembles an assembly line is erroneous. Such a vision of theological transmission may look something like this: at one end of the line are *textual critics and exegetes*, who lay foundational work from the text of Scripture itself. They are answerable to, and indebted to, no one but

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<sup>47</sup>Webster, *Culture of Theology*, 56.

the text. The next figures on the assembly line are the *biblical theologians*, who work with the resources the exegetes provide to outline canonical theology, which develops progressively over the span of Scripture. Further down, past the biblical theologians are the *systematicians*—who systematize the findings of the biblical theologians in dogmatic fashion—*philosophical theologians*—who provide philosophical articulations of systematic teaching to resource Christian thought in the world—and *historical theologians*—who bring the testimony of church history to bear on a given theological topic. The *pastor-theologian* occupies a place on the far end of the assembly line. He plays the role of the generalist, distributing the best of all previous figures to the *members of the local church*. Such is a common conception of how these different figures relate to one another in the transmission of theology within the Christian community.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>This particular picture is one that was delivered by Owen Strachan in an address to a group of PhD students at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in January, 2019, but its general sentiment can be seen elsewhere. Indeed, it seems to be assumed in the way disciplines are often sharply segregated from one another. Specialization, for all its value, tends to foster a myopia in this setting that prevents practitioners from recognizing an important, though oft forgotten reality: the dividing walls of disciplines are not fixed laws of nature but are erected by philosophies. In this landscape, the default approach to the OT, for example, assumes that fairness to the discipline requires consideration of other disciplines (e.g., NT studies or dogmatics) be relegated to the position of mere application; they *may not* function, methodologically, in the hermeneutic used to interpret the OT. E.g., Köstenberger and Patterson write, “unlike systematic theology, which tends to be abstract and topical in nature, biblical theology aims to understand a given passage of Scripture in its original setting.” Andreas J. Köstenberger and Richard Duane Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation: Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011), 698. They go on to say in a footnote (Köstenberger and Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation*, 698 n9, emphasis added), “We hasten to add that *once exegesis and biblical theology have done their work*, systematic theology certainly has a place.” Likewise, D. A. Carson writes, “Biblical theology tends to seek out the rationality and communicative genius of each literary genre; systematic theology tends to integrate the diverse rationalities in its pursuit of a large-scale, worldview-forming synthesis. In this sense, systematic theology tends to be a culminating discipline; biblical theology, though it is a worthy end in itself, tends to be a bridge discipline.” D. A. Carson, “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 103. This Carson says after explaining that both “systematic theology and biblical theology enjoy a common base of authority, viz. canonical Scripture” (Carson, “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” 102). This is interesting precisely because the authoritative hermeneutical principle “canon” is a product of systematic theology, which would seem to undermine the sequential construction (first hermeneutics, then systematics). Kevin Vanhoozer, “Exegesis and Hermeneutics,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 63, makes this precise point: “In short, neither exegesis nor biblical theology is possible apart from explicitly theological presuppositions, assumptions about the nature and identity of God.” “Systematic and Biblical Theology,” 102. Carson, it should be noted, acknowledges the inevitability of what Vanhoozer says, though it is not clear from his description how self-consciously the reader should let his theology inform his hermeneutic: “Although in terms of authority status there needs to be an

Far more preferable to this conception of theological transmission is to think of all these roles as existing within a broad *ecosystem* of theologizing. And like any “ecosystem,” it flourishes when there is a lot of cross-pollination. The relationships between these figures are not (or rather, *ought not be*) simply those of benefactor and beneficiary, as if the exegete stands to benefit the biblical theologian without the biblical theologian having anything significant to offer the exegete. The relationships are symbiotic. The philosophical theologian should look to the biblical theologian for resources. He should also *give* the biblical theologian resources. The exegete who labors over the textual variants in the Bible has a conception of *what the Bible is* (i.e., the inspired word of God) thanks to the systematician. At the same time, the systematician has textual findings with which to work in articulating dogma thanks to the exegete. This reciprocation works all the way up and all the way down. The pastor-theologian benefits the flock under his care with biblical wisdom. He is their shepherd. But he is also a sheep; an *under-shepherd* who stands with fellow sheep under the care of the Great Shepherd of the sheep, Jesus Christ (Heb 13:20). And standing right *there*, under the care of his Good Shepherd, the under-shepherd is not only expected to resource his flock, but he is also expected to *be resourced* by them. He and his Spirit-filled congregation are to “one-another” each other. The lay church member needs the biblical theologian and the exegete. The biblical theologian and exegete also need the lay church member.

Therefore, while it may be appropriate to say that pastors are accountable to the findings of scholars who help to “define the edges” of sound exegesis and historical orthodoxy, such scholars cannot define those edges as untethered pontificators. Their work is not to build fences for sheep pins in an open field so that pastors might fill them with their church members; it is rather to identify the fences *from within the pin—as fellow sheep alongside fellow church members*. The responsibility of safeguarding the structural integrity of those fences is a responsibility bequeathed to the entire church. And it will take the entire church—scholar and Sunday school teacher alike—to fulfill this responsibility.

To put the matter frankly, the church’s theological ecosystem does not *need* the exegetical work of a biblical scholar who is not under the submission of a local church pastor, or the dogmatic work of a systematician who is unconcerned with church history, or the biblical theologian who is not conscious

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outward-tracing line from Scripture through exegesis towards biblical theology to systematic theology . . . in reality, various ‘back loops’ are generated, each discipline influencing the others, and few disciplines influencing the other more than does systematic theology, precisely because it is so worldview forming” (“Systematic and Biblical Theology,” 102).



of the philosophical presuppositions turning the cogs in his methodology, etc. Such scholars cannot function properly in the theological ecosystem of the church. Untethered scholarship is unhealthy—not only for the scholars themselves but for the countless saints that untethered scholarship affects downstream. The theologian must pursue holiness in his theological task, and this pursuit is, in a very real way, a community project. He cannot theologize well without loving God, and he cannot love God well without becoming holy in his obedient pursuit of virtue, and he cannot become holy in his obedient pursuit of virtue in an isolated fashion, detached from the community of Christ's saints.

### **Karl Barth and the Theological Handicap of Tolerated Sin**

As an illustrative example of the importance of virtuous consecration in the theological task, we may examine Karl Barth, with particular attention to his adulterous relationship with Charlotte von Kirschbaum (1899–1975), as a cautionary tale. If what we have learned from Gregory above holds up, we must insist that Barth's theological contemplation was handicapped by his long-term, high-handed unfaithfulness to his marriage vows in the sight of God. Gregory would insist that it is not possible for such blatant disobedience to have no impact on the fidelity of one's theological contemplations. So, with sober humility, in the spirit of Galatians 6:1 (“... keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted”) we *must* insist on Barth's marital unfaithfulness entering into the equation when we assess his theology. This we must do even while we insist on eschewing the slightest hint of smug judgmentalism—after all, what do we have that we did not receive by grace (cf., 1 Cor 4:7)?

It is important to be explicit, however, about what we can and cannot say. On the one hand, we must resist the temptation to psychologize Barth from a distance in a reductionistic way. As if to say, “Barth's affair with von Kirschbaum effected his theology in such and such precise manner: because of his affair, he held *this* belief.” To reason in such a way is to fall victim to the same modernistic rationalism we have been raging against in this paper, which treats theology as a merely intellectual exercise. If it were that easy to determine how erroneous beliefs are derived from sinful behavior, it would be possible to correct those beliefs purely in the abstract, regardless of behavior. The contaminating nature of sin is complex and mysterious. On the other hand, we are not consigned to absolute silence when considering Barth's vice in relation to his theology. This is because Barth himself was not silent in his private correspondence with von Kirschbaum about how he conceptualized their affair from a theological perspective.

In her article, “Karl Barth and Charlotte von Kirschbaum,” Christiane Tietz

does a thorough job at summarizing the history of Barth's unfaithful relationship with von Kirschbaum.<sup>49</sup> What becomes clear from reading the account is that Barth and von Kirschbaum walked into their ungodly conduct with eyes wide open, and yet Barth repeatedly writes as if he were passively acted upon. For example, shortly after Barth meets von Kirschbaum and develops feelings for her, he chooses to write her informing her of his feelings (“... yes, out with it, it's no use, it is just so: because I as well am very fond of you, 'more than I can think'”).<sup>50</sup> We should think about the open-eyed intentionality required to take out stationary, write a letter, post it for delivery, and deliver it. Barth has to willfully make several active choices just to get this message into Kirschbaum's hands.

Yet according to Barth, he was under obligation to make this crucial step and write such a fateful letter: “. . . when in our conversation it again became so clear how perfectly and naturally we suit each other, the situation was so insincere to me that I *needed* to indicate what I saw.”<sup>51</sup> Of course, he “*needed*” to do nothing of the kind, but this kind of self-acquittal of responsibility shows up all throughout his letters. He refers to his unfaithfulness to his wife, Nelly, not as unfaithfulness, but as an “incident.”<sup>52</sup> And *after* striking up a frank correspondence with von Kirschbaum, wherein their feelings for one another are freely confessed, he hires her to work as his secretary and thereby holds the fire ever-closer to his chest (Prov 6:27).<sup>53</sup> As time progresses with von Kirschbaum living with Barth and his family, tensions in the home continually compounded. Nelly was thrust into a depression, and at one point even threatened Barth with an ultimatum: either von Kirschbaum moves out of the house or they pursue divorce.<sup>54</sup> Barth refused both alternatives, and effectively forced Nelly to remain in a loveless marriage, living in a home with an unfaithful husband and his mistress. He was convinced that he could not avoid a “certain *double* life.”<sup>55</sup>

This euphemistic manner of conceptualizing his cruelty toward Nelly and disregard of divine law came with an explicitly theological dimension. Indeed, Barth readily admits that his actions impacted how dogmatic he allowed himself to be. “A strange consequence of our ‘*experience*’” says Barth, “will be that my

<sup>49</sup> Christiane Tietz, “Karl Barth and Charlotte von Kirschbaum.” *Theology Today*, vol. 74(2), (2017): 86–111.

<sup>50</sup> Letter from Barth, quoted in Tietz, “Karl Barth,” 93.

<sup>51</sup> Tietz, “Karl Barth,” 93.

<sup>52</sup> Tietz, “Karl Barth,” 94.

<sup>53</sup> Tietz, “Karl Barth,” 96.

<sup>54</sup> Tietz, “Karl Barth,” 100.

<sup>55</sup> Tietz, “Karl Barth,” 97.

seminar this summer about the recent history of theology will turn out much more lenient, merciful, cautious than it would have been the case otherwise!”<sup>56</sup> In a telling paragraph, Tietz summarizes:

Barth interprets his own situation theologically as standing in *tension* between “order” and that which “has come upon us unintentionally out of the mysterious-guilty depth of the human,” between “the holiness of the command,” and “that you [von Kirschbaum] and I (I don’t know on which level) are together,” between the right and the natural event. Barth also stands in the tension between “the shadow of guilt and suffering and renunciation” and a “*right* to each other which is difficult to outline” and which leads to joy. Barth is convinced: “it cannot just be the devil’s work, it *must* have some meaning and a right to live, that we, no, I will only talk about me: that I love you and do not see any chance to stop this.” Barth has the feeling that somehow God did this and speaks of “the *two* [Nelly and Charlotte] who are ordained to me.”<sup>57</sup>

According to Barth, the pious option is to remain in the tension between the revealed commands of God’s Word and the assumed ordination of God in his love for von Kirschbaum. It could not possibly be that God intends for him to deny his affections for a woman that is not his wife—even though this seems to be what the Scriptures clearly teach—and so he concludes that God has purposes to keep him in this tension: refusing to divorce his wife, and refusing to deprive himself of his relationship with von Kirschbaum. “Thus I stand before the eyes of God, *without being able to escape from him* in one or the other way.”<sup>58</sup> God, according to Barth, has placed him in an impossible dilemma, wherein the closest thing to obedience, and the most pious option, is to stay in an adulterous relationship.

Even before we speculate about the impact this line of thinking may or may not have had on Barth’s theology as a whole, we may look at this rationale itself as a prime example of sin’s blinding effect. The misery of Barth’s situation shows itself to be unnecessary from the hindsight vantage point of his own life. For example, after von Kirschbaum’s health degenerates and she is forced to move out of their house, Barth’s relationship with Nelly begins to flourish again, showing that the interpersonal conflict in his marriage was not fateful, but was rather, in part, a consequence of his infidelity. But even apart from these circumstan-

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<sup>56</sup>Tietz, “Karl Barth,” 108.

<sup>57</sup>Tietz, “Karl Barth,” 108–9.

<sup>58</sup>Tietz, “Karl Barth,” 110 (Emphasis added).

tial considerations, Barth's miserable "double life" was obviously unnecessary in light of any fair assessment of theology. For example, it is as clear a theological conclusion as any that "it is impossible for God to lie" (Heb 6:18). And yet, Barth's toleration of sin had a stupefying result that led him to imagine God did just this—God, Barth imagines, willed simultaneously for him to piously remain "faithful" (i.e., stay married to Nelly) while impiously remaining unfaithful (i.e., maintain in his adulterous relationship with Charlotte). What, save sin, could reduce the thinking of such a brilliant scholar to such pitiful inconsistency? Sin, evidently, kept Barth from seeing God aright (in this area of God's will, at the very least).

Apart from this, there are other ways Barth's theology may have been affected by his affair as well. Stephen J. Plant suggests that the affair "may have been one reason among several that led [Barth] to abandon the binary oppositions of dialectic theology."<sup>59</sup> The currency of such a theology was "either/or," "the choice for or against," notes Plant, and by 1933 (eight years after Barth and von Kirschbaum began to develop their relationship), "Barth told his colleagues that he would no longer participate in" the dialectical theology journal, *Zwischen den Zeiten* ("Between the Times").<sup>60</sup> Plant suggests that Barth was perhaps compelled to abandon his binary model of theologizing since such a model would leave him self-condemned.

Plant also considers the potential theological consequences of Barth's affair with particular interest to Barth's comments on men and women in *Church Dogmatics* III/4. There, Barth writes how

sooner or later each man must discover that in regard to the command of God he is a failure, that measured by it we all belong to the category of fools, bunglers and impious who can only cling to the promise hidden in the command, but who certainly cannot congratulate themselves upon nor live in the strength of its fulfillment.<sup>61</sup>

On this passage from Barth's *Dogmatics*, Plant notes, "If Barth has his own situation at the back of his mind, how hard is he on himself? ... it is difficult to evade the impression, *pace* Romans 3:23, that in arguing that *each* person falls short of the standard of God's law Barth may very gently be letting off the hook one par-

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<sup>59</sup>Stephen J. Plant, "When Karl met Lollo: the origins and consequences of Karl Barth's relationship with Charlotte von Kirschbaum." *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 72(2), (2019): 140.

<sup>60</sup>Plant, "When Karl met Lollo," 140.

<sup>61</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936), III/4, 144.

ticular person.”<sup>62</sup> It would seem, in other words, that Barth may be downplaying the significance of disobedience—and therefore, downplaying the severity of *his own* disobedience—in the name of elevating the grace of God. Since *all men* are “fools, bunglers and impious,” Barth, in regards to his affair, merely finds himself clinging, with every other man, “to the promise hidden in the command.” To the degree that this summary is accurate, Barth would seem to advocate for a way of thinking that Paul explicitly prohibits: “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means!” (Rom 6:1–2a). We might even be so bold as to say that Barth, at least on a private level, falls under Jude’s condemnation of “perverting the grace of God into sensuality and denying our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ” (Jude 4).<sup>63</sup>

We are not here critiquing certain elements of Barth’s theology (i.e., his view of grace, or his non-binary and paradox-embracing method) based *solely* on how he used it (i.e., as a justification for his sin)—we do not *need* to do this, since his theology has been ably criticized long before the widespread discovery of his affair.<sup>64</sup> Our claim here is far more modest. We are insisting that Barth’s high-handed and habitual sin hampered his theological vision because it *could not do otherwise* in light of the nature of theology (as described above), and we are observing one particular instance of a theological handicap, as made clear by his feeble attempt to justify his vice theologically. Was it that Barth’s theology took on a more convincing light because of his sin (i.e., was it believable because it conveniently pampered his sinful appetites), or did his sinful actions compel him to harm his theology by forcing it to do the heavy lifting of justifying sin in a way that was never intended? Is his theology intrinsically deficient in that it justified his infidelity, or did it *become* deficient when he perverted it by employing it to

<sup>62</sup> Plant, “When Karl met Lollo,” 143.

<sup>63</sup> In all of this, we are commenting on Barth’s apparent perversion of God’s *grace*. But the same logic may be pressed, albeit in an even more speculative manner, to other erroneous aspects of Barth’s theology that would put him outside the Great Tradition (such as his vehement rejection of the classical doctrines of divine immutability and impassibility, or his insistence on grounding theology proper in Christology, rather than the other way around—which consequently led to his brand of “theistic personalism.” On these theological novelties, see Tyler R. Wittman, *God and Creation in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2018). Is it the case that these revisions to classical theology made it more conceptually possible to ease his conscience? Again, answering such a question in the affirmative is bound to be hampered by the amount of speculation required to give the answer, which means it should not be a “load bearing” premise to argue for the legitimacy of Gregory’s principle endorsed in this article. But such a conclusion is certainly consistent with the overall argument and that which is clear about Barth and his sin’s impact on his theology.

<sup>64</sup> E.g., see David Gibson and Daniel Strange, eds. *Engaging with Barth: Contemporary Evangelical Critiques* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2009).

justify his infidelity? It may be that we are asking which comes first: the chicken or the egg? In a sense, it does not really matter. The final result is that Barth's theology successfully—in his mind, at least—allowed for him to feign reluctant piety with obviously impious behavior.

Again, the point in all this is not to throw stones at Barth in a spirit of self-righteousness—Barth is not extraordinary in his capacity to sin. Nor are we saying that the only theological works that can be trusted are produced by those free from indwelling sin or sinful behaviors—for then we would necessarily deprive ourselves of any and every theological work that has ever been produced by the hands of fallen creatures (i.e., every theological work that has ever been produced). Rather, we are saying that making peace with habitual sin—the way Barth clearly did, or at least attempted to—cannot but compromise one's theological meditations. This is why Holmes can write, "I have come to appreciate the need to pursue teaching on God in a believing way. If our 'life and conduct' is unworthy, then our thinking will not be worthy of God; our sight will be compromised. . . . Doctrinal learning and progress is not possible without worthiness of life."<sup>65</sup> Barth tragically proves Holmes's point here.<sup>66</sup> He serves as a cautionary tale, and thus encourages us to resolve, along with Holmes, "Let us not embrace sin and thereby stifle learning and progress."<sup>67</sup> And this ties back into our discussion on ecclesiology above, as well. Can we consider Barth a responsibly stewarded "gift to the church" if any local church with even a vestige of ecclesiological health would have excommunicated him for his unrepentant sin? Is not the "exceptional theologian and faithless husband" a contradiction in terms?

## Conclusion

To rightly theologize is to theologize as someone pursuing God with his whole being: one who increasingly knows and increasingly fears and increasingly loves his subject matter. This necessarily requires the sanctifying pursuit of virtue.

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<sup>65</sup>Holmes, *A Theology*, 75.

<sup>66</sup>It is worth mentioning here that in this same work, Holmes himself interacts with Barth at length, even going so far as to have him as a major conversation partner in his chapter, "Virtue and the Christian Life" (*A Theology*, 125–43), without any mention of Barth's affair. This, in my estimation, may amount to the greatest weakness in Holmes's book. In a volume that stresses time and time again the importance of marrying virtuous living with theologian contemplation, Holmes leans on the theological contemplations of Barth, a figure who *clearly* contradicted this central insight in a blatant and high-handed manner. Holmes does not mention the discrepancy between his debt to Barth's contribution to the theme of virtue and Barth's own lack of virtue. This is a major oversight in an otherwise outstanding book.

<sup>67</sup>Holmes, *A Theology*, 75.

Such a pursuit is not a beneficial add-on for the theologian, it is material to his very vocation. The theologian is one who seeks to see God, and Christ has told us plainly that this benefit is reserved for the pure in heart (Matt 5:8). As Gregory has reminded us, this is because seeing the brightness of the sun requires some adjustment of vision: “For one who is not pure to lay hold of pure things is dangerous, just as it is for weak eyes to look at the sun’s brightness.”<sup>68</sup> “Theology,” notes Holmes, “is taken up by persons in various degrees of purity. The greater the degree of virtue, the better is the theology. Theology, as with the Christian life, is a fruit of ‘spiritual sanctification.’ If theology’s goal is to become intimate with the one of whom it speaks, then it must seek the Spirit’s mortification and vivification.”<sup>69</sup> The theologian worthy of the name, then, must attend not only to his doctrine, but also to his life (1 Tim 4:16). Such a life will be irreducibly accountable to the local church and the communal habits that form the virtue of its individual members. Like Dante, he will be eager to forsake his vice on his upward ascent to heaven, steadily moving toward that day when he will say:

I came back from those holiest waters new, remade, reborn, like  
a sun-wakened tree that spreads new foliage to the Spring dew in  
sweetest freshness, healed of Winter’s scars; perfect, pure, and ready  
for the Stars.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> *Oration 27*, §3.

<sup>69</sup> Holmes, *A Theology*, 136.

<sup>70</sup> Dante, *Purgatorio*, Canto XXXIII.142–46.

