Abstract

This paper critically evaluates the suggestion that biblical inerrancy is theologically indefensible in conversation with Karl Barth. For Barth, belief that the Scriptures are errant is a necessity to ensure at least four things: God's sovereign free grace, the true humanity of the prophetic-apostolic witnesses, the supremacy of Christ and the role of faith. Barth's position is established on a number of dogmatic propositions, which are analysed in this paper. After presenting laudable elements in Barth's position, the weaknesses are exposed in four positive affirmations about Scripture. Demonstrating the adequacy of human language, the direct identity between Scripture and the 'Word of God', the inspiration of Scripture, and Scripture's covenantal function in God's salvation, a greater miracle of sovereign free grace is proposed: the sovereign Lord of all creation has bound himself to his people in an inerrant, covenantal word, which is to be received by faith.
In his *Church Dogmatics* Karl Barth wrote:

As truly as Jesus died on the cross, as Lazarus died in Jn. 11, as the lame were lame, as the blind were blind, [...] so, too, the prophets and apostles as such, even in their office, even in their function as witnesses, even in the act of writing down their witness, were real, historical men as we are, and therefore sinful in their action, and capable and actually guilty of error in their spoken and written word (Barth, 1963 [1938], *CD I/2, 529*).

For Barth, belief in the fallibility of Scripture is a necessity: to insist on its fallibility is to maintain the sovereignty of God's free grace:

For that reason every time we turn the Word of God into an infallible biblical word of man or the biblical word of man into an infallible Word of God we resist [...] the miracle that here fallible men speak the Word of God in fallible human words – and we therefore resist the sovereignty of grace... (*CD I/2, 529*).

Moreover, an inerrant Bible is worthy of the charge of docetism. We must affirm, says Barth, that the human authors were 'vulnerable' and 'capable of error even in respect of religion and theology [...] if we are not to take away their humanity, if we are not to be

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1 Hereafter *CD I/2*, and Barth (1994 [1936], *CD I/1*) hereafter *CD I/1*.

2 Barth uses 'infallibility' and 'inerrancy' interchangeably, and thus also the concepts of fallibility and errancy. Whilst there is a distinction between the two, for the purposes of critiquing Barth we will also use them interchangeably. *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* cited in Packer (1979, 146) makes the following distinction: 'Infallible signifies the quality of neither misleading nor being mislead and so safeguards in categorical terms the truth that Holy Scripture is a sure, safe, and reliable rule and guide in all matters. Similarly, inerrancy signifies the quality of being free from all falsehood or mistake and so safeguards the truth that Holy Scripture is entirely true and trustworthy in all its assertions.'
guilty of Docetism' (CD I/2, 510). Besides, it is '…mere self-will and disobedience to try to find some infallible elements in the Bible' (CD I/2, 531). Barth's posit is at heart theological (Frame, 1973, 164; Ward, 2003, 155).³

Before critically evaluating Barth's suggestion that biblical inerrancy is theologically indefensible, it is important to further understand Barth's dogmatic structure and what influences his position. Five important points may be observed. First, God's revelation is a personal event, the Word of God himself. That to which the prophets and apostles witness is the event of God's self-revelation in His incarnate Son (CD I/1, 127): 'God's revelation is Jesus Christ, the Son of God' (CD I/1, 137). Whilst admitting that God's revelation takes a verbal form, Barth is at pains to insist that it is personal; a person in fact, Jesus Christ (CD I/1, 138). This event of revelation in Jesus is God's event: 'God is known through God and through God alone' (CD I/1, 321).

Second, Scripture's relation to this event is a unity-in-distinction, an 'indirect identity'. Scripture is united to God's revelation in Jesus because it witnesses to it, but it is distinct from it precisely because 'A witness is not absolutely identical with that to which it witnesses' (CD I/2, 463). The prophets (expectation) and apostles (recollection) are a necessary witness because 'We cannot have revelation "in itself"' (CD I/2, 492). But they are not the revelation itself; there is an 'indirect identity':

³ A plethora of books and articles exist on the issue of biblical inerrancy, too many to produce a fair interaction with in this short paper. Therefore, we will respond to the criticism that inerrancy is theologically indefensible in conversation with Karl Barth, because he is one of the more theological proponents. Regarding other responses to biblical inerrancy: against 'limited inerrancy' see Lindsell (1976) and France (1982) contra Coleman (1974), against 'accommodation' see Grudem (1983, 53-57) contra Fuller (1968); Rogers and McKim (1979); Berkouwer (1975, 185-187).

⁴ 'Ereignis' – Barth’s key word in regard to revelation.
If we want to think of the Bible as a real witness of divine revelation, then clearly we have to keep two things constantly before us and give them their due weight: the limitation and the positive element, its distinctiveness from revelation, in so far as it is only a human word about it, and its unity with it, in so far as revelation is the basis, object and content of this word' (Barth, 1956 [1938], CD I/2, 463).

In sum, the biblical witness is both necessary and limited.

Barth later re-enforces this 'indirect identity' by drawing on an analogy with the incarnation (CD I/2, 499-501).\(^5\) Obviously the analogy does not lie in a hypostatic union between God and the biblical writers – since that is unique to the incarnation alone – but rather in the fact that, like the incarnation, Scripture is not divine only or human only, nor a mixture of the two. It is both 'very God' and 'very man' at the moment of revelation, brought about solely by 'a decision and act of God to man' (CD I/2, 499, 500). For Barth, a 'direct identity' between the two natures in Scripture would mean a transmutation of the divine and human, implying the same in the incarnation, which is 'impossible' (CD I/2, 499). Thus, Scripture is 'a witness of revelation which itself belongs to revelation, and historically a very human literary document' (CD I/2, 501). This ensures Christ's supremacy, for that which is human and finite (Scripture) must never be given equal status with that which is divine and infinite (the Word of God himself).

This leads, third, to an assertion by Barth that, *the human witness necessarily entails fallibility.* The prophets and apostles 'were real, historical men as we are, and therefore sinful in their action, and capable and actually guilty of error in their spoken and written word' (CD I/2, 529). For Barth, this fallibility does not just include cultural and historical

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\(^5\) See Bromiley (1979, 37) for a succinct summary.
details, but 'extends to its religious or theological content' (CD I/2, 509). To refuse this reality of human fallibility in the Bible is to be guilty of docetism (CD I/2, 510).

Fourth, *this fallible witness is an 'unsuitable' medium for God's revelation*. God's Word comes to us 'in the mystery of its secularity', a 'twofold indirectness': its creaturely and fallen reality (CD I/1, 165). But this form is wholly 'unsuitable' to reveal God: 'It does not correspond to the matter but contradicts it. It does not unveil it but veils it' (CD I/1, 166). This form is other than God himself, and is in fact 'the cosmos in which sin reigns'; such that, 'If God's Word is revealed in it, it is revealed "through it," of course, but in such a way that this "through it" means "in spite of it."' (CD I/1, 166).

However, herein, fifth, is the great miracle: *in his sovereign free grace God chooses to use fallible witnesses to reveal himself in the present*. This 'secularity' is not a 'fatal accident'; rather it is 'an authentic and inalienable attribute of the Word of God itself.' For, 'Revelation means the incarnation of the Word of God', and 'If God did not speak to us in secular form, He would not speak to us at all'. In fact, this is 'His real way to us, and consequently a necessary and a good way' (CD I/1, 167). For 'God veils Himself and that in so doing [...] He unveils Himself', because if he unveiled himself without this veil it would be 'the end of us and all things'. And so 'In its secularity it is thus in every respect a Word of grace' (CD I/1, 168). In short, the fallible witness accentuates God's grace.

Furthermore, God's grace is *free*. God decides as and when he will reveal himself in Scripture; we cannot 'possess' or 'control' his revelation. Enter Barth's doctrine of inspiration. Barth centres the heart of his argument on a 'circle of revelation'. Revelation originates with God who authorises the prophets and apostles to speak and write, and closes with the hearer being enabled by the Spirit to receive their words. By exposition
Barth arrives at the view that there are two 'royal acts' in the one event of inspiration: the inception of scripture in the past and the reception of it in the present. 'This self-disclosure in its totality is theopneustia, the inspiration of the word of the prophets and the apostles' (CD I/2, 516). In sum, Scripture needs the continuing, revealing work of the Spirit of God for it to be the Word of God; the being of Scripture is in its becoming.6 Only in this sense, may we predicate Scripture with 'the Word of God'. In all this, Barth's motive is to safeguard God's sovereign freedom and grace: 'To say that [the Bible has the attribute of being the Word of God] would be to violate the Word of God which is God himself – to violate the freedom and sovereignty of God' (CD I/2, 513).

The 'circle of revelation' is informative as it highlights Barth's criticisms of the Early Church Fathers and High Orthodoxy of seventeenth century Protestantism. In his view, by dealing only with the inception of the biblical writings, the Fathers reduced the grace and mystery of God and ended up with 'verbal-inspiredness' rather than verbal inspiration, turning the Bible into a 'bit of higher nature' (CD I/2, 517, 518). And High Orthodoxy, guilty of the same thing, inadvertently undermined the great Reformation principle of sola fide: since knowledge of God now became 'a tangible certainty, not one that is given and constantly has to be given again [...] a certainty of work and not solely of faith' (CD I/2, 524).

In sum, for Barth the doctrine of biblical inerrancy is theologically indefensible, on at least four fronts. First, it resists God's sovereign free grace because revelation is God's act in God's time. Second, it denies Scripture's humanity (which necessarily entails fallibility). Third, it compromises the supremacy of Christ by attributing equal status to

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6 Referred to earlier in CD I/1, 110. See McCormack (2004) for a helpful discussion, and Thompson (2006, 67n, 74n) for some cautions with McCormack's paper.
the Bible as the 'Word of God', implying some sort of second incarnation (Ward, 2003, 157). Fourth, the 'verbal inspiredness' of Scripture makes it a part of natural knowledge of God, thus undermining *sola fidei*.

There are laudable elements to Barth's position. First of all, his controlling principle that Scripture is *autopistos* is an admiral stance during a time when appeals were being made to rationalism (liberalism), religious experience (Schleirmacher), and scientific or historical investigation. Secondly, even although Barth affirms the fallibility of Scripture he never really enters into criticism of it. Thirdly, a recovery of the Godness of God in his sovereign free grace is a breath of theological fresh air. Fourthly, despite some shortcomings of Barth's Christology, his strong commitment to Nicene Trinitarianism and Chalcedonian Christology is to be affirmed (Packer, 1999, 13). Fifthly, Barth has safeguarded any evangelical tendency toward docetism and bibliolatry, reminding us of the genuine humanity of Scripture and of its personal centre – Jesus Christ. Sixthly, the close relationship between the revelation of God and the 'illumination' of the Spirit in Barth corrects any trajectory towards a fossilised 'Word of God'. With all this said however, significant weaknesses exist with Barth's opposition to biblical inerrancy, to which our critical evaluation now turns. Our criticisms will take the form of four positive affirmations.

First, *human language is an adequate medium for God's revelation despite human fallibility*. Barth overplays the limitation of human language. Creaturely forms of communication can and must speak truthfully because *God* made them. We are God's image bearers and so our capacity to communicate is derivative of his (Gaffin, 2004, 183); 'Language is a divine construction' (Horton, 2002, 186). Even our sinfulness does not create any functional

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7 In the eleven volumes of *Church Dogmatics* 'we hardly find any instance of criticism' (Runia, 1962, 105n).
8 See Thompson (2006, 75-76).
deficit in language itself; rather the problem lies with our misuse or abuse of it (Gaffin, 2004, 191). Tied to this is Barth's failure to distinguish the fact that fallibility refers to the capacity to err – not the necessity to err (Sproul, 2005, 85; Knox, 2000, 315-317). Indeed, although fallibility is possible for humans, actual fallibility is sub-human. We were created to speak truthfully and even despite the Fall humans can still speak infallible words; parrots too: 'Polly wants a cracker'. When the Holy Spirit's superintending work over the prophetic-apostolic witness is taken into consideration, human language is an adequate medium for God to speak inerrantly. God's transcendence should not be pitted against this: 'If God chooses to speak to us personally, in his Son and through those he has commissioned and enabled to write his words for us, then it is no transgression of his majesty to take him at his word' (Thompson, 2006, 79). Barth's failure is to hold the transcendence of God – he is wholly other than we are – alongside his immanence – he comes up close and personal in creaturely words. And precisely because God is transcendent we ought to heed the words of the biblical writers as the very words of God, rather than question them (Frame, 1973, 174).

Second, the prophetic-apostolic witness and the 'Word of God' are directly identified in the Bible. The Bible presents a direct identity between human words and God's words. This is evidenced in the OT with the prophets' oft-repeated phrase: 'Thus says the LORD' (cf. Deut 18:15-20; Jer 1:9b-10; Horton, 2002, 133-134). The prophets' words are spoken of in the same qualitative manner as God speaking through his Son in the last days (Heb 1:1-2).

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9 At first glance it may appear that Barth concedes this distinction when he refers to 'capacity for errors' (CD I/2, 508). However, later on he says the apostles were 'actually guilty of error' (CD 1/2, 529), though again he gives no actual examples.

10 The ability of infallible human words is best demonstrated in the fact that the fruit of the unio hypostatica in the incarnation produced just that – the words of our Lord (Cameron, 1988, 42-44). The legitimacy of an incarnational model of Scripture certainly requires care, but Cameron's point is to be acknowledged.

11 The same verb λαλήσας is used in each case.
the Son's revelation is consummative, but there is no hint of any qualitative difference. Jesus' own view of the OT is that it is the 'word of God' (Mark 7:6-13). He equated his own human words with the word of God (John 8:28b; 17:8), and his Apostles' words were to be his words (Luke 10:16; Matt 10:40). Indeed, they had no hesitancy in claiming their words were the Holy Spirit's words (Acts 5:32; 15:28).

Barth is not unaware of some of these texts; according to him these texts reveal only one aspect of the witness: the aspect of unity (CD I/2, 487). However, it is remarkable that no scriptural proof is adduced for the distinction between Scripture and the Word of God, only an appeal to his definition of witness; which is not without its difficulties either. For example, there is more happening than 'witnessing' in the biblical text (Gibson, 2004, 30). John the Baptist's 'prodigious index finger' (CD I/1, 112) is a hermeneutical pointer: this one is 'the lamb of God' (John 1:29). Furthermore, this dichotomy in Scripture between words (witness) and person (revelation) is too sharp. As Wolterstorff (1995, 75-94) shows, a person is identified in his words, and to respond to his words is to respond to him. And equating Scripture with the 'Word of God' does not, as Barth infers, compromise the supremacy of Christ, since Scripture itself makes such an equation (Ward, 2003, 174). By establishing the 'indirect identity' between Scripture and the 'Word of God' Barth creates room for affirming the fallibility of the human witnesses. However, having seen the direct identity affirmed in Scripture between the words of men and God's Word, Barth's distinction does not hold up, and this in turn calls into question his doctrine of the Bible's fallibility. In addition, affirming the direct identity does not in any way undermine faith, or turn it into a work for that matter; rather it secures the central role of faith since to believe Christ is to believe the witness about him.

12 See Wenham (1984, 11-38) for a substantial list of biblical references.
13 For a plethora of texts regarding Scripture's self-attestation see Grudem (1983, 19-64).
Third, Scripture is by its very nature the Word of God because God inspired it. For Barth, inspiration is focused on the writers and recipients. However, θεόπνευστος is a predicate of παρα γραφή (Wallace, 1996, 313-314); 'Its reference is a divine action performed on the text' (Gibson, 2004, 32). Moreover, B.B. Warfield, in his seminal work on inspiration, suggests that θεόπνευστος refers more to a 'spiring' than an 'in-spiring'; in other words Scripture is breathed out by God, not breathed into by God (Warfield, 1948, 132-133). This means a direct identification of the human text with the 'word of God', so that in a 'concursive operation' the Bible is always a human and divine word; eliminating the need for any supplementary action to render it divine.

In addition, Barth's historical anchor is far from secure. Accusing the Early Church and High Orthodoxy of a deficient view of verbal inspiration is unwarranted when in the light of 2 Tim 3:16 a legitimate characteristic of Scripture is its 'verbal inspiredness', irrespective of whether it is received or not. Barth's references to Luther are primarily in relation to the illumination of the Spirit (CD I/2, 521), but he ignores other quotes of Luther regarding the inspired nature of Scripture itself. Barth's employment of Calvin's work in the Institutes (Calvin, 1960 [1559], I.vii.4, 78-79) and his commentary on 2 Tim 3:16 is puzzling since the former is referring to the internal testimony of the Spirit, and the latter states: 'we owe to the Scripture the same reverence we owe to God, since it has its only source in him' (Calvin, 1964, 330). Both Luther and Calvin were unhesitant in predicating Scripture with 'the Word of God'. Barth risks collapsing illumination into inspiration and allows this to drive his definition of verbal inspiration, and in turn his historical assessment. Again, Barth's desire to honour God's sovereign freedom in

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15 'For whatever the written thing is, it remains that even if people ignore it, even if people turn blind eyes to it and fail to see it for what it is, and receive none of God's self-presencing by this means' (Carson, 2006, no pages; emphasis original).
16 See Thompson (1998) for these.
revelation is applaudable, but in this case the Bible presents no tension, for, 'it is not at all clear why a recognition that this text finds its source in God […] should threaten the sovereign freedom of God' (Thompson, 2006, 76). And furthermore, if the text finds its source in God, is it right to associate fallibility with it? This leads to our final affirmation about Scripture.

Fourth, Scripture's function in the economy of salvation is covenantal. The way the Bible hangs together – old and new covenant – betrays 'a fundamental theological characteristic of Scripture' (Gibson, 2004, 28): it is a covenant document. Paul provides the warrant for this in the titles he accords to Old and New Testaments (cf. 2 Cor 3:14, 6 respectively). A number of important factors emerge from viewing Scripture in this way. Firstly, again there is a direct identity between God's words and the words of the covenant. The first written Word of God was the Ten Commandments, written by the very finger of God – in human language no less (Exod 24:12; 31:18; 32:15f; 34:1). Those words were not a human witness about God; they were God's witness against men, and as such they were to be obeyed not questioned. Secondly, a covenantal view of Scripture provides us with, in our mind, a better perspective on God's sovereign freedom. God 'limits' his freedom by binding himself to his people. Yet God remains completely free since it was always his gracious initiative to enter it, uncoerced by man. Barth's doctrine of God's freedom lacks the nuance of the biblical perspective. Thirdly, the God who binds himself in covenant proclaims to be 'A Faithful God who can do no wrong' (Deut 32:4). This view of the trustworthiness of God 'is not so easily side-stepped by Barth's re-positioning of the miracle that occurs in the renewing of the fallible biblical witness' (Gibson, 2004, 35).

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19 Reading parts of the OT as the 'Book of the Covenant' is seen in 2 Chr 34:14-31 (cf. Exod 24:7; Jensen, 2002, 81-82).
20 Jensen (2002, 69) argues that God's covenant name 'I will be what I will be' (Exod 3:14) even implies truthfulness.
For Barth, the miracle of Scripture becoming the Word of God means, 'God Himself now says what the text says' (*CD* I/2, 532). But if what the text says in its humanity is errant (*CD* I/2, 531), then for Barth to be consistent, at the moment of 'inspiration' God speaks errant words, for God's revelation can come to us *only through the fallible human witness* (*CD* I/2, 529).  

If Barth would not wish us to arrive at such a conclusion – and we are sure that he would not! – it is difficult to discern exactly what conclusion he would have us arrive at, since he provides no alternative.

This logical conundrum raises the issue of God's truthfulness and trustworthiness, to which Heb 6:13-20 sheds some light. In these verses the assertion that God cannot lie refers specifically to his promise. Helm observes that 'the character of God is imputed or transferred to his word' (2002, 244), such that if God is trustworthy, then by necessity so is his word. By application, 'This principle of transference applies *par excellence* to the Incarnate Word, but counts with equal validity to anything else that is identified as the word of God, to the works of prophets and apostles, for example' (Helm, 2002, 244). Thus if Scripture is God's covenantal word – and God cannot lie – then by the connection observed between the immutability of God and his covenant promise in Scripture, Scripture cannot lie; it *must* be inerrant.  

Calvin shows only too well how God's integrity for speaking the truth entails the truthfulness of the Scriptures: 'And it is not even enough to believe that God is trustworthy [cf. Rom. 3:3], who can neither deceive nor lie [cf. Titus 1:2], unless you hold to be beyond doubt that whatever precedes from him is sacred and inviolable truth' (Calvin, 1960 [1559], III.ii.6, 549). Viewing Scripture as covenantal in the economy of God's salvation is theologically foundational to biblical inerrancy.

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21 Also, "We cannot have revelation "in itself"" (*CD* I/2, 492).

22 We are of course referring here to the original autographs. See Bahnsen (1980, 151-196).

23 From this covenantal standpoint biblical inerrancy is buttressed all the more when one then looks at Scripture's self-attestation (Grudem, 1983, 19-64).
It can be seen from our four positive affirmations – the adequacy of human language, the direct identity between Scripture and the Word of God, the inspiration of Scripture, and Scripture’s covenantal function – that Barth’s suggestion that biblical inerrancy is theologically indefensible does not hold up under close scrutiny. We think that Barth’s concerns regarding the miracle of God’s sovereign free grace, Scripture’s humanity, Christ’s supremacy, and the role of faith, are both met and challenged in different ways in our theological presentation of biblical inerrancy. For Barth, the errancy of Scripture is a necessity to ensure the miracle of God’s sovereign free grace. However, we would propose that a greater miracle exists: the sovereign Lord of all creation has graciously chosen to bind himself to his people in an inerrant, covenantal word that witnesses to his own perfect Son, so that we, weak as we are, may have ‘a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul’ (Heb 6:19). An ‘idle miracle’ (CD 1/2, 530)? No, rather an ‘even bolder assertion’ (CD 1/2, 529), to be received by faith.
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