

THE WILD AND CROOKED TREE: BARTH, FISH, AND INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITIES

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In a letter to Rudolph Bultmann, responding to the charge that he had not sufficiently refined his theological concepts, Karl Barth described himself as a “wild and crooked tree” when seen beside the straight pole of Bultmannian philosophical precision.¹ Barth was content, however, with his practice of reaching for terms that were at hand and annexing them for use in his theology, rather than seeking “a preestablished harmony between the matter itself and these particular concepts.”² He noted simply in his defense, “my hands were already full in trying to *say* something very specific.”³ The great variety in Barth’s biblical exegesis suggests that here too he was “wild and crooked,” reaching eclectically for interpretive tools that would help him say what he wanted to say. Because of this the student of Barth is put in a difficult position. On the one hand, few would doubt that Barth is a crucial figure in the rise of hermeneutical studies in this century; on the other hand, his own “hermeneutic” seems indecipherable—and this by his own design!⁴

I

Despite Barth’s disinterest in (and even disdain for) discussing general hermeneutics,⁵ and the almost universal agreement that “Barth’s exegesis is ultimately and irreducibly *pluralistic* methodologically,”⁶ many have sought to organize his hermeneutical thought around some central theory or practice.⁷ His interpretive center has been found in various places, including realistic narrative,⁸ hermeneutical realism,⁹ conceptual analysis,¹⁰ and the “strange new world within the Bible.”¹¹ Perhaps the drive to systematize or

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organize Barth on this matter is a reaction to the fact that, despite the profound impact of his *Romans* commentary, he has until recently been largely ignored in hermeneutical discussions. Thus those attempting to recover his contribution have felt it necessary to show that he is relevant within the prevailing assumptions of the debate—that is, within the search for a general method or theory of reading. And while each attempt strikes a chord that is true to Barth at some level, I suspect the features that are being highlighted were for Barth himself simply *ad hoc* tools that served a purpose but did not fundamentally organize his exegesis or theology.

My proposal, however, is not that Barth *lacked* a unifying or stabilizing factor in his reading of scripture; nor am I suggesting that his exegesis represents a free-flowing play of text, sign, and trope (although his readings certainly suggest a freedom with the text not wholly unlike that of midrashic or deconstructive approaches). I will argue, rather, that prior attempts to understand Barth's interpretation have been inadequate primarily because the wrong question was being asked. The most important issue for Barth is not *how* one should read scripture, but rather *who* is reading, *what* is sought, and *where* this reading takes place. If methodologically Barth was a "wild and crooked tree," he was never this tree alone, but constantly worked within the larger forest of the church. For Barth this context, with all its commitments and practices, does more to create a right reading of scripture than any hermeneutical or methodological decision.

In one of his earliest writings about biblical interpretation, Barth makes this clear.

What is there behind all this [in the Bible] that labors for expression?

It is a dangerous question. We might do better not to come too near this burning bush. For we are sure to betray what is—behind *us*! The Bible gives to every man and to every era such answers to their questions as they deserve. We shall always find in it as much as we seek and no more: high and divine content if it is high and divine content that we seek; transitory and 'historical' content, if it is transitory and 'historical' content that we seek—nothing whatever, if it is nothing whatever that we seek. The hungry are satisfied by it, and to the satisfied is its surfeiting before they have opened it. The question, What is within the Bible? has a mortifying way of converting itself into the opposing question, Well, what are you looking for, and who are you, pray, who make bold to look?¹²

Barth is not ignorant of the Bible's multivocality or of its ability to render the reading that one seeks. Given this, the central questions become *who are you* and *what do you seek*? These questions drive Barth's understanding of scripture from his early work on *Romans* to his later *Church Dogmatics*,¹³ though the focus shifts (as it does in his overall theology) from *who are you* as the single reader to *who are you* as part of the Christian community. As a

way to bring this interpretive context to the fore, I will take a detour through the work of Stanley Fish, hoping that his theory of interpretive communities will help us get a fresh look at how, or rather where, Barth believes we should read the Bible.¹⁴

One might ask, of course, whether the use of Fish here threatens to reduce Barth to an instance of a general theory of interpretation alien to the church's practices (precisely what Barth wanted to avoid). I would argue it does not. What Fish offers us is a secularized version of a traditional Christian (and perhaps also Jewish) belief about scripture and interpretation. Ironically, it is this voice from outside the church which is keeping alive (or reviving) a way of reading which has been largely forgotten or rejected in theological circles.¹⁵ As Fish candidly admits, "In general it seems to me that structuralist and poststructuralist insights and positions have been anticipated by theological modes of reasoning."¹⁶ Yet theologians and biblical scholars have so successfully excluded certain traditions of Christian reading that we must now listen in on other conversations to hear again what we once knew.¹⁷

II

The place to begin with Fish is with the question he poses to himself as the title to one of his collections of essays: *Is There a Text in This Class?*. This is a crucial question, since much of what Fish wants to do in his theoretical writings is to undermine the idea of the text as an independent, meaning-filled entity which presents itself to us as an object to be examined. Does this mean that there is no text? The answer is not quite so easy. Fish himself responds with graceful ambiguity:

'there is and there isn't.' There isn't a text in this or any other class if one means by text what E. D. Hirsch and others mean by it, 'an entity which always remains the same from one moment to the next'; but there is a text in this and every class if one means by text the structure of meanings that is obvious and inescapable from the perspective of whatever interpretive assumptions happen to be in force.¹⁸

Texts admit of an infinite possibility of meanings. Signifiers chase down signifieds across a web of other signifiers. Symbol, metaphor, and allegory all serve to create an endless proliferation of interpretations. Meaning would never be created if this play were not at some point, if only temporarily, halted. This is the role of the reader, and more importantly the reading community, for Fish. Thus he says that the text is created or 'written' in the act of reading. It is constructed according to the interpretive strategies of the reader. On the one hand, text and meaning are indeterminate, but on the other, they are always determinate, but only within a given context of interpretive rules, which could be different.

The impression that the text has its own voice, that it "acts," or "speaks," is one that comes about as a result of the reader having already constructed the text in a certain way. For instance, after giving a reading of Milton's *Lycidas*, Fish writes, "in the analysis of these lines from *Lycidas* I did what critics always do: I 'saw' what my interpretive principles permitted or directed me to see, and then I turned around and attributed what I had 'seen' to a text and an intention."¹⁹ Fish unmasks the rhetoric of textual agency (even in his own work) and acknowledges that it is the reader who makes the text speak. But if this is the case, how are the dangers of solipsism, relativism, and subjectivism to be avoided? Fish answers by showing that the reader simply isn't autonomous enough to create any of these "isms." Indeed, the reader is as much a construction as is the text, since "the self does not exist apart from the communal or conventional categories of thought that enable its operations (of thinking, seeing, reading)."²⁰ Readers are formed in their modes of thought and reading practices by their interpretive communities, which "are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions."²¹ Thus, readers will agree on interpretations, or at least will have a context for argument, if they share an interpretive community. Such a view of the self tames the specter of relativism, since one can only produce readings made possible by the community or communities of which one is a part.²² Thus the reader and the text are both caught up in, and in a sense created by, cultural and institutional structures.

Three questions must briefly be addressed before we move on. First, if the reader constructs the text through her or his interpretive strategies, how does the community construct the reader? Fish is less clear about this. It is *not* a case of an autonomous subject choosing a community that fits one's preferences. Rather, the communities or institutions precede us; we are always already shaped by some conventional ways of thinking, seeing, reading, and living.²³ We do not inhabit these frameworks, we are "inhabited by them."²⁴ It is interesting to note that while Fish demythologizes the agency of the text, he is perfectly happy with attributing agency to the cultural framework without explanation. (Though, of course, cultural or communal structures as a whole can no more exert agency than can texts.) The attributes which the New Critics located in the text and that the early Fish located in the reader are now transferred to the interpretive community—a move that shifts but does not account for the assumptions of structural stability and formative agency. Here one sees the inherent difficulties in a position that derives from theological ancestors but seeks to carry on the discussion in a secular mode. Fish himself is able to find in Lancelot Andrewes a Christian answer to this question of agency that is, I will argue later, more satisfying than his own purely literary analogue.

A second question is whether this means that the community simply decides what it wants to find in a text and reads into it whatever will serve

its own interests. Not necessarily. Fish does not deny the text's ability to resist interpretations, to exert a force back on the reader. He writes,

The fact that the objects we have are all objects that appear to us in the context of some practice, of work done by some interpretive community, doesn't mean that they are not objects or that we don't have them or that they exert no pressure on us. All it means is that they are interpreted objects and that since interpretations can change, the perceived shape of objects can change too.²⁵

If we follow Fish's line of thought, we are not doomed to have churches and classrooms full of individuals reading their own preferred meanings into the text—eisegeting their favorite doctrines or issues into every imaginable passage. Rather, we have communities of readers whose confessions, practices, and goals determine that certain readings are possible and legitimate and certain readings are not.²⁶ Interpretive communities establish a context for reading in which a range of meanings may emerge, but all of which will have emerged by virtue of the practices and assumptions of the readers. For instance, the practice of reading the Old Testament christologically may yield diverse and even conflicting readings. What it could not yield is an interpretation that did not see Christ, since the very strategy of christological reading assures this.

Our third question is how one determines a right reading. Already the way I have phrased the question would be unacceptable for Fish. The issue is not one of "determining" or "demonstrating," as if one could give proofs that validate a certain reading as the "right" one. Rather, Fish suggests, the issue is one of *persuasion*.

In a demonstration model our task is to be adequate to the description of objects that exist independently of our activities; we may fail or we may succeed, but whatever we do the objects of our attention will retain their ontological separateness and still be what they were before we approached them. In a model of persuasion, however, our activities are directly constitutive of those objects, and of the terms in which they can be described, and of the standards by which they can be evaluated.²⁷

Demonstration appeals to the neutral territory of the "text itself," but as Fish has helped us see, such an entity does not exist. Thus, recourse to the text is made problematic, since it is precisely what (or who) constitutes the text that is being debated. To argue, then, that one's position is correct because this is what the story or poem says is to leap already to one's conclusion (that the text should be seen in this way rather than that way) and to create by fiat the point for which one is ostensibly arguing. In other words, there are no context-independent criteria by which to adjudicate between readings. Criteria do not exist "objectively" in the text, but rather are established within the discourse of a community. Persuasion, then, must function within a

framework of relative agreement. That is, "the mechanisms of persuasion, like everything else, are context-specific: what will be persuasive in any argument depends on what the parties have agreed to in advance."²⁸ Hence, Fish argues that debate must proceed through strategies such as convincing the other party that an affirmation they want to maintain depends on their thinking differently about the point at issue.²⁹ Argument and agreement about right readings can be accounted for in Fish's theory, but it occurs within particular contexts, in which certain goals and goods are agreed upon, and thus, in which persuasion can be found persuasive.

In concluding our look at Fish, it will be helpful to note two places in his writings where he specifically compares his work with that of Christian theology and biblical interpretation. In the first case, Fish notes similarities between his and Augustine's views of readers and their interpretations. For Augustine, to be a right reader of scripture and the world involves being cleansed, transformed, and thus made able to see. So he writes that in preparation to know God the Christian 'cleanses that eye through which God may be seen, in so far as He can be seen only by those who die to the world as much as they are able. For they are able to see only in so far as they are dead to this world; in so far as they live in it, they do not see.'³⁰ Fish draws the connection in this way:

The eye that was in bondage to the phenomenal world (had as its constitutive principle the autonomy of that world) has been cleansed and purged and is now capable of seeing what is really there, what is obvious, what anyone who has the eyes can see: 'to the healthy and pure internal eye He is everywhere' [Augustine, p. 13]. He is everywhere not as the result of an interpretive act self-consciously performed on data otherwise available, but as the result of an interpretive act performed at so deep a level that it is indistinguishable from consciousness itself.³¹

Fish argues that "categories like 'the natural' and 'the everyday' are not essential but conventional. They refer not to properties of the world but to properties of the world as it is given to us by our interpretive assumptions."³² Likewise, Augustine realizes that the very things we see or do not see are determined by who we are and how we have been shaped, or cleansed, by certain practices.

Elsewhere, in a telling parenthetical comment, Fish describes his interpretive theory as "a literary analogue to Augustine's rule of faith."³³ According to Fish, Augustine lays down an interpretive strategy

designed to make all texts one, or to put it more accurately, to be forever making the text It is dazzlingly simple: everything in the Scriptures, and indeed in the world when it is properly read, points to (bears the meaning of) God's love for us and our answering responsibility to love our fellow creatures for His sake.³⁴

Augustine unapologetically comes to the text knowing what he is going to find. By virtue of his convictions and practices as part of a Christian community, Augustine is assured that no part of scripture would contradict the good news of God's love and the command to love others. Augustine, then, is a prime example for Fish of the fact that "interpretive strategies are not put into execution after reading ... ; they are the shape of reading, and because they are the shape of reading, they give texts their shape, making them rather than, as is usually assumed, arising from them."³⁵ Given his interpretive lens, the Bible takes on a particular shape for Augustine as he reads. He "writes" the Bible as a witness to God's love even as he "reads" it.³⁶

The second important theological discussion in Fish's work is his essay on an Easter sermon by Lancelot Andrewes, a late sixteenth, early seventeenth century Anglican prelate. Fish notices

a parallel between Andrewes's theologically motivated dislodging of the self as the originator of meaning and the structuralist elimination of the subject in favor of discursive systems that in some sense 'speak it'... In Andrewes's theology the self is constituted not by a system but by the indwelling presence of Jesus Christ; but the effect of the two ways of thinking is the same, to deny the distinction between the knower and the object of knowledge that is so crucial to a positivist epistemology.³⁷

Fish gives a reading of a sermon which Andrewes preached on John 20:11-17—the story of Jesus' resurrection appearance to Mary. Fish argues that in Andrewes' sermon, as well as in this biblical text and in the Christian reader or hearer, the one who seeks does not find, or rather *does* find but only by being found, and indeed by finding oneself to have always already been found.

In John's account of the first resurrection appearance, Jesus finds Mary even as she seeks him in vain. She had come to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and found the stone rolled away. Jesus' body was gone. While she sought him, he appeared to her, but she mistook him for the gardener. When he called her by name, she recognized him. He had found her even as she, though seeking, had been unable to find him. Andrewes made the point this way in his sermon that Easter morning: "He is found of them that seeke Him not but of them that seeke Him never but found." The odd turns required to navigate this sentence sparked Fish's interest. One might expect Andrewes' text to read simply "He is found of them that seeke Him." Such a sentiment would seem properly intuitive, justifying Mary's seeking and encouraging ours. But Andrewes' "not" confounds our expectations. Our belief that seeking will lead to finding flounders on the rocks of this negation, but the "but" which follows revives our hopes. Perhaps now he will speak the good news to those of us who seek. "But of them that seeke Him never..." and our expectation hears "found." The rhythmic and chiasmic structure certainly

would warrant the expectation that the passage would read: "He is found of them that seeke Him not but of them that seeke Him never found." It would be a counterintuitive and disconcerting assertion, but by the time we reach the "never" we are sure this is what we will hear. Yet Andrewes inserts another "but." And so we find the "found," which, as it were, really finds us, for we had ceased to look, sure that seekers would not find. Thus, Andrewes gives us the news that is profoundly good, but which does not justify our search: "He is found of them that seeke Him not but of them that seeke Him never but found." As Mary is found by Jesus even as she looks in vain, Andrewes' sermon text recapitulates the finding when the "found" finds the hearers.³⁸ Thus,

for Mary Magdalene, for Andrewes, and for us the moral is the same: if the paradigmatic axis, the storehouse of already constituted and interchangeable meanings, includes everything, it also includes the structures by means of which we validate and assert our independence; we, no less than the words we speak, are meant, stipulated, uttered by another. In our postures as seekers, after meaning or after Christ (they are of course the same), we place ourselves outside a system and presume to make sense of it, to fit its parts together; what we find is that the parts are already together and *that we are one of them*, living in the meaning we seek—"in him we live and move and have our meaning"—not as its exegetes but as its bearers. We are already where we want to be and our attempts to get there—by writing, by reading, by speaking—can do nothing else but extend through time the 'good news' of our predetermined success.³⁹

Where earlier we wondered about how the cultural patterns or frameworks exerted an agency in order to construct the reader, we now see that Fish himself, in his reading of Andrewes, suggests a Christian answer. It is the God who has found us, chosen us, and called us who also grasps and transforms us. But this does not occur independently of the *people* of God, rather it occurs through the very tangible communal realities of the church. Not being a Christian himself, Fish would finally disagree with Andrewes on this. The difference could perhaps be delineated by noting that for Fish Andrewes' theology and exegesis becomes an exemplification of a general theory of interpretative communities. For the Christian, such a general theory can only be understood as an attempt to extend analogously that which has been found to be true of the paradigmatic interpretive community—the church. With this we are led on to our discussion of Barth, who could only agree with Fish's assertion that "within a Christian framework ... the plot is fortunate by divine fiat, and one reaches a point not because he chooses but because he has been chosen, that is, redeemed."⁴⁰

III

Barth begins his discussion of the Bible in the *Church Dogmatics* with the assertion, "*Scripture* is holy and the Word of God, because by the Holy Spirit it became and will become to *the Church* a witness to *divine revelation*" (CD I/2 457, emphasis added). There is much in this one line that will help us see the connections with Fish's theory of interpretation. Most notably, Barth does not take up a discussion of scripture alone, but within his larger discussion of the threefold Word of God.⁴¹ It was precisely *context* that Barth thought was missing in contemporary discussions of scriptural interpretation, and it was this that he sought to provide in his doctrine of the threefold Word. "In the modern situation," he tells us, "both as regards Roman Catholicism and also Modernism, what falls to be said about Holy Scripture as the criterion of dogmatics needs a comprehensive elucidation of context. Hence we shall attempt a doctrine of the Word of God and not merely of Holy Scripture, i.e., a doctrine of the Holy Scripture in the context of an embracing doctrine of the Word of God" (CD I/1, 43). The Word of God in its first form is God's revelation, which is to say Jesus Christ. In its second form it is the Word of God written in Holy Scripture. In its third form it is the Word of God proclaimed in the church. These can be thought of as a series of concentric circles with Christ at the center, scripture encircling Christ, and the church's proclamation forming the outer ring. These three forms cannot be separated yet there is a clear ordering among them. The biblical witness is subordinated to the authority of Christ, to whom it points. The church's proclamation is in turn subordinated to scripture, by which it recollects the revelation of God. This hierarchical ordering does not diminish the importance of any of the elements, for all three together are the Word of God, none less than the others and none without the others (CD II/2, 745). Barth writes,

As the Bible and proclamation become God's Word in virtue of the actuality of revelation they are God's Word: the one Word of God within which there can be neither a more nor a less. Nor should we ever try to understand the three forms of God's Word in isolation. The first, revelation, is the form that underlies the other two. But it is the very one that never meets us anywhere in abstract form. We know it only indirectly, from Scripture and proclamation. The direct Word of God meets us only in this twofold mediacy. But Scripture too, to become God's Word for us, must be proclaimed in the Church (CD I/1, 121).

This passage reveals that there is not only an *ordo essendi*, which functions as a hierarchical ordering of authority—from Christ to scripture to proclamation, but there is also an *ordo cognoscendi*—Christ is only known through scripture and scripture only through the proclamation of the church.⁴² To return to the concentric circle analogy, the authority flows from

the center (Christ) through the inner circle (scripture) to the outer (church). The order of knowing, however, moves from the outer circle toward the center. There is no way to reach Christ but through scripture and church.

Once one sees these two directions of ordering, one can better understand the significance of Barth's taking up the threefold Word in different orders in different contexts. When considering the particular path of knowledge involved in dogmatics (*ordo cognoscendi*), he discusses proclamation first, then scripture, and then revelation, (CD I/1, §4, cf. 287). Yet when he moves on to discuss each of the three forms of the Word of God in detail according to "their inner structure and mutual relations" (*ordo essendi*, CD I/1, 292), Barth reverses the order—treating revelation first, then scripture, and finally proclamation. My concern in the remainder of this paper is to explicate the noetic ordering of the threefold word as a means to understanding Barth's biblical interpretation. In short, my thesis is that for Barth, to interpret scripture rightly one must stand within the arena of church proclamation and read with an eye to finding Christ, that is, stand in the outer ring (the church) and look through the middle ring (scripture) in order to see the center (Christ). Or to put it in Fish's terms, it is only within a particular interpretive community (the church), with its particular interpretive strategy, (reading christologically—that is, seeking the Christ who has found us), that one reads scripture rightly.

One of the implications of this doctrine of the threefold Word is that like Fish, Barth is unwilling to give the biblical text an independent status or to underwrite its existence as a stable object with "objective" meaning. The importance of this for Barth comes out in three places: in his assertion that the Bible is not the Word of God as a property but only as an event, in his refusal to make the text an "object," and in his discussion of the doctrine of inspiration.

First, throughout his theological work Barth is careful with the substantive "is." To say that God "is" or that the command of God "is" or that the Word of God "is" always refers to an act, to an event, to a being which is a becoming. Thus, scripture does not have a stable existence as the Word of God, nor does it of itself point to its subject matter, its meaning, Jesus Christ. "The Bible ... becomes God's Word in this event [of God's action], and in the statement that the Bible is God's Word the little word 'is' refers to its being in this becoming" (CD I/1, 110). Thus, Barth would be no happier than Fish with Hirsch and others who think of the text as "an entity which always remains the same from one moment to the next."³ Such static existence is found nowhere in Barth's theology and certainly not in his doctrine of the Word of God. To put it another way, Barth is critical of assuming the "presence" of scriptural meaning in the text, for "we cannot regard the presence of God's Word in the Bible as an attribute inhering once for all in this book as such" (CD I/2, 530). Rather, he prefers to talk about the event of the Word of God as recalled and expected but never simply "present."

Further, Barth refuses to treat the biblical text as an object which we have a natural capacity to understand, for this would bring the Bible under human control.

We must say at once, that of itself the mere presence of the Bible and our own presence with our capacities for knowing an object does not mean and never will mean the reality or even the possibility of the proof that the Bible is the Word of God (CD II/2, 506).

While some may fear that a position like that of Fish or Barth would give the community too much control over the text, Barth makes it clear that the real subduing of the text occurs among those who make its meaning immanent and thus manipulable. The event in which the Bible becomes God's Word "is a miracle which we cannot presuppose we cannot set it up like one chessman with others, which we can 'move' at the right moment" (CD I/2, 507). This refusal to objectify the text and thus locate meaning *within* it is what distances Barth from both fundamentalists and many historical and literary critics. In his insightful excursus on the doctrine of inspiration, Barth takes up battle with these two wings of contemporary biblical interpretation and shows them to be mirror images of one another (CD, I/2, 514-26).

In the writings of Paul and in the Reformers, inspiration was never construed as something that resided in the text of the Bible itself. Rather, they believed that through the work of the Holy Spirit in the church the event occurs by which understanding takes place, the veil is lifted, and scripture bears witness to God's revelation. The Spirit is not trapped in the text, but is free and blows where it will blow. There is no human control or certainty that will guarantee this act of God, and thus no guarantee that understanding will take place when scripture is read. The Protestant orthodoxy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries collapsed inspiration into an attribute of the Bible and thus bound the Word of God to the human words of the text.

The gradually extending new understanding of biblical inspiration was simply one way, and in view of its highly supranaturalistic character perhaps the most important way, in which the great process of secularisation was carried through. This new understanding of biblical inspiration meant simply that the statement that the Bible is the Word of God was now transformed ... from a statement about the free grace of God into a statement about the nature of the Bible as exposed to human inquiry brought under human control. The Bible as the Word of God surreptitiously became a part of natural knowledge of God, i.e., of that knowledge of God which man can have without the free grace of God, by his own power, and with direct insight and assurance. That the highly supranaturalistic form in which this step was made was only a form used because no better was available is proved by the haste with

which it was abandoned almost as soon as it was adopted. It was followed by the enlightenment and the ensuing 'historical' investigation and treatment of the Bible, i.e., the character of the Bible as the Word of God was now transformed into that of a highly relevant historical record. And this merely revealed what high orthodoxy had really sought and attained under this apparently supranaturalistic form: the understanding and use of the Bible as an instrument separated from the free grace of God and put in the hands of man (CD I/2, 522–23; cf. I/1, 112–13).

In this astonishing passage, Barth uncovers the common roots of modern fundamentalism and much literary and historical criticism. Each relies on an understanding of the text as a receptacle of determinate meaning that is accessible to any reader with the right tools. The move to make inspiration immanent in the text only *seemed* to be at odds with the growing secularization of the time. In fact, it was an attempt to naturalize the supernatural, and this explains why orthodoxy was on the one hand making extravagant supernatural claims for the Bible, while on the other becoming more and more open to natural theology (CD I/2, 522). When this distorted doctrine of inspiration became untenable to any serious reader of the Bible, it was only a small step to naturalize the text completely and lay it open to human control. The Bible was placed on a pedestal in order to keep it in its place; it was lifted up in order to be domesticated. 'The Bible was now grounded upon itself apart from the mystery of Christ and the Holy Ghost It was no longer a free and spiritual force, but an instrument of human power' (CD I/2, 525).⁴⁴

In addition to having similar construals of "text," Barth and Fish share the strategy of decentering the reading subject. As we have seen, for Fish there is no autonomous, objective reader; rather, the "individual" is a construction of interpretive communities. Likewise for Barth the self is never unlocated or objective in the sense of coming to the text without presuppositions. In the preface to the second edition of the *Epistle to the Romans*, Barth takes it as given that all interpreters work with certain assumptions. He does not wish to hide his own or to claim that they are anything but "uncertain," when he writes, "For the present ... I assume that in the Epistle to the Romans Paul did speak of Jesus Christ, and not of someone else. And this is as reputable an assumption as other assumptions that historians are wont to make. The actual exegesis will alone decide whether this assumption can be maintained."⁴⁵ The reader is not a blank slate ready to take in the text's meaning, nor would this be desirable even if it were possible. Indeed, later, in the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth finds the illusion of 'impartiality' simply laughable.

There is a notion that complete impartiality is the most fitting and indeed the normal disposition for true exegesis, because it guarantees a

complete absence of prejudice. For a short time, around 1910, this idea threatened to achieve almost canonical status in Protestant theology. But now we can quite calmly describe it as merely comical (CD I/2, 469).

The position of the reader is too important for one to feign neutrality.

It has been suggested recently that Barth had no real interest in the reader, that he had nothing in common with modern reader-response criticism, and that the reader need not be a believer to be a competent interpreter.⁴⁶ Each of these assertions seems to trade on the enlightenment ideal of the neutral, unbiased subject before whom the text opens itself and reveals its secrets. Or perhaps the central point is simply that with the right intellectual commitments the readers' religious beliefs can be bracketed. Either way, such a reading of Barth makes him more palatable to the academy but distorts his own position. In his early writings Barth was already asserting that "we read the Bible rightly, not when we do so with false modesty, restraint, and attempted sobriety, for these are passive qualities, but when we read it in faith."⁴⁷ The importance of the posture of the reader as one of faith remains consistent throughout Barth's work. In the *Church Dogmatics* he again makes this clear.

If it is really the case that a reader of the biblical Scriptures is quite helpless in face of the problem of what these Scriptures say and intend and denote in respect of divine revelation, that he sees only an empty spot at the place to which the biblical writers point, then in a singular way this does set in relief the extraordinary nature of the content of what these writers say on the one hand, and on the other the state and status of the reader. But all that it actually proves is that there can be no question of a legitimate understanding of the Bible by this reader, that for the time being, i.e., until his relation to what is said in the Bible changes, this reader cannot be regarded as a serious reader and exegete. There can be no question of his exegesis being equally justified with one which is based upon the real substance of the Bible, divine revelation (CD I/2, 469).

The reader who does not already know the subject matter of the Bible will never find it. In exegesis "there is only one truth," and one must proceed from this truth, the substance of the text, to the words and not vice versa (CD I/2, 470). If one begins simply with the human words on the page one will inevitably misread them.

In a bold act of annexation and redescription, Barth takes up the concept of "objectivity" in a way that radically reshapes its usual meaning. The serious exegete must bring to the text "a true objectivity, i.e., interest for its own sake" (CD I/2, 471). Its own sake, of course, is the sake of its subject-matter, a subject who is not trapped within the text but who must grasp us before we go to the text so that we will see him there as he is. "We have to know

the mystery of the substance if we are really to meet it" (CD I/2, 470). If we do not know this mystery,

we will, of course, hear as we always do, as though we know already, and can partly tell ourselves what we are to hear ... [However], if we know the sovereign freedom, the independent glory of this subject-matter in relation both to the word which is before us and to ourselves, we will be wholesomely restrained at the very least in our usual self-assured mastery of the relationship (CD I/2, 470).

Thus Barth turns upside down our common notion of "objectivity." The "objective" readers are those who come to the text already having knowledge of its subject. They are already gripped by the very one whom they will discover in the biblical words. They can thus allow the text to exert its proper force over against their attempts to master it and read into it their own content. The "non-objective" readers are those who come to the text with an ostensible neutrality but without the posture of faith and thus without a check on their own natural inclination to dominate the scripture.

The sovereign freedom of this subject-matter to speak of itself imposes on us in face of the word as such and its historicity an *ἐποχή*, of which there can be no inkling if we presuppose the comical doctrine that the true exegete has no presuppositions, and against which we consistently and most flagrantly offend if we presuppose that doctrine (CD I/2, 470).

Having taken up Barth's view of text and reader we must move now to his understanding of the interpretive community—or at least ask whether there is a role for the interpretive community in Barth as there is in Fish. Is Barth's reading subject a solitary individual who is gripped by faith? Or is this reader one who stands within the church community and only as such is guided by the Spirit and by right reading practices? I will argue that the latter is the case.

Again it is helpful to recall the threefold Word. It is only through the outer ring of the church and its proclamation that one proceeds to the middle ring of scripture. Surely for Barth it is the Holy Spirit who finally leads us properly to understand the Bible, but it is in and with the church that the Spirit works to do so. It is telling that the three subsections in Barth's discussion of Holy Scripture in the *Church Dogmatics* are entitled "The Word of God for the Church," "Authority in the Church," and "Freedom in the Church" (CD I/2, §§19–21, emphasis added). It is always and only within this community that scripture is read and heard rightly.

A common hearing and receiving is necessarily involved either way where the Church is the Church. The life of the Church is the life of the members of a body. Where there is any attempt to break loose from the

community of hearing and receiving necessarily involved, any attempt to hear and receive the Word of God in isolation—even the Word of God in the form of Holy Scripture—there is not Church, and no real hearing and receiving of the Word of God; for the Word of God is not spoken to individuals, but to the Church of God and to individuals only in the Church. The Word of God itself, therefore, demands this community of hearing and receiving. Those who really hear and receive it do so in this community. They would not hear and receive it if they tried to withdraw from this community (CD I/2, 558, cf. 473, 479).

Furthermore, it is within this community that one's self is gripped by, inhabited by, the interpretive key which creates the meaning which one seeks in the text. Fish could have been describing Barth when he wrote of Lancelot Andrewes, "In our postures as seekers, after meaning or after Christ (they are of course the same), we place ourselves outside a system and presume to make sense of it, to fit its parts together; what we find is that the parts are already together and *that we are one of them*, living in the meaning we seek."⁴⁸ For Barth, too, we do not find meaning by attempting to stand outside it and "fit its parts together." To do so is to take control of the text, to shape it as we wish, and thus to miss its meaning, its witness to God's revelation. Rather, we must find ourselves already caught up in, found by, the meaning we seek. "In the face of this subject-matter there can be no question of our achieving, as we do in others, the confident approach which masters and subdues the matter. It is rather a question of our being gripped by the subject-matter" (CD I/2, 470).

The self as originator of meaning can only be the sinful self who wishes to be like God. The self is not a self-creation. Thus, as Fish follows "the structuralist elimination of the subject in favor of the discursive systems that in some sense 'speak it,'" so Barth follows Andrewes in his "theologically motivated dislodging of the self," where "the self is constituted not by a system but by the indwelling presence of Jesus Christ."⁴⁹ While the agent who creates this self is different for the structuralist and the theologian, Fish admits that "the effect of the two ways of thinking is the same."⁵⁰ In short, we have always already been found by the meaning we seek. Or to recall how Andrewes puts it, "He is found of them that seeke Him not but of them that seeke Him never but found." This is the interpretive strategy by which readers write texts in order to find the one who has found us. A strikingly similar assertion is made by Barth in *Romans*:

In Jesus we have discovered and recognized the truth that God is found everywhere and that, both before and after Jesus, men have been discovered by Him. In Him we have found the standard by which all discovery of God and all being discovered by Him is made known as such; in Him we recognize that this finding and being found is the truth of the order of eternity.⁵¹

This accounts for the practice of christocentric reading in Barth. Not only the New Testament, but also the Old bears witness to Christ. As the first and preeminent form of the Word of God, Christ is himself the one we seek as we gaze into scripture. "The object of the biblical texts is quite simply the name Jesus Christ, and these texts can be understood only when understood as determined by this object" (CD I/2, 727). Barth's practice of christocentric exegesis should not, however, be confused with a method or an abstract hermeneutical theory. The difference is that it is not an independent tool that can be picked up by any reader and applied to create the wanted results. Following on the above quotation Barth adds, "this insight is not that of the interpreter as such" (CD I/2, 727). Christocentric reading succeeds by virtue of the reader in faith having already been inhabited by the one she or he seeks. Only thus can the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, guide the reader to a true understanding.

To sum up Barth's perspective on biblical exegesis, let us return to the affirmation with which he begins his own discussion of the matter in the *Church Dogmatics*: "Scripture is holy and the Word of God, because by the Holy Spirit it became and will become to the Church a witness to divine revelation." "Scripture is holy and the Word of God"—the second form of the threefold Word—"because by the Holy Spirit"—not by any method or hermeneutic that can be applied without the readers having been transformed by the very one they seek—"it became and will become"—the text is not a stable container of meaning; God's Word is not a presence within the text but is an event which we remember and expect—"to the Church"—not to the solitary individual but to the community which is the arena of all right reading and the context of proclamation, the third form of the Word of God—"a witness to divine revelation"—the first form of God's Word, Jesus Christ, who is the one we seek as we read.

In Barth as in Fish the question arises: How does one adjudicate between conflicting readings? how does one judge whether a reading is faithful? And again here as in Fish the answer is persuasion rather than demonstration or proof.⁵² One cannot appeal simply to the text, for the meaning is not *in* the human and fallible words themselves. The point of exegesis is not to uncover *the* meaning of a passage, but to hear what God would say to the church here and now. We must "let our ears be opened by [the Bible], not to what it says but to what He, God Himself, has to say to us as His Word in it and through it" (CD I/2, 527). Further, there are no neutral grounds for resolving disagreements, since all readings are based on assumptions brought to the text. Indeed, one has no assurance even about the appropriateness of one's own reading, but must live with the uncertainty that is inherent in faith itself.

This is why Barth offers so little "argument" for his exegesis or for the presuppositions with which he starts. In the end there simply is no "public" argument by which to convince someone of the assumption that scripture

witnesses to Christ. Barth understands this and thus does not even try. To do so would be to enter into apologetics and to give up the theological task before one had even begun. Nonetheless, the lack of argument in Barth's exegesis is disconcerting for some of his interpreters.⁵³ If Fish is right, however, Barth is simply refraining from the impossible. All demonstration or proof is only masked persuasion based on the untenable assumption of a stable text whose meaning is equally available to all readers.

Barth's response, then, to the concern that there must be ways of determining right readings is to appeal to persuasion, that is, to assume that the right reading will be convincing and satisfying to the church. Hence, Barth invites challenges to his interpretations not at the level of argument about presuppositions but at the level of actual exegesis—if you don't like my readings offer a better one!⁵⁴ For instance, at the end of his christological exegesis of the Israelite monarchy in First and Second Samuel, Barth writes that these passages can only be understood, "if we are ready to learn from the New Testament what the riddle in these data was, and at the same time how profoundly they were filled with hidden and revealed divine truth." But he goes on, "And if there are those who for any reason cannot accept our 'if,' i.e., the presupposition of the apostolic exegesis of these passages—very well, then, let them show us a better key to the problem of the elect king of the Books of Samuel!" (CD II/2, 393).

Another interesting example of Barth's reliance on persuasion over demonstration or proof is in an exchange he had with Rudolph Bultmann. Barth called Bultmann's work "a new form of the old neo-Protestantism from which I am separated not only by a different theology but ... a different faith."⁵⁵ Yet, he understood that there was no neutral way to decide between the theological grounds on which they each stood. Thus, he writes,

I can only repeat that with your well known attachment to Heidegger (not because he is Heidegger but because he is a philosopher, who as such has nothing to say to and in theology) you have done something that one ought not to do as an evangelical theologian. And if you ask: Why not? I can only answer you, not with an argument, but with a recitation of the creed.⁵⁶

Long before it was popular, Barth had realized that there are no secure foundations for knowledge and therefore no a priori grounds for inter-communal argument. One can hardly help hearing echoes of Barth in Fish's affirmation that "when challenged, one can always give reasons But those reasons are always like the reasons given in the catechism; they are reasons for your faith, and they are also reasons that derive from your faith in a circular but not vicious relationship."⁵⁷ Theology, like literary criticism and biblical exegesis, begins with a *credo*. Thus, in Barth's understanding of biblical interpretation, disagreement must be worked out within a framework of certain assumptions, and even then the issue is one of offering

alternative readings and appealing to the persuasiveness of the exegesis. Barth's conviction and hope was that in the end the Holy Spirit would guide proper interpretation and thus render persuasive to the church the reading it needed to hear.

One might argue that the role of the church in the position I am advancing befits a Roman Catholic hermeneutic far more than that of a man so thoroughly shaped by the reformation. There is some truth to this, and what it shows is precisely the catholicity (or Catholicity) of Barth's thought. This is brought out in the warm reception which he gave the Vatican II document *Dei Verbum*. Of all the writings of the council, this one seemed to interest Barth the most; he even led a colloquium during the winter term of 1966–67 in which this constitution was discussed.⁵⁸ Unlike Trent and Vatican I, *Dei Verbum* put less emphasis on tradition and the teaching office as separate sources of revelation and more emphasis on their role in the authentic interpretation and handing on of the revelation witnessed to in scripture. Excepting chapter 2 of the document (which Barth refers to as "the great fit of weakness which befell the council in the editing of our text"), Barth believed that "*Dei Verbum* could be a helpful model for us [Protestants] in dealing with the problems of 'tradition' and 'teaching office' which we tend to neglect."⁵⁹ Barth saw clearly that both of these concepts were important to Reformed and reformation belief and practice. Their negative reception in Protestant circles owed more to the lamentable developments of Protestant orthodoxy outlined above than they did to the reformers themselves. Barth writes,

As for the concept "tradition," did not the churches which arose in the Reformation in the sixteenth century appeal with one accord to the Councils of the first several centuries? And were we not justified in developing the traditions that became fixed in the various 'confessions' (up to and including the Theological Declaration of Barmen in 1934) and also unwritten traditions? And as for the concept of "teaching office,"... did not Calvin exercise in the sixteenth century in Geneva, in all of French-speaking Protestantism, and even far beyond, a function not entirely unlike the office of Peter in Rome?⁶⁰

In addition to affirming the role of tradition and teaching office in the interpretation of scripture, Barth makes clear that *sola scriptura* does not mean reading the Bible apart from the ecclesial context and interpretive practices that give it meaning.

We do not live, think, and teach on the basis of a Scripture that is suspended all alone in the air, and thus not '*sola*' (= *solitaria*) *Scriptura*. We live, think, and teach (don't we do it in the same way and in agreement with the previously mentioned trend of the Constitution *Dei Verbum*?) in the communion of Saints, as we listen with filial reverence

and brotherly love to the voice of pastors and teachers of God's people, those of the past as well as those of the present. But first and last we do so as we adhere to the revelation of God to which the Holy Scriptures bear witness, which is inspired by the Holy Spirit, and which gives inspiration; that is, we do so in obeying in faith the living voice of Jesus Christ.⁶¹

Barth's affinities with this "new Catholicism" distanced him from many of his Protestant colleagues when it came to biblical interpretation. Perhaps this is why Barth could wonder, "What if one day Rome (without ceasing to be Rome) simply overtakes us in the question of the renewal of the church on the basis of the word and the spirit of the gospel, and puts us in the shade?"⁶² Barth was indeed radically committed to the theology of the reformation, but he harbored no sentimental attachment to the trends in biblical interpretation that as early as the seventeenth century replaced the dynamic, living Word of the reformers with a stagnant book of truths. Over against this option, and its progeny in historical criticism, it is no wonder that Barth found closer company in the "new Catholicism."

A final example of Barth's commitment to communities of interpretation derives from an incident, once again regarding Bultmann, in 1947.⁶³ Hans Bruns, a pastor in the Evangelical Church, became distraught at Bultmann's interpretation of the New Testament, especially at his reference to the resurrection as a "legend." Bruns proposed to the President of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany that the denomination found its own seminaries in order to reduce the influence of scholars like Bultmann on theological students. The president of the council then wrote to Barth for advice. In his response Barth is less concerned with the particular instance of Bultmann's calling the resurrection a legend than he is with Bultmann's overall methodological presuppositions. The intriguing thing about Barth's response, however, is that he does not encourage an exegetical or methodological debate with Bultmann. In fact, he urges that "no controversy be initiated" against him. His advice, rather, is that

if the situation in Marburg proves to be as perilous as Pastor Bruns makes out, we should send the best pastors available into the community there and do everything else that is possible to see that Bultmann and his students are encompassed not only by a 'believing' but also by a living community The proper action of the church in the face of the Bultmann problem can consist only of the church really *being* the church, in practice and not just in theory, at the point of Bultmann's attack.⁶⁴

Barth's imaginative (and probably serious) proposal follows quite reasonably from his convictions about interpretation. The solution to dubious exegesis is not to argue methodology or do battle over presuppositions, but

rather to be visibly present as the church community, to create an interpretive environment which will embody and in turn evoke a right reading of scripture.

IV

Before ending, one last point must be noted. In our reading of Fish we saw him destabilize both text and reader but affirm the possibility of determinate meaning within interpretive communities that are themselves stable. Even if they are always undergoing change, their level of stability at any given time is enough to ensure that a relatively agreed meaning will arise among readers within this community. The questions we must put are two. First, are any communities, in fact, as unified as Fish seems to assume? That is, having shown text and self to be ambiguous constructions, what makes Fish think communities are any more definitely structured? Jacques Derrida has suggested that the history of Western metaphysics, which is the "history of the concept of structure, ... must be thought of as a series of substitutions of center for center, as a linked chain of determinations of the center. Successively, and in a regulated fashion, the center receives different forms or names. ... Its matrix ... is the determination of Being as *presence* in all senses of this word."⁶⁵ Has Fish merely displaced the center from text and self to community, while replicating all the same problems which come with assuming an invariable *presence*? The second question is, even if communities are as unified as Fish thinks, is it not possible that this stability has come about as the result of coercive practices by those in power who silence others in order to advance their own self interest? The issue could be put ecclesialogically by asking how the church can continue to be a reforming church if the authority structures in the community are so definitively underwritten?

The key issue for the purposes of this project is whether such challenges could be made against Barth, regardless of whether or not Fish falls victim to their critiques. Though I have not adequate space here to take up the issue, my hunch is that Barth avoids these problems. For one thing, Barth makes clear that the church is no more stable than the text or self. The community stands under the same promise and hope that it will become the church, but its existence as church takes place as the event of God's gracious act. There are always spaces for reform in a church which must constantly await God's action to bring it into existence ever anew. To put it another way, we have seen hints that Barth is as determined a critic of *presence* as Derrida. As was pointed out above, the Word of God is never "present" in scripture, but rather is recalled and expected. The desire for such presence is a desire for control, a desire to make God and God's Word manipulable, which Barth wishes to undermine at every turn. The event in which the Bible becomes the Word of God or in which the church really becomes the church

is something like a Derridean “event”—a “rupture” rather than a closure.⁶⁶ This seems to me the way to describe how Barth saves space for the church to be *semper reformanda*, but a full explication of this would require another study.⁶⁷

NOTES

- 1 Karl Barth-Rudolph Bultmann *Letters 1922–1966*, Bernd Jaspert (ed.), Geoffrey W. Bromiley (trans. and ed.) (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982), p. 40.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- 4 As James M. Robinson writes, ‘Into the void left by the collapse of hermeneutics exploded Karl Barth’s *Romans*. This book is not hermeneutics, a theory about interpretation, but rather *hermeneia*: a commentary, in which the subject matter of Paul’s language is radically translated and proclaimed anew in the language of our day. It is this *fait accompli* that has called forth the hermeneutical reflection of our times.’ ‘Hermeneutic Since Barth,’ in James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb (eds), *New Frontiers in Theology*, vol II: *The New Hermeneutic* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 22.
- 5 See Barth’s remarks in Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life From Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), p. 466.
- 6 Paul McGlassen, *Jesus and Judas: Biblical Exegesis in Barth*, AAR Academy Series, no. 72 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), p. 8.
- 7 See McGlassen, pp. 154f.; Mark I. Wallace, *The Second Naiveté: Barth, Ricoeur, and the New Yale Theology*, Studies in American Biblical Hermeneutics, no. 6 (Mercer: Mercer University Press, 1990), p. 3; Mark I. Wallace, ‘The World of the Text: Theological Hermeneutics in the Thought of Karl Barth and Paul Ricoeur,’ *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 41:1 (1986), pp. 1–15; Werner G. Jeanrond, ‘Karl Barth’s Hermeneutics,’ in Nigel Biggar (ed.), *Reckoning With Barth* (London and Oxford: Mowbray, 1988), pp. 84ff.; George Hunsinger, ‘Beyond Literalism and Expressivism: Karl Barth’s Hermeneutical Realism,’ *Modern Theology* 3:3 (1987), pp. 209–223; William Werpehowski, ‘Narrative and Ethics in Barth,’ *Theology Today* 43:3 (1986), pp. 335f.; George Lindbeck, ‘Barth and Textuality,’ *Theology Today* 43:3 (1986), p. 362; Ronald F. Thiemann, ‘Response to George Lindbeck,’ *Theology Today* 43:3 (1986), p. 380; D. F. Ford, ‘Barth’s Interpretation of the Bible,’ in Stephen Sykes (ed.), *Karl Barth: Studies of His Theological Method* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), pp. 56ff.; David H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), pp. 39ff.
- 8 Ford, pp. 56–57; Kelsey, pp. 39ff.; Werpehowski, pp. 33f.; Thiemann, p. 380.
- 9 Hunsinger, pp. 209ff.
- 10 McGlassen, p. 154.
- 11 Wallace, ‘The World of the Text,’ pp. 2–3; Lindbeck, pp. 362ff.
- 12 Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), p. 32.
- 13 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vols 1–4 (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1956–1975), hereafter cited parenthetically as CD.
- 14 Anthony Thiselton has warned us of ‘the major difficulties and limited value of Stanley Fish’s later theory for biblical studies and for theology’ (*New Horizons in Hermeneutics* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992], p. 546). He has also dismissed Barth’s work as overly pneumatic and therefore of little interest in hermeneutical discussions (*The Two Horizons* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980], pp. 87–90). I hope to show that he is wrong on both counts. Some more positive appraisals of Fish’s contribution to biblical interpretation include A. K. M. Adam, ‘The Sign of Jonah: A Fish-Eye View,’ *Semeia*, 51 (1990), pp. 177–191; Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993); Stanley Hauerwas and Steve Long, ‘Interpreting the Bible as a Political Act,’ *Religion and Intellectual Life* 6:3/4 (1989), pp. 134–142; and Stephen D. Moore, ‘Negative Hermeneutics, Insubstantial Texts: Stanley Fish and the Biblical Interpreter,’ *JAAR* 54:4 (1986), pp. 707–719.

Because I am interested in interpretive communities, I will focus most of my attention on the later Barth of the *Church Dogmatics*. It does seem true, though, that Barth's position in the CD is anticipated in certain ways even in his very early writings. The resistance to objectifying the text and seeking meaning through method is a common theme from *Romans* onward. Further, the importance of the situation of the reader and the posture of faith remains central from early to late Barth. It is specifically locating right reading in the church community that distinguishes the work of the later Barth from the early Barth on the issue of interpretation. In a similar way, there is an early and late Stanley Fish. Early Fish, like early Barth, is attentive to the reader and thus sets forth a reader-response theory as a way to move beyond formalism and New Criticism. Later Fish recognizes that implicit in reader-response interpretation is a continued formalism, and from this he turns his attention to the communities that shape the reading practices of particular readers. Fish chronicles this change in *Is There a Text in This Class?*

- 15 There are, however, certain promising exceptions. Late in his career Hans Frei moved toward a more communal understanding of biblical interpretation, though this shift was somewhat tentative. One finds, for instance, in 'Literal Reading: Does it Stretch or Will it Break?', *The Bible and the Narrative Tradition*, ed. Frank McConnell, a turn away from Frei's earlier reliance on New Criticism and a growing awareness that even the centrality of narrative to biblical interpretation is a product of communal judgment (pp. 41–42, 44, 61–64, 67–68). It is unclear precisely how Frei would have worked out this new trajectory if he had lived to pursue it. An excellent discussion of Frei that highlights this communal shift in his understanding of interpretation is in Charles Campbell, 'Preaching Jesus', Ph.D. diss., Duke University 1993, see especially chapter 2. In addition Stanley Hauerwas, in *Unleashing the Scripture*, takes up and elaborates Fish's position in relation to biblical interpretation. Finally, one finds in Stephen Fowl and L. Gregory Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), an attention to the importance of communal context for faithful reading.
- 16 Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 181.
- 17 Thus, our dialogue with Fish is not unlike the important and ongoing dialogue of Christians with Marx and Marxists. At a time when Christian eschatology was either ignored or idealized, Marx gave us a secularized version of a Christian belief, which reminded us of the historical and material nature of our eschatological hopes (that is, he reminded us why we pray, 'thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven'). He thus has become a dialogue partner for theologians because he points us (albeit in a secularized way) to something we once knew.
- 18 Fish, *Text*, p. vii.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 163.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 335.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 171.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 321.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 331–332.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 332. Cf. pp. 303–4, 314–15; 318, 336–38.
- 25 Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally* (Durham and London: Duke, 1989), p. 153.
- 26 As A. K. M. Adam has rightly pointed out, 'we must recognize that the phenomenon of apparent "resistance to interpretation" is not a property inherent in the text, but is rather a property of our common propensity to use the English language in certain ways rather than others.' In 'The Sign of Jonah: A Fish-Eye View,' *Semeia* 51 (1990), p. 179.
- 27 Fish, *Text*, p. 367.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 367.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 369.
- 30 Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1958), p. 40.
- 31 Fish, *Text*, p. 271–272.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 271.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 328.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 170.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 168.

- 36 Obviously Augustine would not agree with Fish on every point. Augustine is still concerned, for instance, about authorial intention, though this is subordinated to the rule of charity. Cf. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, pp. 30–31, 90, 93.
- 37 Fish, *Text*, p. 181.
- 38 *Ibid.*, pp. 184–86. This reading relies on the formal structure of the text and suggests how it guides the experience of the reader. But such a reliance seems to contradict Fish's assertion that there is no structure "in" the text, as such. Yet Fish never denies that we *find* structure, nor does he cease to argue that everyone should see the structure he does in his own readings. In this instance, Fish is not talking theory but actually proposing an interpretation. He is seeking to persuade us that the structure he creates as he reads the text is convincing and satisfying, indeed, that it is particularly appropriate in that it recreates the experience of being found that resonates throughout Andrewes' sermon and in the text from John.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 193. Fish's identification here of Christ and meaning is not a move to reduce Christ to a general meaning structure. It is rather to say that, as Fish reads Andrewes, the meaning Christians seek does not consist of abstract propositions that can be mined from the biblical text. Rather, to find meaning is to be found by Christ—for there can be no meaning more determinative than the very life of this person.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 195.
- 41 It is interesting to compare McGlassen at this point. He writes, "The subject matter of Holy Scripture is witness to God's Word. As such it has two dimensions: a textual content and a real object" *Jesus and Judas*, p. 30. The striking absence of the third form of God's Word, and thus the collapsing of the Word to a twofold entity, is but a vivid instance of a general lack of interest in Barth studies in the communal context of reading which I hope to show is central to Barth's view of biblical interpretation. Cf. Robert T. Osborn, "Christ, Bible and Church in Karl Barth," *Journal of Bible and Religion* 24 (1956), pp. 100ff., who acknowledges the importance of the threefold form of the Word, but goes on to ignore the role of the church when discussing Barth's hermeneutics.
- 42 The *ordo essendi*/*ordo cognoscendi* distinction is not one Barth himself makes explicitly, though I think it is a helpful description of what Barth is doing. Yet to refer to an *ordo essendi* here is dangerous given Barth's critique of "being"—especially with regard to scripture. The "being" of scripture, proclamation, and church is not a stable quality but is determined for Barth by God's act in which God makes each of these to be (I will say more about this below). Perhaps it would be better to speak of an *ordo auctoritatis*, but since Barth himself at times annexes "ontology" for his own purposes, I have chosen to use the classical distinction with the warning that any notion of "being" should be considered "under erasure" for Barth.
- Such a distinction between *ordo essendi* and *ordo cognoscendi* would be foreign to Fish, who would not want to push beyond the noetic ordering to anything like an "ontology"—even one as nonfoundational as Barth's. I do not think, however, that this difference undermines the comparison between these two figures.
- 43 Fish, *Text*, p. vii.
- 44 Perhaps it is not surprising that Stanley Hauerwas, in his attempt to apply Fish's interpretive theory to the reading of scripture, reaches some of the same conclusions about the current state of biblical interpretation in America. He writes, "The irony of the fundamentalist attack on the higher critics is that higher critics share many of the fundamentalist's presuppositions. In particular the higher critics, at least in their earliest manifestations, assumed that the text had a meaning that was not dependent on the community" (*Unleashing the Scripture*, p. 33). Like Barth, Hauerwas realizes that to link meaning to the text as such is to give human interests power over the biblical word. Thus, he observes that "ironically, by freeing the Bible from the Church and putting it in the possession of the individual conscience, the Bible becomes, in the process, the possession of nationalistic ideologies" (p. 32).
- 45 Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London/Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 10.
- 46 McGlassen, p. 116; Wallace, *Second Naiveté*, p. 26.
- 47 Barth, *Word of God*, p. 34.
- 48 Fish, *Text*, p. 193.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 181.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 181.

51 Barth, *Romans*, p. 97.

52 It is perhaps better not to oppose persuasion and proof in this way, but to say that for Barth persuasion is proof (which is precisely Fish's point). Here it is helpful to recall the influence of Anselm on Barth. What is called a "proof" in Anselm, Barth shows to be a matter of persuasively working out the inner logic of the Christian *Credo*, such that it can be convincing to an interlocutor. "Proof" is not the process of starting from a neutral (that is, non-credal) starting point and demonstrating the "facts" of the case. As Barth put it, "What is set out in *Prosl.* 2–4 is first described as a 'proof' (*probare, probatio*) by Anselm's opponent Gaunilo, but this designation is adopted by Anselm himself. This concept can be found elsewhere in Anselm but always in passages where he is speaking of a definite result that his work has actually produced or is expected to produce. Anselm is bent on this result and strives to achieve it. But in point of fact his own particular description of what he is doing is not *probare* at all but *intelligere*. As *intelligere* is achieved it issues in *probare*. Here we can give a general definition: what to prove means is that the validity of certain presuppositions advocated by Anselm is established over against those who doubt or deny them; that is to say, it means the polemical apologetic result of *intelligere*" (*Anselm: Fides Quarens Intellectum* [London: SCM Press, 1960] p. 14). That is to say, proof is the result achieved when one has persuaded those who doubt. Barth adds later, "*Intelligere* comes about by reflection on the *Credo* that has already been spoken and affirmed" (p. 27), and "there can be no question but that the fundamental meaning of *intelligere* in Anselm is *legere*: to reflect upon what has already been said in the *Credo*" (p. 40, cf. pp. 54–56). In this sense proof and persuasion are one and the same thing. Thus, when I say that "the answer is persuasion rather than demonstration or proof," I mean "proof" in the common sense of a presuppositionless presenting of an objective and neutrally determined truth designed to convince anyone regardless of one's beliefs and practices.

53 For instance, McGlassen, pp. 43, 67, 75–76, 80, 108–109, 143–44; and Jeanrond, 91–92, 95–96.

54 Barth, *Romans*, p. ix; cf. McGlassen, p. 40.

55 *Letters*, p. 65.

56 *Ibid.*, p. 65. It is worth noting that my use of Fish to illumine Barth's understanding of scripture is fundamentally different from Bultmann's use of Heidegger to which Barth responded so critically. I am not suggesting that Fish presents us with generally true insights to which theology and biblical exegesis must conform. Rather, I am suggesting that we find in Fish, and especially in his readings of Augustine and Andrewes, a reminder of certain practices of the church that have been largely forgotten. Further, Fish is being used here in a purely heuristic manner—that is, to help us read Barth in such a way that we attend to certain aspects of his work that have not been highlighted in discussions of his doctrine of the Word of God.

57 Fish, *Doing*, p. 462.

58 Busch, pp. 484–85.

59 Karl Barth, *Ad Limina Apostolorum: An Appraisal of Vatican II*, trans. Keith R. Crim (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968), p. 51.

60 *Ibid.*, p. 49.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 49–50.

62 Busch, p. 481.

63 The following comes from *Letters*, pp. 139ff.

64 *Ibid.*, p. 146–47.

65 Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978), p. 279.

66 Derrida, p. 278.

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