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The Fundamental Word of Christ's Eschatological Proclamation

Karl Barth on the Beatitudes

Declan Kelly | ORCID: 0000-0002-7403-5156

University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, UK

declanjkc@gmail.com

Abstract

Whether understood as an expression of the inner attitude or disposition of the Christian, as a description of the kingdom's inhabitants, or as a Christianizing of virtue theory, the beatitudes have generally been read within the framework of Christian ethics. This is as true of the Protestant tradition as it is of others. This essay considers a notable exception to that general approach: the account of the beatitudes as found in Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* IV/2. Read as a "word of grace," the beatitudes are understood by Barth to be a deepening of the revelation that God is *for us*, and ultimately so, as the "total savior." More specifically, this essay argues that Barth offers a christological-cosmological reading of the beatitudes orientated to the saving advent of God's eschatological kingdom in a "wounded" cosmos subjected to foreign lords, and that he thereby taps into the "apocalyptic" character of these sayings.

Keywords

beatitudes – Barth – apocalyptic – grace – kingdom

Introduction

The beatitudes are one of the best-known and most cherished portions of the New Testament. They are also a source of no little theological contestation and consternation. The Protestant tradition, in particular, has from its very inception been forced to grapple with the doctrinal implications of the beatitudes. After all, their *prima facie* form—those who do X will receive Y—seems to sug-

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gest the works-righteousness scheme that the Reformers sought to overturn with their uncompromising attachment to the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith apart from the works of the law.¹ Faced with this potential threat to the doctrine of justification, the Reformers felt compelled to deflate the status of the beatitudes in order to demonstrate the harmony between these sayings and the apostle Paul's soteriology.

Martin Luther dealt with this potential threat by insisting that the beatitudes are not concerned with the being of a Christian—with what makes a Christian a Christian—but with the outward activity of those who are *already* Christians by grace.² In John Calvin's *Institutes*, the relationship between the beatitudes and the doctrine of justification is briefly addressed and similarly resolved. Calvin notes that in certain biblical passages there appears to be a view that blessedness is attributed to works, and some of the beatitudes seem to countenance this view. Calvin is adamant, however, that these makarisms “do not gainsay the truth of what Paul says.”³ They do not do so, he argues, because the blessedness promised in the beatitudes is, essentially, penultimate, or non-salvific. The only blessedness that ultimately matters is the blessedness of forgiveness. Within the sphere of that ultimate blessedness there is nevertheless a place for penultimate blessedness. But outside of that sphere of ultimate blessedness, the penultimate blessedness is of no avail.

Acquitted of contradicting the doctrine of justification, the beatitudes could be freely interpreted by Luther and Calvin in a decidedly ethical fashion. According to Luther, the beatitudes “are nothing but instruction about the fruits and good works of a Christian.”⁴ Though Luther states that Christ is *not* a new Moses, that is, that Christ is not a teacher of the law, since he comes not with demands but with promises,⁵ he can nevertheless read the first beatitude as a “command ... to be ‘spiritually poor.’”⁶ Calvin takes a similar approach. He understands the beatitudes to be, in essence, words of exhortation to the faithful. By commending certain qualities, the intention of the beatitudes is to

1 The deployment of the beatitudes as descriptions of that “higher” monastic life that went beyond obedience to the mosaic law also fueled Protestant anxieties over this portion of the New Testament.

2 Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 21: *Sermon on the Mount (Sermons) and the Magnificat*, ed. and trans. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 285–287. Henceforth *LW* followed by volume number and page number.

3 John Calvin, *Institutio* III.xvii.10; quoted according to the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1960), 813.

4 *LW* 21:26.

5 *LW* 21:10.

6 *LW* 21:12.

acclimatize disciples of Christ to his rule from the cross, in the hope of future reward. These disciples must learn to “set their happiness beyond the world, and above the desire of the flesh.”⁷ It is this ‘philosophy’ that the beatitudes teach. Far from eliminating the ‘ethicizing’ of the beatitudes, then, the early Reformers can be seen to incorporate an ethical interpretation of the beatitudes into a predominantly Pauline soteriology, though the meaning of ‘ethical’ is undoubtedly transfigured in the process.⁸

The subsequent Protestant tradition has largely followed the Reformers’ approach to the beatitudes. Whether they are understood as an expression of the inner attitude or disposition of the individual Christian,⁹ as a description of the kingdom’s inhabitants,¹⁰ or as a Christianizing of virtue theory,¹¹ these gospel sayings have been read within the framework of Christian ethics. Expressed in terms of Ulrich Luz’s typology, it can be said that Protestant theologians have tended as a rule to fall into one of two closely related schools of interpretation: they read the beatitudes either as ethical exhortation or as regulations for community life.¹²

One notable exception to this rule is Karl Barth. Indeed, according to Luz’s typology, there is a third school of interpretation, one that is more sparsely populated than the other two, yet that at face value appears particularly and differently hospitable to Protestant theological sensibilities. This third type consists of those who read the beatitudes as a “word of grace.”¹³ Luz himself

7 John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vol. 1, trans. A.W. Morrison, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, Calvin’s Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 169.

8 Contra Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, ed. Helmut Koester (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 200: “The Reformation’s interpretation has somewhat eliminated the ethicizing.”

9 This is a common reading among nineteenth- and twentieth-century Protestant liberal theologians. For example, though Albert Schweitzer does not read the beatitudes as a series of exhortations, he nevertheless discerns in these sayings “the qualities which are an indication of inward membership of the Kingdom.” Albert Schweitzer, *The Kingdom of God and Primitive Christianity*, trans. A. Garrard (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1968), 81.

10 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 4 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000). Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006).

11 Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017); Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997).

12 Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, 188–189.

13 Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, 188. Luz also includes Gerhard Barth and Karl Bernhard Bornhauser among this group of interpreters. One can also associate the following works with the

numbers Barth among this third group of interpreters.¹⁴ This article takes Luz's observation as an invitation to examine what it looks like, on Barth's terms, to understand the beatitudes as a word of grace. Barth, I will demonstrate, interprets the beatitudes as a deepening of the revelation that God is *for us*, and ultimately so, as the "total savior."¹⁵ This reference to Jesus as the "total savior" appears in the doctrine of nothingness in *CD* III/3, in the context of Barth's apocalyptic description of Christ as "the Conqueror not only of sin but also of evil and death."¹⁶ What I show in the present article is that this broadly "apocalyptic" sensibility on Barth's part bears upon his reading of the beatitudes and distinguishes it from the "ethical" readings that otherwise predominate in the Protestant tradition.

In part 1, I will unpack Barth's description of the beatitudes as the "fundamental Word in Christ's proclamation of the kingdom" within the context of "The Royal Man" as a whole and in connection with his later (and related) treatment of the theme of the kingdom of God in *The Christian Life*. In doing so, I will demonstrate in particular the "cosmological-apocalyptic" significance Barth gives to the concepts of proclamation, kingdom, and Christ, and will trace the impact of this cosmological-apocalyptic significance for Barth's approach to the beatitudes as a whole. In part 2, I will go on to explore how this cosmological-apocalyptic framing of the beatitudes informs Barth's distinctive reading of the first four Matthean beatitudes before turning, in part 3, to Barth's under-

"word of grace" type: Dale C. Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1999); W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew 1–7* (London: T&T Clark, 2004); W.D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964); Joachim Jeremias, *The Sermon on the Mount*, trans. Norman Perrin (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963); Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News according to Matthew*, trans. David E. Green (Atlanta: Westminster John Knox Press, 1975).

14 On Barth's account of the beatitudes, see Chad Quantaince, "The Blessed Life; Theological Interpretation and Use of the Beatitudes by Augustine, Calvin, and Barth" (PhD diss., Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education, 2003). See also the various engagements with Barth's interpretation of the beatitudes in Rebekah Eklund, *The Beatitudes through the Ages* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021). For explorations of Barth's reading of the Sermon on the Mount in *CD* II/2, see A. Katherine Grieb, "Living Righteousness: Karl Barth and the Sermon on the Mount," in *Thy Word Is Truth: Barth on Scripture*, ed. George Hunsinger (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 86–111; Paul T. Nimmo, "Exegesis, Ontology, and Ethics: Karl Barth on the Sermon on the Mount," in *Christology and Scripture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Andrew T. Lincoln and Angus Paddison (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 171–187.

15 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (hereafter *CD*), trans. and ed. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, 4 vols. in 13 part-vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–1975) III/3, 311.

16 *CD* III/3, 311.

standing of the remaining beatitudes, which are all marked by their explicit reference to human activity.

1 Apocalypticizing the Beatitudes

The most notable “formal” feature of the gospel beatitude, according to Barth, is the “privileged” place given to the collection of beatitudes at the head (*Spitze*) of Jesus’s two key sermons in Matthew and Luke.¹⁷ By Barth’s reckoning, the privileged place accorded these sayings signifies that the beatitudes spoken by Jesus “impressed themselves on the tradition as the fundamental Word of [Christ’s] proclamation of the kingdom of God.”¹⁸

This is a striking description of the beatitudes and one that requires careful unpacking. Three elements from it are worth expanding upon. The first is Barth’s description of the beatitudes as *proclamation*. The second is his understanding of the content of this proclamation as proclamation of *the kingdom of God*. The third is his concentration on the fact that the beatitudes are *Christ’s* own proclamation of the kingdom of God. Each of these elements, we will see, are freighted with unmistakable “cosmological-apocalyptic” significance. The act of preaching, the content of what is preached, and the identity of the preacher are understood against the backdrop of the sovereign, eschatological act of God whose purpose is a “seizure of power” (*Machtergreifung*) within a cosmos under foreign lordship.

1.1 Proclamation

Barth’s description of the beatitudes as the fundamental Word in Christ’s proclamation of the kingdom encourages us to consider further the understanding of “proclamation” that emerges in “The Royal Man.” The third section of “The Royal Man”—the section on the “life-act” of Jesus—is particularly helpful for elucidating what, precisely, Barth means when he describes the beatitudes as *the* Word of proclamation.

A treatment of this life-act, Barth insists, must begin with the fact that this life-act was Jesus’s Word. Barth uses the term ‘Word’ in a comprehensive sense. He refuses the distinction between the speaking of Jesus and the act of Jesus, for such a distinction overlooks the reality that in all of the acts of Jesus there

17 CD IV/2, 188.

18 CD IV/2, 188, revised translation (hereafter “rev.”).

was also a speaking, as well as the reality that the speaking of Jesus was itself a “decisive and effective act.”¹⁹

The “primary and controlling aspect” of Jesus’s life-act, in Barth’s view, is the “communication,” the “self-communication” (*Selbstmitteilung*)²⁰ of Jesus by his “spoken *Word*.”²¹ This will be the major theme in the third part-volume of the doctrine of reconciliation, where the doctrine takes a “Johannine” turn. In the “Synoptic” inflection of the doctrine of reconciliation in *CD IV/2*, Barth’s discussion of the spoken Word of Jesus is organized around the three most important “active words” used by the gospel writers to denote the speech of Jesus: *euangelizesthai* (to preach the gospel), *didaskein* (to teach), and *kērussein* (to proclaim).

Matthew’s use of the word ‘teach’ in the short preface to the Sermon on the Mount suggests that the beatitudes are best located within the dimension of the spoken Word of Jesus denoted by the term *didaskein*. For Barth, however, it is under the term *euangelizesthai* that the beatitudes most naturally belong. The preaching of the gospel is summarized by Barth as an eschatological “summons to joy” (*Aufruf zur Freude*).²² The beatitudes, as “the climax [*Spitze*] of this summons,” are for this reason to be understood as gospel proclamation.²³

Barth, it should be noted, refuses any hard and fast distinction between “to preach the gospel” and “to teach.”²⁴ Yet, even if the beatitudes were to be read by Barth as teaching, such a reading would be guided by the insistence that the teaching of Jesus “is not a pedagogic action.”²⁵ This negative reference to pedagogic action signifies the contrast between the Word of Jesus and the word of both stoic moralists and gnostic mystagogues. The guiding principle of moralists and mystagogues is “a program for the education of the human race, a plan for its moral or sacramental elevation, for the development of its deepest (and hitherto unsuspected or neglected) potentialities, for their actualization even to the point of what was conceived to be an attainable deification.”²⁶ Numer-

19 *CD IV/2*, 194.

20 The ET renders this as “impartation” and “self-impartation.” Given Barth’s emphasis on the spoken Word in this context, “communication” seems a more appropriate translation. Katherine Sonderegger highlights the decisive role of the concept of *Mitteilung* in Barth’s doctrine of sanctification in *CD IV/2* in “Sanctification as Impartation in the Doctrine of Karl Barth,” *Zeitschrift für Dialektische Theologie* 18, no. 3 (2002): 308–315.

21 *CD IV/2*, 194.

22 *CD IV/2*, 198, rev.

23 *CD IV/2*, 198.

24 *CD IV/2*, 198.

25 *CD IV/2*, 203.

26 *CD IV/2*, 203.

ous interpretations of the beatitudes rhyme with this guiding principle.²⁷ Yet where others see significant overlap between Jesus and the Stoics, Barth sees stark opposition.²⁸

The preaching of Jesus is for Barth an irreducibly apocalyptic activity, in a way that the words of the Stoics, and even the words of the Old Testament prophets, could not be. It is an apocalyptic activity because the event proclaimed is, as he writes,

the coming of the kingdom, the fulfillment of the lordship of God on earth, its concrete institution in direct contrast to all human lordships and kingdoms, the striking of the last hour for these dominions however long they may still persist, the once for all, complete and irrevocable seizure of power by God as a historical reality among men.²⁹

Furthermore, as indicated above, the very distinction between “event” and “proclamation” is called into distinction in the life-act of Jesus. The preaching of Christ is itself a decisive and efficacious act. “What He proclaims becomes actuality the moment He does so.”³⁰ Because Jesus is “the One who comes,” he does not speak of “an assumption of power [*Machtergreifung*] which has still to take place, or does so in some other way.”³¹ Rather, God’s eschatological seizure of power in the cosmos is accomplished “as [Jesus] speaks.”³²

Seen in the light of this subsequent discussion of Christ’s proclamation in “The Royal Man,” Barth’s description of the beatitudes as the fundamental Word in Christ’s proclamation of the kingdom is shown to be nothing less than a description of their apocalyptic significance and character. Taken together, the beatitudes are the fundamental Word spoken at “the striking at the last hour”

27 Jonathan Pennington, for example, develops an “aretegenic” reading strategy for the Sermon on the Mount, that is, a reading whose purpose is the formation of virtue. See Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 15. Such a reading strategy presupposes a Christology wherein Christ is simultaneously “the complete and virtuous human and the true king” (15). Jesus is certainly more than a “sage or philosopher,” Pennington states, “but he is not less” (29).

28 For Pennington, this overlap is evident in what he considers to be the chief concern of both the Sermon and the Greco-Roman virtue tradition (and the Jewish wisdom tradition), namely, “the great theological and existential question of human flourishing.” Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, 1. The Sermon on the Mount, according to this framing, is “Christianity’s answer” to this “metaphysical question” (14).

29 *CD IV/2*, 204.

30 *CD IV/2*, 205.

31 *CD IV/2*, 205.

32 *CD IV/2*, 205.

and spoken against the “dominions” that are being brought to nothing precisely by this decisive and effective speech. If the beatitudes tell of what Margaret Davies has termed an “eschatological reversal,” as Barth surely thinks they do, they do so within the context of a cosmic battle, where the reversal means not simply a change of fortune but a change of lordships.³³ Barth’s description in *CD II/2* of what the Sermon on the Mount actually proclaims captures this well: it proclaims that “God has irrevocably and indissolubly set up the kingdom of His grace” in the “immediate neighborhood” of “the sphere of power of Satan.”³⁴ The beatitudes, it follows, are the head of just that proclamation.

1.2 *The Kingdom of God*

The decisive, material originality of the beatitudes is that the truth of these pronouncements is wholly dependent on the immanence of the kingdom of God. In foregrounding the reality of the kingdom, Barth is continuing the hermeneutical strategy adopted in his exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount as a whole in *CD II/2*, which reads it in the light of its connection “with the theme of God’s kingdom as it has come in the person of Jesus.”³⁵ Given the prominence of the kingdom of God both in the beatitudes themselves and in Barth’s interpretation of them, it will be helpful to sketch briefly this concept as we find it developed in Barth’s fragmentary ethics of reconciliation, posthumously published as *The Christian Life*.

Barth discusses the kingdom of God amid his elucidation of another portion of the Sermon on the Mount, namely, the petition “Thy kingdom come” within the Lord’s prayer.³⁶ “Kingdom,” Barth here insists, names not so much a location as an act and event. The prayer for the coming of the kingdom looks “to an act of God which, although it embraces all times and places in its compass, is a once-for-all act that had not taken place before and neither needs to be nor can be

33 See Margaret Davies, *Matthew*, 2nd ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 51. An apocalyptic background for the beatitudes has been noted by several commentators. Luz (*Matthew 1–7*, 189), for example, states that “[t]he background of [the first] three beatitudes is ... the apocalyptic hope for a total reversal of conditions.” See also Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1–7*, 432.

34 *CD II/2*, 688, rev.

35 *CD II/2*, 687. See also W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, “Reflections on the Sermon on the Mount,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 44, no. 3 (1991): 283: “Interpreters have again and again failed to take seriously the broader, literary context of Mt. 5–7 and have instead interpreted the chapters as though they were complete unto themselves, as though they constituted a book instead of a portion of a book.”

36 On Barth’s understanding of this petition, see Philip G. Ziegler, *Militant Grace: The Apocalyptic Turn and the Future of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 89–96.

repeated.”³⁷ The distinctiveness of this act is that it is a *new* act. The petition is uttered in “the sphere of human unrighteousness and disorder,” a sphere dominated by “lordless powers.”³⁸ Characteristic of this sphere, according to Barth, is monotony and repetition. He writes:

the sphere is finally a boring one to the extent that events in it, as Qoheleth knew and said [Eccl. 1:2–11, etc.], do not constitute any new history but are a cyclic history with constant repetition of the same things, like the famous snake which bites its tail and waits to see what will finally happen when it continues its meal.³⁹

By contrast, the kingdom of God, as God’s *act*, “does not take place in the continuation of a dubious cycle, nor as a repetition or variation of the same thing.”⁴⁰ It is, for this reason, unlike “any other event.”⁴¹ Redeploying language made famous in his commentary on Romans some forty years prior, Barth asserts that the kingdom “breaks through the plane of all previous things vertically from above [*senkrecht von oben her*].”⁴² The possibility of its occurrence is not immanent to the world; from the world’s standpoint, its occurrence is “absolutely unexpected and inconceivable.”⁴³ The kingdom is that “one thing that is wholly new.”⁴⁴

As God’s new, unprecedented act, the kingdom of God is nothing less than God himself in his coming: “God’s kingdom is God himself and—wonder of wonders, Marcion was right here—it is God himself as he not merely *is* somewhere and somehow (not even in the highest height or as the God beyond God of Paul Tillich) but as he *comes*.”⁴⁵ Barth’s description of what is involved in the coming of God is worth quoting at length:

He does not come as a self-disclosing numen to give them material for religious ideologies and the corresponding cults. He does not come to reveal and impart to them this or that morality. He does not come with

37 Karl Barth, *The Christian Life* (hereafter *TCL*): *Church Dogmatics IV/4. Lecture Fragments*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (London: T&T Clark, 1981), 235.

38 *TCL*, 235.

39 *TCL*, 235.

40 *TCL*, 235.

41 *TCL*, 235.

42 *TCL*, 235.

43 *TCL*, 235.

44 *TCL*, 239.

45 *TCL*, 237.

a purpose whose execution depends, if not totally, then at least partially on the action, or at any rate the cooperation of Christians. He comes in the deed in which he acts and deals on and for and with them as their Lord and King, in which he acts directly as such and proves himself to be such. In coming he illumines, establishes, asserts, and protects his questioned, obscured, and threatened right to man and therefore man's own right, his right to life, which is negated apart from God's own right as Lord and King.⁴⁶

The stress here is on the fact that the kingdom of God is "God's own independent action."⁴⁷ This claim has a critical force, since it indicates that the human "cannot bring in the kingdom of God."⁴⁸ Instead, the kingdom is "God's own action, which does not merge into the best of human action, for example, that of Christian faith or the Christian church, which does not mingle with it, let alone identify itself with it, which remains free and independent over against it, and which in its purity and freedom is God's gracious, reconciling, and finally redeeming action."⁴⁹

What is especially noteworthy about this understanding of the kingdom as God's independent action is that Barth explicitly contrasts it with what he takes to be the "Reformation understanding" of the kingdom initiated by Luther and Calvin, an understanding that relates the coming of the kingdom "to what is done, or should be done, in Christian faith and the Christian church in service to the world."⁵⁰ This is an understanding, moreover, which he claims "remained normative in modern theology"⁵¹ and which stands in basic continuity to the ancient tradition.

It is at this point that Barth explicitly sides with modern critical exegesis over against the theological tradition.⁵² In stating that modern New Testament scholars have "rendered a not yet fully appreciated service to theological knowledge with its discovery of the eschatological character of the New Testament in general and the message of the kingdom of God in particular," Barth is keenly aware that he is "parting company with an imposing ecclesiastical consensus."⁵³ Indeed, the disagreement over how the beatitudes are to be understood,

46 *TCL*, 236–237.

47 *TCL*, 240.

48 *TCL*, 240.

49 *TCL*, 240.

50 *TCL*, 243.

51 *TCL*, 242.

52 *TCL*, 243.

53 *TCL*, 244. The modern exegetes to whom he explicitly refers are Albert Schweitzer, Johannes Weiß, and Franz Overbeck.

I submit, concerns not so much the beatitudes themselves but the larger theme of the kingdom of God. Given the account of the kingdom later presented in *The Christian Life* yet undoubtedly already operative in *CD IV/2*—the kingdom as a new, sovereign, independent, eschatological action of God—it becomes clear why Barth would avoid a predominantly “ethical” reading of the beatitudes. For if the beatitudes are the fundamental Word in Christ’s proclamation of *the kingdom of God*, they are primarily, if not exclusively, the Word of God’s sovereign, salvific power; they declare what Eugene Boring calls an “objective reality” that results from “a divine act” and not from “subjective feelings.”⁵⁴

Barth’s understanding of the beatitudes as words bound up with the eschatological reality of the kingdom creates space for what might be called a cosmological reading of these statements. As will be explored below, they are permitted to be heard as good news for humans living in particular “situations” in the cosmos—not because of any inherent or secret goodness in these situations, but because they herald the presence of the kingdom of God that invades the monotony of the world. Who are the blessed, and why are they blessed? For Barth, the answer to both of these questions centers on the reality of God’s dawning kingdom: “both the situation of those who are pronounced blessed and also that on account of which the beatitude is proclaimed, are in some way created and conditioned by the imminent *kingdom of God*.”⁵⁵ There is for Barth a “descriptive” power to the beatitudes. They “denote and describe” both the situation of a particular group of people and the “significance and promise” of this situation. But this situation, as well as its significance and promise, are “grounded in the presence of *Jesus*.”⁵⁶

1.3 *Christ the Novum*

With this identification of the kingdom of God with the presence of Jesus we arrive at the nail on which Barth’s understanding of the beatitudes hangs.⁵⁷

54 M. Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 8 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 177. This “objectivity” of what the beatitudes declare leads Boring to reject the substitution of “happy” for “blessed.” As he points out, the opposite of “blessed” in the Gospel of Matthew is not “unhappy” but “cursed.”

55 *CD IV/2*, 188. Cf. Davies and Allison, “Reflections on the Sermon on the Mount,” 304: “The SM does not speak to ordinary people in ordinary circumstances. It instead addresses itself to those in the eschatological crisis, those overtaken by an overwhelming reality. This reality, if embraced, remakes the individual, begetting a new heart, a new life, a new creation, one which, in gratitude, can lay itself open to the requirements of eschatological revelation.”

56 *CD IV/2*, 188.

57 Earlier in “The Royal Man,” Barth makes use of Origen’s description of Jesus as the *auto-*

It is no accident when at the beginning of his treatment of the beatitudes, Barth immediately emphasizes that, with only one exception, the beatitudes included in the gospel narratives “are always pronounced ... by Jesus Himself.”⁵⁸ Above all else, it is the identity of the speaker of the gospel beatitudes that makes them a *distinctive* phenomenon.⁵⁹ Barth’s “christological” reading of the beatitudes is, for this reason, not fully captured by understandings that take them as descriptions of Christ—Christ as the poor one, Christ as the one who mourns, Christ as the meek, and so on—even though such a reading of the beatitudes is evident in some of Barth’s sermons on this portion of scripture.⁶⁰ But in the analysis of the beatitudes in “The Royal Man,” the ‘christological’ reading of the beatitudes has primarily to do with the fact that Jesus *is the one who pronounces* the blessing.

Barth’s account of the beatitudes is fundamentally disciplined by the *eschatological* identity of the speaker, who is the new human, the second Adam, the kingdom in person. As Barth declares at the climax of his treatment of the kingdom in *The Christian Life*, Jesus Christ is “the new thing” (*das Neue*),⁶¹ and precisely as *das Neue* his proclamation of the kingdom of God “is not the proclamation of a reality and truth differing from himself as its Proclaimer, from his being and life.”⁶² The theme of “newness,” in fact, is a dominant theme in Barth’s treatment of Jesus as the royal man—indeed, it is a dominant theme in the second part-volume of the doctrine of reconciliation as a whole.⁶³ § 64 begins with the thesis statement that “Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Lord who humbled

basileia, the kingdom in person. For “[t]he King and His kingdom, the Lord and His lordship, are one.” *CD* IV/2, 162–163. Cf. *CD* III/3, 156.

58 *CD* IV/2, 187–188.

59 On the importance of the identity of the speaker for understanding the Sermon, see Eduard Thurneysen, *Die Bergpredigt* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1936); Helmut Thielicke, *Life Can Begin Again: Sermons on the Sermon on the Mount*, trans. John W. Doberstein (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 8. See also Philip G. Ziegler, “Not to Abolish, But to Fulfil: The Person of the Preacher and the Claim of the Sermon on the Mount,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 22, no. 3 (2009): 275–289.

60 See, for example, a sermon on Matt. 5, preached on Good Friday in 1948. “Such a meek person, however, has been, in the true and exact sense of the word, only a single one, He Himself, *Jesus Christ alone*. And so also the promise which is given to the meek is wholly determined in Him, and its fulfilment is to be found wholly within Him.” Karl Barth, *Predigten 1935–1952*, ed. Anton Drewes, Hartmut Spieker, and Hinrich Stoevesandt, Gesamtausgabe 1.26 (Zurich: TVZ, 1996), 389.

61 *TCL*, 252.

62 *TCL*, 249.

63 For a theological treatment of the theme of “the new,” see Eberhard Jüngel, “The Emergence of the New,” in *Theological Essays II*, ed. John Webster, trans. Arnold Neufeldt-Fast and John Webster (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 35–58.

Himself to be a servant, is also the Son of Man exalted as this servant to be the Lord, the new and true and royal man.”⁶⁴ In the first section of “The Royal Man,” in which Barth delineates the character of Christ’s presence as attested in the gospels, he begins with the claim that Jesus was seen by his community as “an absolutely alien and exciting *novum*.”⁶⁵ In the second section, Barth uses the description of the “new man” in Ephesians 4:24 as the point of departure for his depiction of Christ’s correspondence to the existence of God. In his discussion of Jesus’s “revolutionary” relationship to worldly orders and powers, Barth declares that “the new thing of Jesus [*das Neue Jesu*] is the invading kingdom of God revealed in its liberating antithesis to the whole world and therefore to all its orders.”⁶⁶ Proclaimed in this revolutionary relationship to the orders is the “end” of the “old” and a “new beginning beyond this end.”⁶⁷

The theme of newness comes to a climax in Barth’s treatment of the beatitudes. What they say to those to whom they are addressed is “entirely *new*” (*ganz Neues*).⁶⁸ It is entirely new because the one who speaks here is entirely new. The beatitudes “can be said only by the royal man who Himself brings and is this new thing.”⁶⁹ And as this royal man comes on the scene, the being of those addressed in the beatitudes is “lit up in a new way”; it is a being that is “newly *ordered*” by the coming of the kingdom in the person of Christ.⁷⁰

Alongside the eschatological newness of Jesus, and filling out its particular content, stands Jesus’s correspondence to God. The beatitudes are treated at the conclusion of Barth’s exploration of the “correspondence” between the man Jesus and God. The four points of correspondence between God and Jesus that Barth picks are instructive, both in relation to the kind of christology developed in his doctrine of reconciliation and in relation to his understanding of the beatitudes. He does not select “attributes” of God in any classical sense, attributes that are then embodied by the man Jesus. Rather, he selects what one might think of as contingent aspects of the divine existence vis-à-vis the cosmos: God’s being ignored and despised by the world, God’s selection of the

64 CD IV/2, 3.

65 CD IV/2, 157.

66 CD IV/2, 177, rev.

67 CD IV/2, 178.

68 CD IV/2, 188. See Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, Including the Sermon on the Plain*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 95: “the beatitude reveals a fact commonly unknown or unexpected. Even if such a fact was known in a general way, for the person receiving the message it constitutes a new revelation.”

69 CD IV/2, 188.

70 CD IV/2, 189, rev.

poor, God's freedom in relation to worldly powers and laws, and ultimately God's being *for* the world. In selecting these points of correspondence, Barth implicitly steers clear of presenting Jesus as the ideal human or as the earthly model of virtue and piety—a presentation that flourished in the rationalistic “lives of Jesus” in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and that would undoubtedly fund a very different interpretation of the beatitudes from that which Barth advances.⁷¹ With a virtue-driven Christology in the background, the beatitudes might have been taken to extol the person of Jesus and the religion inaugurated by him as the human expression of the glorious divine character. Indeed, the popularity of the Sermon on the Mount among theologians ancient and modern has depended in part on its apologetic expediency.⁷² The moral beauty of Christianity, or its status as the highest of the world religions, could be defended by pointing to the words of Jesus in Matthew 5–7. The Christology developed by Barth in *CD IV/2* in general and “The Royal Man” in particular blocks any such understanding and use of the beatitudes at the source.

It is of particular significance that the examination of the beatitude as a “distinctive phenomenon” in the gospels concludes Barth's treatment of the fourth “correspondence” between the man Jesus and the divine life: the correspondence between Jesus's being for the world and God's being for the world.⁷³ The exegesis of the beatitudes is grouped together with Barth's exegesis of Mary's *Magnificat* and Zechariah's *Benedictus*, as well as his comments on the “compassion” of Jesus attested in the gospels.⁷⁴ As Barth reads them, each of these

71 “For Reinhard, Hess, Paulus, and the rest of the rationalistic writers He is the admirable revealer of true virtue, which is coincident with right reason.” Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. W. Montgomery, 3rd ed. (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1954), 4. In Adolf von Harnack's view, for example, the beatitudes were seen to contain the ethics and the religion of Jesus, which are shown to be “united at the root.” Adolf von Harnack, *What Is Christianity? Lectures Delivered in the University of Berlin during the Winter-Term 1899–1900*, trans. Thomas B. Saunders (London: Williams and Norgate, 1902), 74. Barth is critical of this presentation of Jesus: “the New Testament certainly did not present Jesus Christ as the moral ideal, and if we apply the canons usually applied to the construction of a moral ideal, we may easily fall into certain difficulties not easy of solution, whether with the Jesus of the Synoptics or with the Jesus of John's Gospel.” *CD I/2*, 156; “[Jesus's sinlessness] did not consist in an abstract and absolute purity, goodness and virtue.” *CD IV/1*, 258.

72 See Grieb, “‘Living Righteousness,’” 90.

73 *CD IV/2*, 187.

74 On Barth's understanding of the compassion of Jesus, see Paul T. Nimmo, “The Compassion of Jesus Christ: Barth on Matthew 9:36,” in *Reading the Gospels with Karl Barth*, ed. Daniel L. Migliore (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 67–79. That Barth groups the beati-

texts bears witness to “the incursion of the Yes” spoken by Jesus to a world gripped by fear, and by fear of Jesus no less.⁷⁵ This “Yes” is the Yes of the savior. It is a saving Yes. Jesus is the One who saves, and precisely this is his decisive correspondence to God. “Jesus came and spoke and acted as the Deliverer, and therefore as the bringer of great joy, for He was the direct and omniscient witness of the redeeming grace of God Himself.”⁷⁶ If Jesus is “the new thing,” if he is the kingdom in person, he is this as the Savior. The New Testament beatitude is a message of “salvation and life and joy” because it is a beatitude “which is spoken by Jesus the savior.”⁷⁷ The beatitudes are in this way set up to be read not as law either in the sense of an impossible demand that drives us to Christ or in the sense of an exhortation to practice Christian virtue with the aid of the Spirit, but as gospel, as the proclamation that God is for us, and *savingly* so.

2 Passion

In the second part of this article, I will examine three features of Barth’s approach to the first four beatitudes in Matthew’s Gospel: his identification of those addressed as sufferers, his cosmological-apocalyptic grasp of their situation, and his christological-eschatological concentration. Barth’s understanding of these beatitudes is of interest for two reasons. First, he claims that it is these beatitudes that most clearly exhibit the true meaning of the New Testament makarisms as a whole. Much is at stake, then, in his treatment of the first four Matthean beatitudes. Second, and somewhat paradoxically, it is Barth’s approach to these beatitudes that is most at odds with dominant interpretive strategies.⁷⁸ What is clear to Barth, it is fair to say, has not been clear to the tradition.

2.1 Sufferers

The first distinctive feature—one that is in fact determinative for the other features of Barth’s approach to be examined below—is the identification of those addressed in these beatitudes as sufferers. It is clearly the case, Barth observes,

tude texts together with the *Magnificat* and *Benedictus* further indicates his intention to read the beatitudes as the announcement of good news.

75 CD IV/2, 182.

76 CD IV/2, 183.

77 CD IV/2, 192.

78 David L. Turner, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 152, is representative of traditional readings when he claims that the first four beatitudes teach us that “humility is the basic trait of authentic kingdom spirituality.”

that the people addressed in these four beatitudes have not put themselves in their present situation (*Dransein*). This situation, rather, has “befallen them” (*widerfährt ihnen*). They are what they are not by their own willing and choosing and acting, but by circumstances and—as we will see presently—powers beyond their control.

Barth’s identification of these people as sufferers rules out two approaches. First, it rules out an ethical approach. For by identifying the addressees of the beatitudes as human beings in their suffering, Barth removes these beatitudes entirely from the realm of human action and willing and achievement. This, as noted above, marks a radical departure from most readings of these first four beatitudes. For Barth, the first four beatitudes do not call for what Georg Strecker identifies as “something that those addressed do not yet have, but that should be realized through their actions.”⁷⁹ They are not “ethical demands.”⁸⁰ Rather, they address people who have already fallen into particular situations. They address the world as it is. They do not ask people to realize poverty of spirit. For such poverty is already a reality, and a miserable reality at that. Instead, they promise the divine creation of a new reality, a salutary confrontation with the kingdom of God.

Second, Barth’s identification of these people as sufferers, coupled with his understanding of the nature of their suffering, rules out certain notions of the beatitudes as the revelation of a secret wisdom or as a transvaluation of values. In Barth’s view, the situation of these people as it is described in the beatitudes is not one of “hidden, immanent value.”⁸¹ As he writes, “The New Testament, like the Old, does not regard or magnify the happy and positive and vital as a secret quality of that which is unhappy and negative and dead.”⁸² We are not confronted here with the kingdom values of the happy poor, but with people who are “genuinely wretched.”⁸³ Barth even goes so far as to reckon their situation, in itself, to be “evil” (*übel*), since it is a situation ruled by death.⁸⁴ What the beatitudes offer, then, is not an interpretation or disclosure of the concealed meaning of poverty or hunger or mourning. Their utterance, in other words, is not primarily a hermeneutical event in which Jesus would disclose the hidden meaning of certain forms of human existence. If these words of grace can be

79 Georg Strecker, *Die Bergpredigt: Ein exegetischer Kommentar*, 2nd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985), 34.

80 Strecker, *Die Bergpredigt*, 34.

81 *CD IV/2*, 190.

82 *CD IV/2*, 190.

83 *CD IV/2*, 190.

84 *CD IV/2*, 190.

said to implement a transvaluation of values, it is not the case, according to Barth, that where the world thinks of poverty as a bad thing, Jesus reveals it to be a good thing as such. In short, the beatitudes do not call evil good.

2.2 *The Cosmic Wound*

Barth's description of the situation of these people as an "evil" situation invites further scrutiny and clarification, since it is a description that challenges readings that take these first four beatitudes to be commendations of strange virtues. This brings us to the second feature of Barth's approach to these beatitudes, which I will call his "cosmological" grasp of the situation into which they speak. Reading Barth's account of the beatitudes in isolation, one might miss this cosmological aspect. But when it is read in conjunction with the surrounding material in "The Royal Man," it is seen to be an aspect that underpins many of Barth's exegetical moves.

Barth's cosmological grasp of the situation of those addressed in these four beatitudes is indicated when he describes the situation of the poor and hungry and meek as one that is "redolent of death," and as one that manifests the world's "mortal wound" (*Todeswunde*).⁸⁵ To appreciate the cosmological element of this association of the poor, the meek, and so on with death, it is helpful to connect what Barth says about the beatitudes with what he says about the miracles. This connection, it should be noted, is not arbitrary; it is the connection between the word of the kingdom and the deeds of the kingdom. Indeed, according to the logic of Barth's account of Christ the Royal Man, the miracles of Jesus are, in essence, the fulfillment of the promises spoken in the beatitudes; they are "the kindling light of His speech—the light of the truth of His speech kindling into actuality"; they are the demonstration that Christ's Word "makes cosmic history," or "signs of a new thing that He proclaimed in His Word."⁸⁶

Of particular relevance to Barth's understanding of the beatitudes is his description of the "condition" (*Sosein*) of the human who is object of Christ's miraculous deeds.⁸⁷ In the light of the kingdom of God, the human is revealed to be "unfortunate" (*unglücklich*), to exist in a situation of "suffering."⁸⁸ Barth, using the same language found in his interpretation of the first four beatitudes, call this an "evil existence" (*übles Dransein*).⁸⁹ It is an evil existence not in any moral sense, but because it is existence "in the shadow of death" or under the

85 *CD IV/2*, 191.

86 *CD IV/2*, 209–211.

87 *CD IV/2*, 221.

88 *CD IV/2*, 221.

89 *CD IV/2*, 222.

“powers of death.”⁹⁰ And precisely because it is an *evil* situation, it is a situation “above all painful and alien and antithetical” to God, one that God “does not will.”⁹¹

But, as indicated by his reference to the “powers of death,” Barth goes even further: not only is this situation antithetical to the will of God; it is a situation created by the will of another, of a third agent. Behind this situation Barth detects the work of an “enemy,” which he characteristically identifies as “nothingness”—with death being one of its forms. This nothingness “aims to destroy” the human being.⁹² And God, in turn, “opposes and contradicts [nothingness’s] onslaught on His creation and triumph over His creature.”⁹³

This notion of a conflict between God and nothingness runs right through “The Royal Man,” with its repeated references to a “seizure of power” (*Machtergreifung*).⁹⁴ Such a notion is, of course, hardly original to Barth. Johannes Weiss, at the end of the nineteenth century, confronted modern theology with the uncomfortable truth that, in the mind of Jesus at least, the work he was to accomplish consisted in nothing more nor less than “a struggle against Satan.”⁹⁵ Distinctive in Barth, however, is that this notion of cosmological conflict informs his exegesis at every turn. This is certainly the case with regard to the first four beatitudes. The makarisms addressed to sufferers, to those “redolent of death,” as Barth has them, have God’s conflict with nothingness firmly in view. Seen in this light, God’s promised acts of salvation—the possession of the kingdom, gift of comfort, inheritance of the earth, satisfaction for the hungry and thirsty—can be understood as militant acts, acts that constitute the “seizure of power” occurring in the words and deeds of Christ.

This cosmological aspect also underwrites a quite novel view of what the beatitudes actually are. Following the logic of “The Royal Man” as a whole, Barth invites us to understand the beatitudes as the formal declaration of the divine opposition and contradiction to nothingness’s onslaught on God’s creation. They are “words of grace” indirectly addressed against “the rule of death in the cosmos.”⁹⁶ The notion of a cosmological conflict gives specificity to Barth’s concluding claim that “[t]he beatitude pronounced by Jesus tells us that He is

90 CD IV/2, 222.

91 CD IV/2, 225.

92 CD IV/2, 225.

93 CD IV/2, 225.

94 CD IV/2, 204, 205, 208, 215, 225.

95 Johannes Weiß, *Jesus’ Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*, trans. R.H. Hiers and D.L. Holland (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 102.

96 CD IV/2, 226.

the Lord of all these men.”⁹⁷ Barth does not use the word ‘Lord’ in this context to indicate a fundamentally ethical or legal relationship between Christ and those he pronounced blessed.⁹⁸ Rather, ‘Lord’ has the meaning ascribed to it by Martin Luther in his comments on the Apostles’ Creed: it is synonymous with liberator, deliverer, redeemer. Christ’s declaration that he is the Lord of the poor and the hungry is at one and the same time a declaration that the oppressive lordship of Satan is at an end.

Barth’s description in *The Christian Life* of what does and does not occur when God’s kingdom comes brings this cosmological aspect into sharp relief. There he writes:

He does not come to reveal and impart to them this or that morality. He does not come with a purpose whose execution depends, if not totally, then at least partially on the action, or at any rate the cooperation of Christians. He comes in the deed in which he acts and deals on and for and with them as their Lord and King, and directly actuates and identifies himself to be such. In coming he illumines, establishes, asserts, and protects his questioned, obscured, and threatened right to man and therefore man’s own right, his right to life, which is negated apart from God’s own right as Lord and King.⁹⁹

Here, as in Barth’s treatment of the beatitudes in *CD IV/2*, the ‘ethical’ framework is supplanted by the ‘cosmological.’ The kingdom concerns God’s destruction of the works of the devil. The fact that there are the poor, the meek, those who mourn, and those who hunger and thirst calls into question, obscures, and even threatens God’s “right” vis-à-vis God’s creatures. The beatitudes are thus a reassertion, perhaps even a “reactivation,” of God’s lordship in the face of all competing and ultimately destructive lordships.¹⁰⁰

97 *CD IV/2*, 192.

98 Contra Strecker, *Die Bergpredigt*, 35, who thinks of ‘Matthew’s Jesus’ as the eschatological Lord in the sense that he is the eschatological Lawgiver. Strecker might object that Barth is guilty of reading the Gospel of Matthew through the lens of Paul’s letters. Barth’s approach to his sketch of Jesus in “The Royal Man” is, at the very least, not particularly interested in any stark differences between Matthew’s Jesus and Luke’s Jesus and so on.

99 *TCL*, 236–237, rev.

100 The notion of a “reactivation” of divine omnipotence is given expression in Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

2.3 *Witnesses*

The third feature of Barth's approach to the beatitudes is its christological-eschatological concentration. This feature emerges as Barth develops an answer to the question of why these particular people, whose situation is so miserable in itself, are pronounced blessed. If it is not the hidden meaning of their situation as such, what is it, then, that makes the wretched of the earth blessed? Barth's answer, once again, centers on the impinging reality of the kingdom. The poor, the meek, and so on, are pronounced blessed because "[i]n their wretchedness they find themselves on the outermost frontier of the cosmos as it is confronted with the kingdom of God and to be renewed by the man Jesus."¹⁰¹ Barth, at the conclusion of his treatment of the beatitudes, applies a theologically dense term to all those addressed in the beatitudes: he calls them "witnesses."¹⁰²

The suffering are witnesses in a triple sense. First, they are witnesses to the true state of the world as a "a world given up to death."¹⁰³ The wretched do not conceal a hidden value. Just the opposite: they reveal the "mortal wound" of the cosmos. In this way they assume a representative function. Put otherwise, they bear witness to the truth about the world—the truth of its "vulnerability" or "fragility" (*Brüchigkeit*). The moral wound from which the world suffers is not "concealed" by them, as it is by the wealthy and the righteous, but laid bare.¹⁰⁴ Second, they are witnesses to the God who comes among them as one of them, to the God who is in solidarity with the poor.¹⁰⁵ As Barth writes, "It is not for nothing that the man Jesus comes and acts and is revealed as Himself a sufferer, the supreme sufferer and the partisan of all others."¹⁰⁶ This leads to the third and decisive sense in which the sufferers are witnesses: they are witnesses to the saving activity of God, and to the God who remembers the poor, to the God who has chosen that it is "precisely in the existence, the situation, of the poor and sad and meek that the new thing of God shines in all the different spheres of the life of the old man."¹⁰⁷ The evil existence of humanity thus becomes an occasion for the workings of grace. The poor are blessed not because of the hidden value of poverty as such, but because the works of God are displayed toward and in them.¹⁰⁸

101 CD IV/2, 191, rev.

102 CD IV/2, 192.

103 CD IV/2, 227.

104 CD IV/2, 191.

105 CD IV/2, 168–171.

106 CD IV/2, 191.

107 CD IV/2, 191, rev.

108 John 9:3.

The beatitudes addressed to the wretched remain “judgments,” to use Barth’s term. These judgments, however, remain inseparable from the presence of the Judge, from the fact that “Jesus is near to them,” for it is this very presence and nearness that renders the judgment a true judgment.¹⁰⁹ The poor are not blessed on account of their poverty. The cause of their blessing lies entirely outside of themselves. The declaration of blessing is, as Barth reiterates, a synthetic and not an analytic statement. The decisive factor is not something immanent to their existence but rather “the objective thing that characterizes their existence from above.”¹¹⁰

Yet, we might finally ask, just how synthetic is this statement? Is Christ’s nearness to the poor not a given? And is God not always already the God of the poor, the God who *is* poor in the eyes of the world? If this is so, it would seem that the beatitudes are in fact analytic statements, provided one does not exclude the given reality of God from the analysis. A prior use of the synthetic/analytic dichotomy in *Church Dogmatics* is helpful at this point. In a discussion of the notion of *vestigia trinitatis*, Barth warns of the ever-present possibility that the light that revelation shines in the world would be seized by the world and made its own, or at least understood to be in original harmony with the world and the world with it. In this case, Barth argues, the synthetic statement “God into the world” (*Gott in die Welt*) is transformed into the analytic statement “God in the world” (*Gott in der Welt*).¹¹¹ The difference between these two statements is subtle but profound. The analytic statement ontologizes the presence of God in the world; it turns it into a brute fact, a given. The synthetic statement, by contrast, places the emphasis on the dynamic activity of God as the one whose presence in the world is a matter of his own choosing, a matter of grace and not of nature.

Barth’s discussion of the kingdom of God in *The Christian Life* also serves to prevent the beatitudes from being “ontologized,” from becoming truths or principles that can be abstracted from the actual presence of Christ. For the kingdom, Barth insists, is not so much about God as he is but God “as he comes.”¹¹² The presence of the kingdom, which is identical with the presence of Jesus, is not a given or state of being. It is an event; or, perhaps better, an advent, a coming. It is a “special dynamic reality,” a “breaking forth” and “breaking through” and “breaking into.”¹¹³ The beatitudes, when understood in this light, are not

109 *CD* IV/2, 191.

110 *CD* IV/2, 191.

111 *CD* I/1, 341.

112 *TCL*, 236.

113 *TCL*, 236.

about the kingdom in the world but about the kingdom *into* the world, and its salutary confrontation with those who exist at the divinely chosen site of this confrontation.

3 Action

Once those addressed by the first four beatitudes are identified as sufferers, Barth's understanding of the beatitudes as the proclamation of the gospel is somewhat intuitive. But what about those beatitudes addressed not to sufferers but to humans engaged in particular activities? These latter beatitudes, as the early Protestants were well aware, seem at first glance to resist being classified as words of grace. Such a classification, some modern exegetes argue, risks reading Matthew through the lens of (Luther's) Paul and thus distorting the meaning of the text.¹¹⁴

Barth is insistent, however, that the logic at work in the first four Matthean beatitudes is also at work in the next three (Matt. 5:7–9). According to Barth, the merciful, the peacemakers, and the pure of heart are no less the recipients of God's gracious Word than the poor and hungry. As we will explore below, they are recipients of grace in a twofold sense: first, insofar as they have been graciously liberated to act in this or that way; and second, insofar as they are promised that their activity is graciously permitted to be a parable of the kingdom of God.

3.1 *Graciously Liberated*

The key emphasis in Barth's approach to the beatitudes addressed to humans in their activity is similar to what we have discussed above: it is the invading kingdom of God in the person of Jesus that makes a person blessed and that is decisive for the truth of these 'synthetic' statements. There is, however, a fundamental difference between how Barth reads the beatitudes addressed to human passion and how he reads the beatitudes addressed to human action. With respect to the former, the saving presence of Jesus is a response to a dire situation. With respect to the latter, the human action is understood by Barth to be a response instigated by the presence of Jesus. The actions on account of which particular humans are pronounced blessed "are stimulated and moved and determined and ordered *by the kingdom of God.*"¹¹⁵ Directly or indirectly,

¹¹⁴ Strecker, *Die Bergpredigt*, 33–34.

¹¹⁵ *CD IV/2*, 189.

Barth insists, the merciful, the peacemakers, and the pure of heart are “called and empowered and ordered and directed” by Jesus.¹¹⁶ Their activity has this call and empowerment at its source, and it is on account of this source—and not on account of the activity as such—that a human being is pronounced blessed. As Barth writes, “it is primarily a question of the impress made on a man’s *action*, its *determination* [*Bestimmung*] or characterization.”¹¹⁷

At the conclusion of his discussion of the beatitudes that address human actions, Barth discloses the gospel text that has “compelled” him to read these particular beatitudes in the way outlined above and that he views as “normative” for an understanding of all the beatitudes in which human action is declared to be blessed, namely, Matthew 16:17. Peter has just confessed Jesus to be the Messiah, a confession that Barth describes as “the sum of human action in the sense of the Gospel tradition.”¹¹⁸ Jesus responds to Peter with the following makarism: “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.” Peter is declared blessed, Barth explains, not because of his confession as such, but because of the “source” of his confession: a divine revelation. And the same is surely true, Barth argues, of the blessedness of the merciful, of the pure in heart, and of the peacemakers: all these human agents are blessed because of the particular “situation” in which they find themselves, a situation determined by the powerful and creative revelation of God’s kingdom.

Barth’s approach to this second group of beatitudes once again represents a challenge to the idea that we have in this gospel text an invitation to practice Christian virtues. “Unlike the makarisms of the Greek world,” Barth explicitly contends, the beatitudes “do not refer to the possession and enjoyment of external or internal worldly goods, nor to human abilities, nor to the practice of human virtues.”¹¹⁹ An invitation to the practice of virtue, of course, can be construed as a word of grace itself.¹²⁰ For Barth, however, this reading of the beatitudes mistakenly treats these actions as if they occur “in a vacuum,” as if they spring from something these humans “have in themselves,” and as if these human are practicing “something which is excellent in itself.”¹²¹

116 CD IV/2, 190.

117 CD IV/2, 189.

118 CD IV/2, 190.

119 CD IV/2, 188, rev.

120 Strecker, *Bergpredigt*, 34, argues that the beatitudes defy both Luther’s law and gospel schema and Barth’s gospel and law schema by bringing law and gospel into complete unity. The law simply is the gospel. It is a gift of God.

121 CD IV/2, 189–190.

At stake in this critique of reading these beatitudes as a summons to virtue is what Paul Lehmann has called “the Christian significance of behavior.”¹²² Indeed, Lehmann helps bring into focus the distinctive logic that undergirds Barth’s theological ethics, a logic that can be espied in the exegesis of the beatitudes in *CD IV/2*. For Lehmann, as for Barth, “it is not man but Christ who makes ethical thinking and acting ‘Christian.’”¹²³ This is the reason why the kind of discourse typically associated with virtue theory is redundant here. For Christian thinking about ethics is no longer consumed with questions concerning “the nature of an act” and “the relation between the nature of an act and the nature of the good.”¹²⁴ It is too late in the economy of salvation for such deliberations. Action is no longer to be defined by its qualitative “perfections” but by its “parabolic power.”¹²⁵ Or, to use Barth’s phrase from his treatment of the Sermon in the Mount in *CD II/2*, good actions are now those actions that are “reflections of the Messianic event.”¹²⁶

The activity of those pronounced blessed does not happen “unconnectedly” (*beziehungslos*) but in a “very determinate context.”¹²⁷ This context is the direct or indirect call and direction of Jesus, about which Barth will have more to say in his doctrine of sanctification.¹²⁸ The decisive thing about the action, then, is not its “virtuous and meritorious character” but its “root,” that is, the summoning and enabling word of Jesus.

3.2 *Parable of the Kingdom*

The key word that Barth applies to sufferers is also applied to actors: they are witnesses. They are blessed not because they have done something praiseworthy in and of itself, but because they are chosen witnesses to the activity of Christ, because their actions reflect the messianic event. These actions show them to be children of the kingdom of God, to be creatures of the Word and therefore doers of the Word. It is the messianic event, ultimately, that is the “cause” of the blessing. The coming of Jesus means not only that the sick are healed and sinners forgiven; it also means that mercy and peace-making and purity of heart abound as what Barth will later call “signs of the kingdom in the world which is ruled by the gods and subject to their legalism.”¹²⁹

122 Paul Lehmann, *Ethics in a Christian Context* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 120.

123 Lehmann, *Ethics*, 121.

124 Lehmann, *Ethics*, 122.

125 Lehmann, *Ethics*, 122.

126 *CD II/2*, 698.

127 *CD IV/2*, 190.

128 *CD IV/2*, § 66.

129 *CD IV/2*, 547.

And the fact that they are witnesses is also grace. The merciful are not as such and inevitably witnesses to Jesus. It is not the inherent quality of their action that qualifies them for the kingdom. The comment of John Chrysostom, which Barth uses in a sermon on the beatitudes, applies here: “There is so great a difference between divine and human mercy as between heaven and earth, even as between good and evil.” The logic of the doctrine of justification is thus at work here. As Barth writes earlier in *Church Dogmatics*, the fact that a human being is a witness “is imputed, reckoned, or ascribed to him.”¹³⁰

If the beatitudes are not commendations of virtues or a description of kingdom praxis but a “word of grace,” do they then have no bearing on human behavior? Barth, we have seen, describes the beatitudes as sitting at the “head” of the Sermon on the Mount as the fundamental Word of the proclamation of the kingdom. But they should always be seen together with what Barth elsewhere calls the “heart and center” of the sermon: the Lord’s prayer.¹³¹ The beatitudes, as the head of the sermon, and the Lord’s prayer, as its center, are intrinsically connected by the theme of the kingdom of God. It is the presently invading reality of the kingdom of God that makes the beatitudes good news. And it is for the coming of the kingdom of God, a coming which will fulfill the joyous promises of the beatitudes, that Christians are taught to pray. Indeed, it is not for nothing that those who hear the beatitudes are urged to pray “deliver us from the evil one,” since they have heard in this Word of grace the promise, and indeed the actuality, of this deliverance, of God’s *Machtergreifung* in the words and deeds of Jesus.¹³² The life to which the hearers of Christ’s word of grace in the beatitudes are exhorted, then, is not fundamentally a life of mercy or peace-making or purity as such, but a life of calling upon God, a life of “praying with Jesus.”¹³³

4 Conclusion

According to a characteristically sweeping judgment found in *CD* III/3, Barth contends that Protestant theologians have tended to be “far too moralistic and spiritualistic,” and therefore “blind” to the apocalyptic aspect of the gospel; that

130 *CD* II/1, 113.

131 Luz, *Matthew* 1–7, 391: “An interpretation that overlooks the reality that in the Sermon on the Mount praxis is at its core prayer misunderstands the evangelist.”

132 For an argument that this petition refers to a personal evil, see Raymond E. Brown, “The Pater Noster as an Eschatological Prayer,” *Theological Studies* 22, no. 2 (1961): 206–208.

133 *CD* II/2, 696.

is to say, blind to the gospel's message of liberation from the powers of death and destruction.¹³⁴ These accusations directed toward Protestant theology are repeated in "The Royal Man" in *CD IV/2*, where Barth's most extensive treatment of the beatitudes is located. Addressing what he perceives to be the Protestant neglect of Christ's miracles, Barth argues that it should have been Protestant theologians above all who perceived in Christ's miracles what he calls "the omnipotence of mercy."¹³⁵ Instead, he finds Protestantism to be "one-sidedly anthropological," mistakenly oriented toward the "problem of repentance" but not the "presupposition" of repentance: the in-breaking kingdom of God.¹³⁶

Though Barth does not explicitly take Protestant exegetes of Matthew 5 or Luke 6 to task by name in "The Royal Man," this article has suggested that his approach to the beatitudes in this text is informed by this repeated critique of Protestant anthropocentrism and moralism. A moralistic-anthropological reading oriented to the question of inner dispositions or cultivated character traits, it has been argued, is replaced by Barth with a christological-cosmological reading oriented to the saving advent of God's eschatological kingdom in a "wounded" cosmos subjected to foreign lords. Barth's interpretation of the beatitudes can thus be seen to work against the idea, articulated in an exemplary manner by Günther Bornkamm, that "[t]he inner relationship between Jesus' requirement and his message of the coming of the kingdom of God are not brought out clearly in the apocalyptic interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount," and against the claim that the words in Jesus's Sermon do not contain "the burning odor of the cosmic catastrophe."¹³⁷

Of course, Barth's understanding of the beatitudes in *CD IV/2* is painted with broad brush strokes. He confesses in *CD IV/2* that he is unable to expound these sayings "in any detail in the present context," which suggests that a more extensive treatment of the beatitudes may have followed at some point in *Church Dogmatics*—perhaps in the unwritten volume v treating the doctrine and ethics of redemption. Whatever the case, Barth's account of the beatitudes is certainly not exhaustive. What it does offer, however, is a fresh approach to exegetical questions, an approach that is not imposed upon the text by theological convictions quite foreign to it, as some may fear, but one that is rooted in a

134 *CD III/3*, 311.

135 *CD IV/2*, 233. On Barth's understanding of Jesus's miracles, see Cambria Janae Kaltwasser, "The Omnipotence of Mercy": Jesus's Miracles as the Light of Grace in § 64.3 "The Royal Man," *Zeitschrift für Dialektische Theologie* 33, no. 1 (2017): 113–128.

136 *CD IV/2*, 233.

137 Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. James M. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 223–224.

reading of the Synoptic Gospels oriented to the fact that what is found there is an account of Christ's "struggle against Satan."¹³⁸ The beatitudes, as Barth reads them, are a decisive event in that apocalyptic struggle. Matthew 5:1, it bears noting, is not the first time Jesus has climbed up a mountain in the Gospel of Matthew.¹³⁹ In the previous chapter, he is taken by Satan to the top of a mountain and offered all the kingdoms of the world in exchange for worship. Jesus's ascent to a mountain in Matthew 5, by contrast, is not for the purposes of a *quid pro quo*. He does not offer the kingdom of heaven in exchange for worship. He proclaims that the kingdom of heaven already belongs to those to whom God is gracious, and in so doing he opposes the ungraciousness that characterizes the kingdom of Satan.

Barth's reading of the beatitudes as an apocalyptic "word of grace" also has the capacity to broaden the scope of the doctrine of justification. Where Luther and Calvin sought to acquit the beatitudes of impinging on the seemingly separate, salvific truth of justification, Barth allows the beatitudes, as the proclamation of God's seizure of power, to deepen our grasp of just this truth.¹⁴⁰ Indeed, if Ernst Käsemann is correct in his observation that the Pauline doctrine of justification is a "precise theological variation of the primitive Christian proclamation of the kingdom of God as eschatological salvation," and that the concern of this doctrine "is the Creator's right as Lord of creation as this works itself out in the creature," then Barth's treatment of the beatitudes can be heard as what Käsemann calls, with reference to the concern in Romans 8 for the salvation of "the fallen and groaning world," a "cosmological variation" on the justification of the sinner.¹⁴¹

Finally, while I have claimed that Barth makes a break with Protestant readings, his interpretation of the beatitudes is yet, I suggest, unmistakably Protestant and owes much to the insights of Luther and Calvin, among others. It is unmistakably Protestant for four reasons. First, Barth's interpretation of the beatitudes is quite in keeping with Luther's description of the Christian life as

138 Weiß, *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*, 102.

139 On "the mountain" as a (cosmic-apocalyptic) theological symbol in Matthew's Gospel, see Terence L. Donaldson, *Jesus on the Mountain: A Study in Matthean Theology* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985).

140 Barth's discussion of God's righteousness in *CD II/1* takes similar steps in this direction. He writes: "God's righteousness, the faithfulness in which He is true to Himself, is disclosed as help and salvation, as a saving divine intervention for man directed only to the poor, the wretched and the helpless as such, while with the rich and the full and the secure as such, according to His very nature He can have nothing to do" (387).

141 Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 29, 56, 234–235.

such as a flight from virtue to grace. Second, Barth interprets the beatitudes in the context of the divine *pro meity*, or, more accurately (if more awkwardly), the divine *pro nobisity*. Third, Barth's exegesis concentrates on the great Protestant theme of "the Word." The activity of Christ as eschatological proclaimer and the character of the beatitudes as Christ's efficacious Word are, for Barth, decisive for a proper understanding of the beatitudes—both those which refer to humans in their need and those which refer to humans in their activity. Finally, the depiction by Luther and Calvin of the Christian life as a life beset by forces inimical to God's saving purposes is largely shared by Barth. The beatitudes, as a word of grace, are spoken into what is essentially a war zone. If Barth's reading of the beatitudes can be said to make a notable break with the Protestant tradition, it should nevertheless be added that it does so only for the sake of reorienting the reading of this text to the in-breaking grace of God in Christ. In this way, Barth helps us to see that in the beatitudes we are dealing not with penultimate, but with ultimate things.