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‘God’ is the word we use for the ultimate mystery, the unplumbed depth of life, the cosmos and all value. Karl Barth’s insistence that *God can only be known through God* is actually a truism of all theology. God cannot be known except through God’s own initiative and action, that is to say, by means of divine revelation, whether ‘general’ (in nature, history, culture and conscience – though of course Barth was deeply suspicious of this) or ‘special’ (in the particularities of Israel, Jesus Christ and the church). And for divine revelation to be received in human experience, grounded as it is in sense perception (though not hidebound by it), revelation must necessarily take creaturely form. It must come to us ‘clothed in the garments of creaturely reality’. Inevitably, therefore, the divine reality will be both disclosed and concealed by these creaturely habiliments.

In biblical language, divine revelation, embodied in created forms, is named ‘the Word of God’. The Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, speaks of ‘the word of the LORD (JHWH)’ and the New Testament of ‘the Word of God’. In Scripture the Word of God is both a communication *from* the very being and nature of God and a communication *of* the very being and nature of God. ‘The Word of God’ encompasses the concrete forms of divine revelation. Psalm 19 suggests that general, as well as special revelation, is ‘the Word of God; God’s revelation of Godself, wherever it may be found. But what is ‘the Word of God’. Where is it to be found and how is to be accessed and received? These are major questions of fundamental theology and hermeneutics.

Karl Barth’s answer to that question took the form of his theology of the Threefold Word of God. The first form of the Word of God is the Word in Jesus Christ, the Word both pre-existent and incarnate. The humanity of Jesus Christ is the first, foremost and final form of the Word in the world, but he cannot be known without the second form. The second form of the Word of God is the Word in the Holy Scriptures, for these testify to him and he speaks through them. But the Scriptures speak of the Word in a refracted way, in human words and concepts, so that the Word is received in a way that is conditioned by the context of the receiver. The third form of the Word of God is human, faith-filled speech about God. This human, faithful speech about God has its highest expression in preaching or proclamation. The proclamation of the church takes place through several media and in diverse contexts: preaching and teaching, worship and sacrament, pastoral care and loving service.
The third form, proclamation, cannot stand without the second. Proclamation rests in Scripture, lives from Scripture and is nugatory without it. In turn, the revelatory content of the second form, Holy Scripture, derives from the first form, Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. In the dynamics of revelation, the Scriptures are filled by the action of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. They are the letter, waiting to be vivified by the Spirit. Only as Christ speaks through them are the Scriptures elevated above the contingent historical, political, cultural and ideological influences that are also present within them and indeed help to constitute them as a text within a context. Each of these forms (gestalten) is rightly called ‘the Word of God’, but truly there is one living Word filling, animating and energising both the Scriptures and the church’s proclamation (Die Einheit des Wortes Gottes). The whole of the Christian life and ministry revolves around the Word of God and is placed at its service. Because divine revelation comes to us ‘clothed in the garments of creaturely reality’, the Word of God undergoes a threefold creaturely embodiment – in the Incarnation (the person of Jesus Christ), in the text of Scripture and in the fully human proclamation of the church. The Word of God creates the Christian community. The community exists in a state of dependence on the Word. It is a community of lovers of the Word, hearers of the Word, sharers of the Word and proclaimers of the Word. Reflection on the threefold form of the Word of God and its embodiment in creaturely form leads to reflection on the church, ecclesiology. And ecclesiology – if it is not to become simply sociology or political philosophy – continually drives us back to the action of the Word of God, in Jesus Christ, in Holy Scripture and in the church’s proclamation. Here the word ‘proclamation’ encompasses all that the church knows itself to be here in the world for: to glorify God through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit through the actions of preaching the gospel and teaching the faith, in the celebration of sacramental worship, and in applying word and sacrament to the questions and challenges that arise in the world and trouble humankind.

As Currie argues in this book, the Word of God and ecclesiology are closely connected in Barth. Barth’s ecclesiology is best approached through his doctrine of the threefold Word of God. In this way Currie lays to rest any lingering doubts as to whether Barth actually had an ecclesiology. Currie traces the origins and development of Barth’s conception, from the early essays in dogmatics at Göttingen and Münster, to the Church Dogmatics (cd), showing consistency as well as development and arguing that the later version of the Threefold Word in cd iv/3 is a revision, not a rejection, of the concept.

Currie’s main focus is on the third form, proclamation, because this is where Barth begins in the cd (Das Verkündigte Wort Gottes). Barth takes his clue here