

“TOO DOGMATIC FOR WORDS”? KARL BARTH'S COMIC THEOLOGY IN DIALOGUE WITH THE COMEDY OF CRAIG FERGUSON¹

Also punch was served, and one soon noticed after a while nothing
but the universal (and for us like never before especially palpable)
Aufhebung of Being... And then life went on.

– Karl Barth on his 1925 New Year's Eve party

Karl Barth once complained that a “serious problem one might have with Calvin is that he seems not to have been able to laugh.”² Of course, this is not a problem one encounters with Barth, who devoted four full pages of the *Church Dogmatics* to a facetious book review of the 1740 *Insecto-Theologia*. The following will examine Barth's work in light of theories of humor and comedy, suggesting an interpretation of his theology as ‘comic’ in its response to modern theological trends. Ralph C. Wood has argued that “Barth's reading of the Gospel is fundamentally comic,” joyfully embracing the glad tidings of reconciliation and the promise of redemption.³ He therefore holds that emphasizing Barth's attacks against modern theology overlooks his positive theological contribution. I contend that these two elements *together*, the joyfulness and the combativeness, reveal Barth's theology as ‘comic’ in a slightly different sense, not only in its content and mood but in its objectives.⁴

Barth describes humor as a form of “liberation and release” that allows us to embrace the incongruities and limitations of the present and prevents us from taking ourselves too seriously in light of the ultimate seriousness of God and the divine work of redemption. We will see that the qualities he ascribes to humor are the very same qualities he praises in Mozart and finds lacking in Schleiermacher. Under the influence of the latter, according to Barth, theology had vanished into anthropology, its object shifting from the God revealed in scripture to a deified projection of the human, which could only end in disillusionment. Modern theology had come to be filled with “sulky faces, morose thoughts and boring ways of speaking.” In response, Barth sought “to counterbalance the humanism of the 19th Century, when men were overconfident

in their own ability to run the world, by a return to the Bible in which God talks to men.”⁵ Through what some call ‘retaliatory wit,’ he launched an attack against humorless anthropologies, employing techniques similar to those of the comedian. Rather than relying too heavily on theoretical discourse, then, we will also turn to a practitioner, putting Barth in conversation with comedian Craig Ferguson in order to discern the deeper ‘comic’ elements in his theology. Comparing Ferguson’s comedic rant against the “deification of youth” with Barth’s writings against the “lordless powers,” we find that both understand humorlessness to stem from the failure to observe proper human limits and both employ similar forms of humor in their efforts to unmask the absurdity and irrationality of our submission to arbitrary human powers.

I. Theories of Humor and Barth’s ‘Theology of Humor’

Across the disciplines, theories of humor typically fall into three categories: superiority, relief, and incongruity. *Superiority* theories, associated with Hobbes, view humor as an aggressive assertion of superiority over the object of laughter. Bergson’s theory of laughter as a corrective for “inflexibility” or “inelasticity” is a more positive offshoot, arguing that such traits represent “the gravest inadaptability to social life, which are the sources of misery and at times the cause of crime.” Laughter serves a positive social function by making these traits the object of derision.⁶ *Relief* theories, associated with Freud, understand humor as an outlet for releasing tension. Mindess relies on this theory to demonstrate that the “most important function of humor is its power to release us from the many inhibitions and restrictions under which we live our daily lives.”⁷ He also incorporates elements of superiority (as “retaliatory wit”), though he does *not* understand this as a vehicle for enforcing social restrictions, but as a form of liberation, providing “a moment of respite from our subordinated condition.”⁸ *Incongruity* theories, associated with Kant, locate the origins of humor in unexpected situations, logical absurdities, socially inappropriate pairings, etc. Schopenhauer, for example, defines humor as “the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation.”⁹

Theological explorations of humor and comedy adapt elements from all three categories, though incongruity is the most prevalent theme. Kierkegaard identifies humor as the “boundary zone” between the

ethical and religious stages of life. According to Evans, Kierkegaard's "humorist... has learned to smile at the whole of life, because she has learned to smile at herself," recognizing "the incongruity between her ideals and her actions."¹⁰ Also relying on incongruity, Reinhold Niebuhr argues for an "intimate relation between humour and faith," humor being "concerned with the immediate incongruities of life and faith with the ultimate ones."¹¹ However, humor is restricted to these immediacies and would lead only to despair in relation to ultimate questions, for there is "no laughter in the holy of holies."¹² Peter Berger takes the opposite view, arguing that while "tragedy can never go beyond immanence," comedy is transcendent. In Christian eschatology, "redemption appears after the terrors of the world as a form of comic relief" and, though heaven will be free from tragedy, "man will remain funny for ever." Comedy therefore transcends tragedy's "sense of human courage" with its own "sense of wild, irrational hope."¹³ Similarly, Wood argues that "Christian faith is comic" because "it is about eschatological laughter and joy and hope,"¹⁴ grounded in the God who "himself is the comedian who *wants* his audience to laugh- to rejoice in and thus to be transformed by the Good News." The Gospel itself is a comedy that proclaims the ultimate happy ending, namely, the guaranteed triumph of the kingdom of God. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus we find "the final and absolute reversal of human expectations and desert,"¹⁵ through which the Gospel presents so "comic a deliverance" that the Christian simply cannot respond with "humorless doubt."¹⁶

M. Conrad Hyers contrasts the virtues of the comic hero ("flexibility, freedom, compromise, playfulness, lightheartedness, childlikeness, celebration of life, survivability") with those of the warrior ("unquestioning loyalty and obedience, inflexible conviction, unswerving dedication, indomitable will, passionate involvement, uncompromising determination"). The comic hero interprets the slings and arrows of life "more in terms of a *game* than a battle" and seeks reconciliation rather than victory.¹⁷ He therefore dubs Hobbes's conception of humor "a garbage collector's view of the comic sensibility" that overlooks humor's playfulness. Instead, Hyers prefers the concept of "comic justice," which targets the very characteristics Hobbes associates with humor and serves as a form of advocacy: "When the prophet Amos makes fun of rich Israelite women as 'cows of Bashan' ... it is because they have grown fat on the deprivation of others, and he is defending those who have been oppressed by their selfishness and pride. The 'victims' of the humor are

those who have made victims of others.”¹⁸ Hyers suggests the jester as a counterpart to the biblical prophet through their shared function as truth-tellers. Jesters had unique license to be “notoriously bold in their ridicule, criticism, and advocacy,” and Hyers identifies the prophet Nathan as “the jester [who] was able to enter the inner sanctum of the palace and tell the king an innocent story, the punch line of which was ‘Thou art the man.’”¹⁹ Comedy also protects us from making too much of ourselves and thus prevents the deification of the human seen so often in warrior tales. However, it is precisely this rejection of a deified humanity that elevates the human perspective to what we might call a “superior” position:

For comedy, in the course of being frankly human and refusing to be trapped by frustrating aspirations and wrenching conflicts, has something of the divine – the truly cosmic – perspective in it. It proceeds from a higher and larger vantage point in which mountains become molehills, tyrants do not loom as large as gods, and the greatest deeds for good or ill are but ripples on the waves of a limitless cosmic sea.²⁰

From this perspective, theology too must be sized down to human proportions, and Hyers cites Barth as an example of one who views the significance of his theological work from this cosmic-comic perspective. Beginning with a quote from Barth, he writes:

“The angels laugh at old Karl. They laugh at him because he tries to grasp the truth about G in a book of Dogmatics. They laugh at the fact that volume follows volume and each is thicker than the previous ones. As they laugh, they say to one another, ‘Look! Here he comes now with his little pushcart full of volumes of the Dogmatics!’”

In this manner the great corpus of his theological investigations is finally placed within the parentheses of the comic perspective in a simple confession of the humanity of all theology. The books fit nicely in a small wheelbarrow.²¹

According to Torrance, Barth's sense of humor springs from the sense that these laughing angels are always “looking over his shoulder, reminding him that all theology is human thinking.”²² Offering a series of proof texts, he cites many of the passages that we will explore below, observing “the silver thread of sheer fun that runs throughout his account of the theologians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.”²³

While Torrance points to Barth's robust sense of humor, John Morreall cites Barth in his complaint that humor has been utterly neglected by theology, noting that even Barth's vast *Dogmatics* “gives about a page to humor's connection with humility.”²⁴ Hyers also laments this neglect, but gives Barth twice the credit, citing the “scant *two* pages” on humor.²⁵ This brief mention in §56 of the *Dogmatics*, however, is not all Barth has to say on the subject and, indeed, he is far more concerned with humor than a cursory reading of his work might suggest. In light of incongruity theories and his fondness for Kierkegaard, it is not surprising

that Barth links humor with humility. In the discussion of human ‘freedom in limitation,’ to which Hyers and Morreall point, Barth describes humor as “the opposite of all self-admiration and self-praise.” As such, he lists humor with gratitude and humility as the proper responses to the honor that God accords to humans. “The man honoured by God finds himself extremely odd as the object of this esteem,” and this incongruity is the source of spiritual laughter: “Is not the contrast between man himself and the honour done him by God really too great for man to take himself ceremoniously, and not to laugh at himself, in his quality as its bearer and possessor?”²⁶

However, Barth discusses humor not only with reference to limitation, but liberation as well (thus incorporating elements of ‘relief’ theory). Humor relates to liberation in at least three ways. First, humor is itself a form of liberation that allows us to make the best of our present situation, graciously accepting our limitations in light of our final position in the eschatological future. Second, humor is our response to having been liberated to a subjective awareness of the objective work of salvation. Third, the fact that this liberation is outside our control requires us to maintain a sense of humor in relation to ourselves and our work.²⁷

Because both limitation and liberation are central themes in his eschatology, Barth would likely have had far more to say about humor had he completed the final volumes of the *Dogmatics* on the doctrine of redemption. As it stands, his most concentrated account of humor takes place in the eschatological section of the *Ethics*, where he employs language similar to Mindess’s description of humor as “playful rather than solemn, and even when it is in earnest, it is not entirely in earnest.” For Barth, this would serve as an apt description of *all* right human action in light of the promise of redemption, for “our conduct bears the mark of good, of what is pleasing to God, when it is not done in earnest but in *play*.”²⁸

If our conduct is good only when recognized as play, then we must understand ourselves as the children of God specifically “in the sense of his *little* children... God’s little children at play.” At the same time, Barth says, “we cannot be more grimly in earnest about life than when we resign ourselves to the fact that we can only play.” To play, therefore, does not mean that we take nothing seriously at all, for “when children play properly, of course, they do so with supreme seriousness and devotion... We are summoned to play properly.”²⁹

Barth suggests humor as the attitude that exemplifies play and, as such, it is the “attitude that is ultimately demanded in all that we do.”³⁰ Humor displays the same refusal to take the present with ultimate seriousness, giving our action “flexibility... because it is done in time but from the standpoint of eternity.” Our laughter becomes “liberated laughter that derives from the knowledge of our final position – in spite of appearances to the contrary – within present reality.” This incongruity between present and future is a central motif in Barth’s discussions of humor.

Humor arises when the contrast between our existence as the children of God and our existence as the children of this eon is perceived and vitally sensed in what we do... Humor makes concrete the saying in Romans 8:18: “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed in us.”

Humor, like play, does not require that we take nothing seriously at all, “and those who think it does do not know what real humor is.” Rather, we take the present “seriously within the bracket... not because it is not serious enough in itself, but because God’s future, which breaks into the present, is more serious.” In short, humor is the proper response to the true seriousness of the work of God in contrast to our own.³¹

Because the free humor of the children of God is free within limits, Barth articulates principles for true and false humor. “True humor,” he says, is always “grim humor,” acknowledging tears of suffering while transcending them through hopeful and forward-looking laughter. As a recognition of what is in contrast to what will be, it is rarely found among the “perfectly satisfied,” but among those who “have been through the wringer.” Though grim, humor should provide “liberation and release” through its embrace of joy and hope. Finally, true humor is most often self-directed, “since it sees the bracket in which the self stands,” but when it aims at others it does so without malevolence. Humor becomes “false” when it maliciously targets others with what Hyers would call “fallen laughter.”³² Such humor is not grim but cruel, speaking with “poison and gall” rather than liberation and release.

The ability to laugh at oneself was one of the highest forms of praise Barth could bestow on comrades and opponents alike, for “when we have first laughed at ourselves we can then laugh at others, and we can stand cheerfully the final test of being laughed at by them – a test which many supposedly humorous people ignominiously fail.” It is thus counted among the fruits of faith, arising from an eschatological worldview in which one refuses to take oneself too seriously. For Hyers, such humor leads not only to humility but to

compassion and fellowship: “Even in laughing at others one vicariously laughs at oneself, for humor sees all as sharing in a common human nature and the common predicaments, embarrassments, and temptations of life.” Therefore, “those who are able to include themselves in their laughter are also able to include others in their generosity,” through which “humor is freed to become the humor of humility and compassion.”³³

Having seen how Barth's view of humor relates to incongruity (between present and future, Creator and creature) and to relief (as “liberation and release”), we should briefly note its relation to superiority theories. Barth, it seems, would reject a theory grounded in the superiority of one over another. He argues that genuine human encounter prohibits approaching the other with a sense of superiority,³⁴ and he therefore rejects attitudes that lead Christians to act “as superior spectators, as indolent know-alls” or “as a laughing third party.”³⁵ However, Barth's description of humor has something in common with adaptations of superiority found in Kierkegaard and Hegel. For Kierkegaard, the superior position provided by humor “enables an individual to experience an incongruity as pleasant rather than painful,”³⁶ while Hegel identifies the ability to rise “superior to its own contradictions, and experiencing therein no taint of bitterness or sense of misfortune whatsoever,” as a central element of comedy.³⁷ Similarly, Barth holds that humor allows us to graciously accept our limitations and thereby offers us a superior position, understood in the sense of rising above our current situation by refusing to take it too seriously in light of our future as heirs of God's kingdom. We will now expand on this explicit ‘theology of humor’ in the *Ethics* by examining humor and comedy (and the qualities attributed to them) as they appear elsewhere in Barth's work.

II. Humor and ‘Comic’ Themes in Barth's Theology

As we have seen, Barth's writings on humor rely heavily on concepts of limitation, liberation and incongruity. Human limitation is a benefit, in Barth's view, for “only the void is undefined and therefore unlimited.” Limitation lends an urgency to life, encouraging us to seize “the unique opportunity” that each human life represents. To complain about limitation is to deny the goodness of creation and represents a desire to become gods rather than to live “cheerfully and modestly” as creatures.³⁸ But complain we do, failing to observe even those limits that one would expect us to enthusiastically welcome, such as the divine

command to limit our work with rest. Barth observes the tension under which we so often work and remarks that, if we could just learn to relax, “there might then be far fewer psychopaths and excited bundles of nerves... particularly among theologians.”³⁹

According to Hyers, comedy offers a “counterbalance” to prevailing portraits of humanity in order to reveal the whole picture, and “commonly what is missing is a full recognition of human limitations.” Pointing to the telling position of humor in faith and idolatry, he argues that true blasphemy is found “in the *absence* of humor, for at the heart of the comic spirit and perspective is an acceptance of the prophetic warning against idolatry, and against the greatest blasphemy of all, the claim to understand or to be as God.”⁴⁰ Deification is the stuff of tragedy, and Barth felt that modern conceptions of God, which amounted to little more than a deification of human constructs, could only end in disillusionment. With “modern man’s” relationship to himself and to the world grounded in human self-confidence alone, “once he doubts himself, the abyss yawns.”⁴¹ Playing on the temptation “to be as God” therefore proves a successful strategy for the demonic, which Barth portrays as humorless because of the failure to respect limits: “they are spirits of complaint which falsely depress us and rob us of our humour by persuading us that the natural limits of our physical and psychical existence are a constriction, curse and misfortune, when we are really borne, sustained and even uplifted by God within these limits.”⁴²

The humorlessness wrought by demons stands in stark contrast to the robust humor of God, which Barth finds in both scripture and the divine being itself. In Job, for example, Barth locates this humor in God’s refusal to “lecture” according to the standards of “academic theology,” revealing “the transcendent freedom to speak very differently, and the humour to make powerful use of this freedom. He does not begin to operate on the expected level. He moves off at what seems to be an unexpected tangent to every thoughtful person.” And yet this comic mode of discourse is precisely that which allows God to speak “intelligibly and convincingly.”⁴³ This sense of humor comes through in the divine being and attributes as well, seen in God’s triunity, which incorporates incongruous elements such as identity/non-identity and simplicity/multiplicity. To deny triunity is to deny divine beauty, leading to “a God without radiance and without joy (and without humour!),” and theologies that do so always exude “something joyless, without sparkle or humour, not to say

tedious and there finally neither persuasive nor convincing.”⁴⁴ Here again, as in the passage on Job, Barth links humor with genuinely persuasive discourse.

In response to divine radiance, theology should be filled with joy rather than “sulky faces, morose thoughts and boring ways of speaking,” which Barth holds to be “intolerable in this science.”⁴⁵ While the theologian lives in greater danger of falling into doubt and temptation,⁴⁶ this danger contains within itself a radical hope: “Though it is hard to believe, it is true that Jesus Christ has, indeed, died for the theologians also, rising again from the dead in order to reveal this fact and to give substance to their hope.” With this in mind, the theologian can persevere “in alacrity, hilarity, and spiritual joy, in the joyousness of the Holy Spirit.”⁴⁷ Wood identifies Barth as a “theologian of divine comedy” precisely because he embraces this *hilaritas*. He “is determined to leave happily undialectical and graciously unbalanced that which God himself has set out of kilter,” leading Wood to conclude that “Barth's reading of the Gospel is fundamentally comic.”⁴⁸

That the creaturely response to divine radiance must be joyful, Barth says, “is not merely a concession or permission but a command,”⁴⁹ just as humor is that which “is ultimately demanded in all that we do.” Joylessness, on the other hand, “is only a symptom that in self-embitterment we do violence to life and to God as its Creator.”⁵⁰ To be humorless is an offense, betraying a sense of superiority.

We need not be ashamed before the holiness of God if we can still laugh and must laugh again, but only if we allow laughter to wither away, and above all if we have relapsed into a sadly ironic smile. The latter especially is excluded, for it surely conceals an evil superiority, a wholly inadmissible resistance to the divine revelation, which so illumines the created world that it demands our brightest and not an obstinately clouded Yes.⁵¹

Indeed, humorlessness is a frequent complaint of Barth's, as one who seems exceptionally averse to boredom. For example, though he rejects natural theology on more fundamental grounds, he feels compelled to point to its “profoundly tedious and so utterly unmusical” quality.⁵² Similar themes emerge in his rejection of humorless angelologies⁵³ and in his frustration with the debate over Bultmann's hermeneutics, which reached its peak when he realized that it had become “too dogmatic for words” and so “bogged down in sterility and boredom” that he saw “little point in going on with the game any further.”⁵⁴ Barth's appreciation for humor surfaces in the sphere of music as well, where his famous admiration of Mozart is paralleled by an equally persistent aversion to Beethoven, in part because of the latter's obsession with profound meanings and

the “solemn faces” listeners feel obliged to wear in response. In stark contrast to Mozart’s “free play” is Beethoven’s “desperate jubilation.”⁵⁵

If we take a moment to consider Barth’s writings on Mozart and Schleiermacher, we can see the role that the comic acceptance of incongruity plays in his thought more generally, even where explicit reference to humor is absent. What Barth appreciates in Mozart is this joyful embrace of incongruity (similar to Wood’s appreciation of Barth). “The Mozartean ‘center’ is not like that of the great theologian Schleiermacher — a matter of balance, neutrality, and, finally, indifference,” but rather it is “a glorious upsetting of the balance, a *turning* in which the light rises and the shadows fall, though without disappearing, in which joy overtakes sorrow without extinguishing it, in which the Yea rings louder than the ever-present Nay.”⁵⁶

Conversely, while Barth admires Schleiermacher’s “wonderful ability to laugh, above all at himself,” a central criticism is his apparent aversion to incongruity, which Barth sees in the quest for synthesis that led Schleiermacher to construct dubious unions between finite and infinite. Salvation, for example, becomes “the great synthesis of all antitheses,”⁵⁷ the good of which is found “not in a *relation* between God and man but in their *undifferentiatedness*.”⁵⁸ Hyers argues that comedy avoids precisely this type of undifferentiated unity, for while “comedy aims at overcoming dualities... it does not then dissolve individual difference and separate worth in some ultimate oneness that alone, or even supremely, is holy, true, good, and beautiful.”⁵⁹ Schleiermacher’s syntheses did just that, in Barth’s view, ‘dissolving separate worth’ and thus allowing theology to be wholly absorbed into modern culture.⁶⁰ But the church cannot fulfill its task of proclaiming the Gospel without a confrontation with culture, which this modern ‘synthesis’ prevented.

“The difference between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,” Barth says, “is that there is now a counterattack, so to speak.”⁶¹ To launch this counterattack, he turned to “the strange new world within the Bible” in an effort to create a *diastasis* between theology and culture. He does not deny that theologians are culturally conditioned, but this means that our ideas must always remain open to question. In exegesis, for example, Barth affirms that every reader will bring some philosophical construct to the text, but our conceptions and presuppositions, as *human* conceptions and presuppositions, must always have “the fundamental character of a hypothesis.”⁶² In Barth’s writings, theologies that reject elements of scripture

because they conflict with modern cultural or scientific standards (which were allowed to determine the boundaries of theological thought) are again characterized by rigidity, tedium, and a dearth of humor.

Is it true that modern thought is “shaped for good or ill by modern science”? Is there a modern world-picture which is incompatible with the mythical world-view and superior to it? Is this modern view so binding as to determine in advance and unconditionally our acceptance or rejection of the biblical message? We are again up against the well-known Marburg tradition with its absolute lack of any sense of humour and its rigorous insistence on the honesty which does not allow any liberties in this respect.⁶³

This properly limited freedom in hermeneutics is closely related to humor, according to Torrance, who holds that “Barth's humour has critical significance for the nature and form of his own theological construction, for it means that he is ever open to the question as to the adequacy of his own thought-forms to their proper object, and that he will never let himself be a prisoner of his own formulations.”⁶⁴

Obviously the above examples are not exhaustive. They are simply meant to illustrate that the qualities Barth assigns to humor function as major themes in his theology and that his articulation of these themes bears a certain likeness to theories of comedy. Having established that the chief concepts in his account of humor are also central to his rejection of modern theology, we can now turn to Barth's *use* of humor against modern theological trends. Of course, most theorists see social criticism as a key function of comedy, but rather than relying solely on *theorists* to understand how this relates to Barth's theology, I would like to begin with a *practitioner* who offers reflections on this form of humor.

III. Humor and Social Criticism in the Work of Craig Ferguson and Karl Barth

Craig Ferguson is “that Scottish Conan guy” who became the host of CBS's *The Late Late Show* after his two night stint as a guest host unexpectedly turned into a multi-year contract.⁶⁵ Because of his sudden arrival to the genre, Ferguson sees himself as somewhat apart from his fellow late night hosts: “I know this isn't really a late-night talk show... it's just something that happens about the same time.”⁶⁶ Rather than a series of one-off jokes from the day's headlines, he speaks without a script, incorporating elaborate musical numbers and a robot skeleton side-kick as well as tangents on philosophy, literature, culture and art. Ferguson, a high school drop-out and self-described ‘autodidact,’ effortlessly integrates Freud and Jung into his reflections on comedy's fascination with sex and flatulence⁶⁷ and demonstrates a keen appreciation for

“the indecipherable Kierkegaard” and “the sound-bite-friendly Nietzsche” in the midst of monologues that also attend to *Jackass 3D* and Willy Nelson.⁶⁸ Ferguson is well-aware of the seeming incongruity, frequently pausing mid-sentence to acknowledge that his choices may not mesh with late night television’s typical audience demographics (e.g., in his description of Tudor England and “the dissolution of the monasteries— You’re *welcome*, teenagers!”)⁶⁹ According to Robert Lloyd of the *LA Times*,

Though he styles himself a "vulgar lounge entertainer" and can go as low as the network censor will allow, he is certainly the only late-night host who would do several minutes on the death of J.D. Salinger or respond to recent guest Claire Danes' saying that her father-in-law was a moral philosopher by asking "Pre- or post-Enlightenment?" with a quote from Kierkegaard for a kicker. On the other hand, he loves the show "Mythbusters" and the word "farty."⁷⁰

Ferguson has distinguished himself from his competitors by what he chooses to include in his monologues, not only in remarks on philosophy and art, but also in frank personal discussions of his struggle with alcoholism or his feelings about his father’s death. These personal elements give rise to a great deal of self-deprecating humor. As Barth observed of true humor, “its favorite target is oneself” and, for Ferguson, it comes down to recognizing one’s limits and never taking oneself too seriously. In a recent interview, Ferguson explained his penchant for laughing at himself: “There’s something about being vulnerable up there. I think people can relate to the personal jabs. We’re not perfect. We’re all just human. Sometimes things don’t work out and sometimes what doesn’t work out is funny.”⁷¹ In line with Hyers’s claim that self-directed humor fosters generosity and compassion, Ferguson opposes humor that targets the powerless: “There’s this lie that goes around the business that everything is fair game. But I don’t believe that.”⁷² This restraint brings to mind Barth’s view of “freedom in limitation” as the context and source of genuine humor.

Thus, Ferguson also distinguishes himself by what he chooses to *exclude*. He made waves in 2007 with a twelve minute monologue explaining why he refused to follow others in their ridicule of Britney Spears after her highly publicized weekend of erratic behavior (which happened to fall on the fifteenth anniversary of his sobriety). He recalls meeting a man he had mocked in recent broadcasts, which led him to question whether such humor is appropriate:

It was the look in his eye that bothered me and I began to think, at what price am I doing this stuff? And I started to think about the effect it was having on real people. Now, I’m as guilty as anyone, I’m as guilty as sin about this. I mean, I made fun of the lady astronaut wearing the diapers when she was driving... That is

clearly a funny thing. But at the same time, then the mug shot comes out and I go “this woman’s in trouble, she needs help.” And then I’m thinking, “I don’t know how good I feel about this.”⁷³

Repeating feelings he often expresses about comedy, Ferguson goes on to highlight the dissonance between the laughter directed at such people and the harsh reality that often proves to be no laughing matter:

People are falling apart. People are dying! That Anna Nicole Smith woman, she died! [audience laughter] No! It’s not a joke! You know, it stops being funny, that. She’s got a six week old kid or six month old kid. What the hell is that? You know, and I’m starting to feel uncomfortable about making fun of these people. And for me comedy should have a certain amount of joy in it. It should be about always attacking the powerful people, attacking the politicians, and the Trumps, and the blowhards. Going after them. We shouldn’t be attacking the vulnerable people.

The remainder of the monologue is devoted to a candid description of the rock bottom he hit in the weeks before entering rehabilitation. He relates the story of nearly committing suicide on a Christmas morning after waking up in a London bar, “soaked in my own urine. At least I think it was mine, I can’t be certain. I couldn’t say with total honesty that it was my urine. I didn’t have it tested, is what I’m saying.” (As the audience’s reaction shows, while explicitly reflecting on the proper limits of comedy, Ferguson simultaneously demonstrates that candid, self-directed humor can elicit as many laughs as the callous ridicule of others). After describing his first days in rehab, he addresses the misinformation surrounding rehabilitation in popular culture, which often gives the impression that 28 days is all one needs to overcome addiction.⁷⁴ The point of the story, returning to Spears, is that humiliating someone publicly, whether for one’s own amusement or to sell magazines or to get ratings, is not going to succeed in getting her into treatment. Spears is not an appropriate target because, while she may be rich and famous, she is not powerful. She is, in fact, quite vulnerable: “This woman [Spears] has two kids. She’s 25 years old. She’s a baby herself. She’s a baby. And the thing is you can embarrass someone to death. It’s embarrassing to admit you’re an alcoholic. It’s embarrassing to wake up in your pee or someone else’s, it doesn’t really matter. It’s embarrassing.”

Against Bergson’s remarks on the social function of laughter (“By the fear which it inspires, it restrains eccentricity”⁷⁵), Ferguson denies that targeting and embarrassing the weak serves any constructive purpose. Instead, he uses comedy to criticize the powerful: “My job is to find the politicians and the presidents and the pompous people who are telling other people how to live, powerful, visible creatures and ... go at them.”⁷⁶ What makes these targets so attractive is their tendency to take themselves too seriously,

having (in Barth's terms) "no place for criticism or humour,"⁷⁷ which Ferguson relates to the "deification" of the human. During the 2008 presidential campaign, for example, he experienced a backlash from both sides of the aisle and responded to this humorless criticism by urging viewers to be careful in "who you choose to deify. Be it Clay Aiken or Barack Obama, you put all your hope and all your dreams and all your ideas about stuff into one human being. They're a human being they're going to let you down."⁷⁸

This warning applies not only to individuals, but also to cultural values, including what Ferguson calls "the deification of youth." In a 2009 monologue, Ferguson details the history of advertising and its shift, in the 1960s, toward the younger demographic (still sought after by television networks). What made this strategy so successful was that the "quality of youth which made you a consumer" was naiveté or gullibility: "The by-product of youth is inexperience. By the nature of having youth, you don't *have* any experience. You're too young to have it. It's not your fault. But you're young and you're kinda *stupid*. So they sell you stuff." The social ramifications are significant because this focus on youth eventually transforms into the "deification of youth," which in turn becomes a "deification of imbecility." Devaluing "experience and cleverness," people of all ages begin to judge themselves according to these harmful standards.

The deification of youth kind of evolved and turned into the deification of imbecility. So it became fashionable and desirable to be young and to be *stupid*... But you know what? That's *not* what you want to be. You *don't* want to be that. *Don't* be young and stupid. And then what happened is that people were frightened to *not* be young... They started mutilating their faces and their bodies in order to look young. But you can't be young forever. That's against the laws of the universe! And all of this horrible quirk and this terrible movement. Nobody meant it. Nobody meant any harm. But now we're in this terrible place where we have the fucking Jonas Brothers!⁷⁹

Advocates of superiority theory would emphasize the aggressive nature of this kind of humor. In line with Bergson's theory, Ferguson seeks to unmask the harmful worship of youth and "imbecility" by making it an object of ridicule. On the other hand, he does not see any social benefit in publicly humiliating those struggling with mental illness or addiction, even if their behavior represents "the gravest inadaptability to social life, which are the sources of misery and at times the cause of crime."⁸⁰ Cruel laughter will not encourage them to seek help. It may be more effective, then, to understand this aspect of Ferguson's humor in terms of what Mindess calls "retaliatory wit," offering liberation from destructive social forces such as the "deification of imbecility" or the gossip industries that thrive on the humiliation of others. According to

Hyers, targeting the deification of the human is part of comedy's prophetic task, sharing "something of the same insight that led the Yahwist author of Genesis 3 to credit the promise 'You shall be like God' to a snake."⁸¹ Such humor represents the very "opposite of the Hobbesean formula, namely, to put down the mighty from their thrones and exalt those of low degree (Luke 1:52)."⁸²

But what does this brief excursus on Craig Ferguson have to do with Karl Barth? We could explore Ferguson's comedic emphases in light of Barth's description of "true humor." Moving instead in the other direction, Ferguson's reflections on comedy and its task can shed light on the "comic" in Barth's theology. As a comedian, Ferguson sees it as something of a duty to target powerful social influences in order to unmask the irrationality of their claims and the danger of submitting to them. With his comedic rant against the deification of youth in mind, we can turn to Barth's exploration of the "chthonic powers" in *The Christian Life*.

The "chthonic powers" are numbered among the many "lordless powers," which Barth defines as "intrinsically harmless" human abilities that achieve an illusory power over us when we begin to place our faith in them. Misled by their false promises, we become slaves to these forces of disorder, which inevitably destroy human freedom and dignity.⁸³ His investigation of the chthonic powers, which relate to cultural and technological advances, begins with the lucrative industry of high fashion. In an effort to illustrate the blindness with which we follow such trends, he asks the reader to consider "who or what really determines fashion—the fashion to which man thinks he must obediently subject clothes, headgear, and hairstyle... first to the rather sympathetic astonishment and then to the horror and amusement of those who think they must follow the new fashion?" Also included here are trends in art, music, and even facial hair, as Barth suggests that one could write a history of the world periodized according to "the sequence in which men have thought that they should shave or not shave their faces or adorn them with the boldest or most hideous arrangements of hair." Barth poses a series of specific questions in an effort to compel his reader to ask "what released spirit of earth" really determines these passing trends, which millions hold to be of such great importance.

Why does it seem to be to even the most sensible women, if not an act of lese majesty, at least an impossibility to be old-fashioned? Who wants it this way? The particular industry that tirelessly makes money out of it and whose kings, we are told, reside especially in Paris? But who has made these people the kings? What is it that has always made this industry so lucrative? How has it come about that since the end of the eighteenth century men's clothing has become so monotonous and uninteresting?

Barth then turns to professional sports and its zealous fans: “It should be obvious that we have here a special form of derangement.” He is particularly baffled by the reaction to the 1958 World Cup finals, which brought Pél  “no fewer than five hundred offers of marriage, while on the same occasion Germany, for the opposite reason, threatened to plunge into a kind of irritated national mourning.” He questions the real value of living vicariously through sports heroes or approaching the Olympics with a “cultic form of worship, praise, laud, and thanksgiving.”

Entertainment is the third chthonic power, including “jazz, cinema, and television, at a higher level reading, a little (and sometimes more than a little) alcohol, not to forget a little (and sometimes more than a little) sex.” Barth does not reject these sources of pleasure, writing often of his love of music, movies, cabarets, and “the presence of loving women, good wine, and a constantly burning pipe.”⁸⁴ He is concerned, however, that we come to take them too seriously. They become obsessions, evident in the “overassiduous talk devoted to the pleasure expected from them,” making them anything but pleasurable. Finally, Barth cites transportation as the most powerful of the chthonic powers – a modern convenience we cannot live without, in spite of the fact that by 1960 traffic accidents had already taken 65,000 lives in Europe. Though he chooses not to concern himself with “the common complaint of the pedestrian of what is to become of him (initially because he lets himself be given a ride so gladly),” he does fear where this limitless progress might lead, as when “the moon itself will not be worth looking at by those who are on the way to Venus.”

In each case, Barth's central concern is the fact that we cannot articulate *why* these things are important or why constant progress is necessary, nor can we seem to discern to what degree these forces actually improve our quality of life. “The bondage of the will! People have to do this, *we* have to do it, even though we do not know why,” but Barth immediately proclaims that “we do not really have to do it” and for him it is “one of the strangest symptoms of the basically perverted beginning of our existence, and of the existence of the powers that anonymously control us, that we seem *not* to be free.”

Though at times these remarks on the chthonic powers facetiously veer into the ‘get-off-my-lawn’ genre of septuagenarian discourse, Barth was famously no wet blanket and his often hyperbolic and comical rhetoric serves him well, as it did Ferguson, in bringing out the absurdity and irrationality of our submission

to these powers. Barth targets the lordless powers in order to proclaim the very real freedom one has from these forces and therefore, like Ferguson, he not only targets the powerful but also advocates for those whose freedom or dignity is endangered.⁸⁵ According to Barth, it is the responsibility of Christians to revolt against this disorder, as the community “responsible for... the deepening and extending, of the divinely ordained human safeguards of human rights, human freedom, and human peace on earth.”⁸⁶ Recalling his description of humor in the *Ethics*, humor itself could be understood as a form of “revolt against disorder” in that it keeps us from taking anything too seriously, whether money, fashion, sports, gossip, youth, ourselves, or our work.

For Barth, as for Ferguson, the deification of the human destroys the humor that represents the proper human response to limitation. Given Barth’s identification of humor as constitutive of persuasive theological discourse, it is not surprising that he employs it so frequently in writing against what he perceives to be the breach of proper limits in modern theology. To these works we now turn.

Barth’s “attacks” against modern theological trends often display the qualities Hyers ascribes to comic discourse: “overstatements and understatement, curious coincidences, miscellaneous reports, gossip asides, raised eyebrows, ironic observations, tongue-in-cheek interpretations, winking and whisperings.”⁸⁷ For example, Schleiermacher’s emphasis on the feminine leaves Barth to “wonder among other things whether he was sufficiently aware of his male existence,” insisting that “this is not an irrelevant question, even biographically.” Relying on a truly ancient theme of comedy, he seems to find waggish pleasure in frequently pointing his readers to a letter in which Schleiermacher wrote of his wish to be a woman.⁸⁸ With the hint of a wink, Barth immediately adds: “It is not for us to criticize or judge.” After all, “there have always been far too many male or masculine theologians” and this facet of his character “makes Schleiermacher more interesting and lovable than the majority of those who despise him.”⁸⁹ Given the qualities Schleiermacher ascribes to femininity, however, (e.g. heightened emotion, diminished rationality) Barth suggests that women would “have good cause to reject the role assigned to them with an ‘I am afraid of the Greeks even when they bring gifts.’”⁹⁰ Barth also enjoys teasing Tillich’s “bloodless and abstract”⁹¹ theology, which he cannot resist even in their personal correspondence: “Where shall we begin when we sit down together again? With the infirmities

of age which obviously afflict us both? Or with the Ground of Being which unconditionally affects us both? Or with your difficulty— I mean my own difficulty in reading your books?”⁹²

One of Barth’s most memorable criticisms of modern theology is found in the excursus on optimism in §42 of the *Dogmatics*. Here he traces the work of Leibniz to its application in Lesser’s 1740 *Insecto-Theologia*: “This was not a joke, for in the same style and dimensions the same author has also given us a theological lithology and testacæology” (i.e. theological studies of rocks and shell-bearing mollusks, respectively).⁹³ According to Barth’s mischievous description of the text, insects reveal this to be the best of all possible worlds, revealing divine wisdom in their beauty, their practical skills, and their behavior, “in connexion with which sharp words are spoken about the very different behaviour of child murderesses.” “But this phenomenology is not yet ended” and Barth carefully rehearses Lesser’s praise of particular insects and their virtues as well as his commentary on the use and misuse of insects in food and fashion. With playful sarcasm, Barth notes that “the author knows perfectly well that insects can also be harmful, and he faces the fact unflinchingly” in the second part of the book, where “the problem of theodicy is vigorously tackled.” Insects annoy men, dogs, and cattle as a punishment for sin. Even so, it is possible “as is shown in an enthusiastic description, to prevent or mitigate the damage they do by various means beginning with prayer and ending with a ‘curious flea-trap’ and ‘bug-mixture.’” Indeed, “a whole chapter, which is both instructive and encouraging, is devoted to an account of the successful fight against insects,” the very possibility of which is further evidence of divine benevolence. Barth then explores the “downward evolution” of 18th century optimism through its more egregious application in Brockes’s poetic “reflections on a grazing herd of kine” and the “circular shape” of the earth, which Barth quotes extensively. Finally, “since many ancient and modern problems have undoubtedly found their simplest and plainest solution in Switzerland, we must not fail to mention” the hymns of A. Kyburtz in praise of Alpine cows and the milk and cheese they provide, which “can be sung to the tune of ‘Now thank we all our God.’” In the final song of Kyburtz’s collection, “finally we attain our goal in an explicit account of vegetables and roots (to be sung to the same tune).”⁹⁴

Of course, Barth recognizes the distance between Leibniz’s understanding of God as the perfect creator of the best possible world and Kyburtz’s understanding of God “as the supreme Giver of so much

cheese.” He admits that “it is a long way, to be sure, from the perfection of the world which Leibniz found in the predetermined harmony of antitheses... [to] its direct or indirect edibility in A. Kyburtz.” Nevertheless:

Once we have boarded this train, we find that it is a non-stop express and we must accept the fact that sooner or later we shall reach the terminus. And we can take comfort in the principle of the school—if the application may be permitted—that imperfection is integral and even essential to creaturely perfection, and serves only to increase it. As the world would not be the world, and God Himself would not be God, without metaphysical, physical and moral evil, so even according to his own teaching Leibniz would not have been Leibniz without Brockes and Kyburtz.

Mindess holds that the pleasure we derive from ‘retaliatory wit’ increases when the opponent “lays himself open for it,” allowing us to use his “own momentum as leverage with which to do him in.”⁹⁵ We can see in his relating of Kyburtz to Leibniz “according to his own teaching” that Barth certainly takes pleasure in this himself. Still, Barth must admit that these expressions of optimism bear some resemblance to genuine Christian hope and are certainly preferable to what he sees as the spirit of ingratitude and resentment that had characterized many other ages (though even here he cannot resist one last jab):

Optimism is not to be dismissed just because we cannot study its products without having to smile. Was it not a conscious and seriously executed part of its programme to show that smiling and even laughing are necessary and justified? Is it not a relative justification of the doctrine of the earthly pleasure of the soul ... that this teaching does in fact give us pleasure even if in a different sense from what its author foresaw?—something which cannot always be said of the apparently or genuinely more important products of other times and other minds.

Given the appreciation for laughter and joy in 18th century optimism, Barth is not surprised that “the incomparable Mozart” emerged from the same century, and he concedes that even “Lesser's book—apart from the information which he gathered ‘with and without magnifying glasses’—is not without certain elements of purposeful ingenuity.” These positive qualities, Barth says, “must be remembered before we frown and grumble; otherwise we might easily put ourselves in the wrong even in relation to Kyburtz, let alone Leibniz.” As is often the case, Barth concludes the critique with his own brand of optimism.

IV. The Comic Warrior?

Wood has argued that emphasizing Barth’s “counterattacks” explains why his work went out of fashion and altogether misses “the real burden of Barth's mature theology.” Barth’s purpose was “not to pummel secularized modernity,” but rather to “recall the world to the great glad tidings” of reconciliation. He

therefore underscores the point that the joyfulness in Barth's work did not arise from his "natively ebullient spirit" alone, but from the gladness of the Gospel message.⁹⁶

I would suggest, however, that his 'native ebullience' and his fondness for 'pummeling' are closely related. Indeed, his *Nein!* against Brunner, which Torrance cites for its "rich spice of humor," reveals both at the very outset in the curt title of his "Angry Introduction."⁹⁷ While we cannot deny Barth's jovial nature, we also cannot overlook his natural combativeness, evident in the diary entries of his misspent youth: "Today I did a good deal of bashing up and got bashed up by plenty of people myself."⁹⁸ Moreover, his "*Kriegserklärung*" (declaration of war) against modern theology and his decision to aim "the muzzle of the cannon" at Schleiermacher reveal his lifelong fondness for military history,⁹⁹ and even his English, which he learned by reading detective novels, was dominated by "a criminal vocabulary."¹⁰⁰ Though, in 1948, he claimed that old age had led him to a greater appreciation for flexibility and compromise, he was "still able to put up a good fight when that is absolutely called for"¹⁰¹ and insisted that even his later shift in emphasis from "God as wholly other" to "the humanity of God" was not a retreat (*Rückzug*), but a continuation of his attack (*Angriff*) on modern theology.¹⁰²

Barth's critical writings have left him with a reputation as somewhat less than charitable, due in no small part to his robust sense of humor and combative style. He himself acknowledged that "the ink-bottle is as much a danger to the Barth family as the wine-bottle is to others."¹⁰³ His analyses, however, often display sympathy for the author even when disagreements abound, as seen in his defense of Hegel against the ridicule of critics or of Schleiermacher against "today's swaggering theologians."¹⁰⁴ Barth stressed that one must approach every author "with a certain free and understanding humor, presuming that the author is probably always right in some sense even when wrong, so that our only task is to see how far this is always so, perhaps even unintentionally."¹⁰⁵

Though his scathing criticisms of individual thinkers (past and present) may seem to violate his own theological criteria for true humor (verging on what Hyers calls "fallen laughter"), Torrance argues otherwise, claiming that Barth's ability "to laugh at himself, and therefore to criticize himself" allowed him to target others "in such a way that he can appreciate their intention and respect their persons and their sincerity."¹⁰⁶

Barth held that we can only laugh at others when we have learned to laugh at ourselves, and he did not hesitate to laugh at his own expense, whether in the self-mocking depiction of his “little pushcart of Dogmatics,” or in the confession that ink-bottles and Barths can be a dangerous combination, or in his feigned astonishment that “the kingdom of God simply will not accommodate itself to my teaching methods.”¹⁰⁷ Evidence supporting Torrance’s claim that such self-directed humor mitigates Barth’s aggressive wit may be found in his capacity for lifelong friendship with even his fiercest theological opponents, Bultmann and Tillich. As Barth wrote to the latter, “it is for me a very special phenomenon that we understand one another so well and cordially at the human level, but materially—and don’t try to offer me a synthesis; in so doing you would only strengthen me in my opinion!—we can only contradict and oppose one another from the very foundation up.”¹⁰⁸

While John Updike noted Barth’s “humor and love of combat” together as evidence that he was genuinely “indulgent of this world,”¹⁰⁹ these two qualities also reveal important ‘comic’ elements in his theology, especially in the motivations behind his scathing attacks. Barth complained that modern Neo-Protestant theology lacked eschatological vision, leaving it unable to revolt against the powers that unjustly bind humanity. Barth therefore launched a “counterattack” against powerful theological trends, using humor to unmask the absurdity of deifying the human and thus aiming his theological criticism in much the same direction that Ferguson aims his comedy. Because modern talk about God amounted to little more than “speak[ing] in an exalted tone” about man,¹¹⁰ Barth’s intention was to “counterbalance the humanism of the 19th Century, when men were overconfident in their own ability to run the world, by a return to the Bible in which God talks to men.”¹¹¹

Recall that for Hyers it is only by “being frankly human” that comedy elevates the human perspective. Torrance makes a similar observation in defining “the critical significance of humour” in Barth’s work:

Barth engages in his gigantic task of dogmatics with the consciousness that the angels are looking over his shoulder, reminding him that all theology is human thinking, and that even when we have done our utmost in faithfulness to what is given to us, all we can do is to point beyond and above to the transcendent truth and beauty of God, thereby acknowledging the inadequacy of our thought in response to God’s Word, but engaging in it joyfully, in gratitude to God who is pleased to let himself be served in this way by human thinking and to bless it with his grace.¹¹²

Hyers's view of the role of humor in relation to theology is also illuminating here:

To take oneself seriously *as a human being* is to laugh, for that which is taken in all sincerity and good faith as being ultimate is taken as such by human beings inhabiting this or that culture in this or that moment of time. Even the interpretation of faith as an ultimate and unconditional concern (e.g., Paul Tillich) has an aura of ultimate and unconditional seriousness about it that human beings cannot give to their concerns without absolutizing their experiences and perceptions.¹¹³

Barth uses humor in much this way –to remind theology of its human nature, conditioned by its environment, and to note how often its positions are grounded in nothing more than philosophical fashions, social customs, and cultural taboos.¹¹⁴ He held that theology must therefore be especially careful to recognize all human thinking as provisional and avoid turning cultural conceptions of optimism, progress, pleasure, philosophy, etc. into idols or lordless powers. This requires that theology dedicate itself to the revealed Word above and before all other human constructs, providing a theological foundation that can “free man’s understanding of Jesus Christ from the prior understanding of culture.”¹¹⁵ Again, Barth does not intend to come at theology from a ‘superior’ position, always including himself in the claim that theologians are never equal to their task. Hyers himself observes Barth's ability to place his own work “within the parentheses of the comic perspective in a simple confession of the humanity of all theology”; this observation is made in Hyers’s exploration of jesters, whose task he describes as follows:

The jester’s function is humorously to profane the categories and hierarchies with which we would capture the ultimate truth about things, domesticate it, and add it to the electronic data bank. From the standpoint of the jester, who refuses to take any human pretensions or demarcations with absolute seriousness, the moat that defines and protects the king’s castle is also the moat that imprisons the king.¹¹⁶

Like the jester, Barth held that all human activity had to be “disenchanted of its secret divinity”¹¹⁷ in order to be genuinely free. And like Hyers’s comic hero, he held that all such activity is best understood as a “game” that “might be played better and more successfully, the more it is recognized as a game.”¹¹⁸ Beginning with theology, Barth felt that modern human achievements had to be brought down a notch in order for theology, culture, and “modern man” to be elevated to genuine human freedom. That Barth's attacks often employed biting humor was not only a matter of crafting persuasive rhetoric, but was also one way of demonstrating his refusal to take any element of human culture (including theology) or any individual (including himself) too seriously. He thus places himself, says Torrance, in contrast “to the seriousness with

which nineteenth-century man took himself, and indeed to those today who make such heavy, boring play with what they call ‘modern man.’”¹¹⁹

Rather than “fallen laughter,” therefore, Barth’s use of humor against modern theological trends can be interpreted as an attempt to revolt against the disorder that he believed theology’s assimilation to culture had produced. He sought to free theology from “sulky faces, morose thoughts, and boring ways of speaking” by providing what Hyers calls a “counterbalance” that restores “a full recognition of human limitations and hence a sense of perspective relative to those lofty portraits and painted pretensions”¹²⁰ (or in Barth’s terms, a “counterbalance” to modernity’s “overconfidence”).

Though Hyers juxtaposes the values of the warrior against those of the comic hero, Barth deftly joins the two in his theological discourse. On the one hand, in claiming that theology must be wholly dedicated to the Word, he defends the virtues Hyers ascribes to the warrior, such as “unquestioning loyalty and obedience, inflexible conviction, unswerving dedication.” Moreover, some view his willingness to go against the stream as evidence of “indomitable will, passionate involvement, uncompromising determination.” On the other hand, in emphasizing limitation and humility, Barth argues for the very virtues Hyers credits to comedy, such as “flexibility, freedom, compromise.”¹²¹ His eschatological writings hold that the necessary attitude of the children of God is one of “playfulness, lightheartedness, childlikeness” (the very virtues he praised so often in Mozart), and he regards the “celebration of life” as fundamental to genuine obedience to the divine command.

For Barth, this combination of confrontation and playfulness should characterize all genuine theology and church proclamation. The Christian life itself combines the virtues of the warrior and the comic hero as it treads the “narrow gate” between present threats and eschatological hope.¹²² As one of humor and combat, the Christian life, from Barth’s point of view, could perhaps be described as the life of the ‘comic warrior,’ characterized by the ‘incongruities’ of free obedience, indomitable humility, uncompromising lightheartedness, and serious play. Because of his eschatological orientation, we might interpret Barth’s writings against modern theology, in which Hyers’s comic virtues appear even in warrior moments, as an attempt to exemplify the qualities of this ‘comic warrior,’ displaying humor and optimism even in the skirmishes through which he hoped to cut a new path for theology. Given his description of humor in the

context of eschatology, we can understand humor itself – and with it his use of ‘retaliatory wit’ – as a form of eschatological resistance.

Thus Barth's theology is ‘comic’ not only in the sense of embracing gladness and hope (which led Wood to identify him as “theologian of divine comedy”), but in his particular combination of eschatological hope and pointed criticism, the former serving as the motivation and goal of the latter. Together, these two factors reveal the comic nature of Barth's theological aims, as a revolt against “lordless” theologies waged through the humor that arises “when we wrestle with the seriousness of the present,” while recognizing that “we cannot be totally serious as the children of God.” Like Ferguson, Barth held that humor should express joy and, because both joy and revolt are inspired by eschatological hope, Barth’s “counterattacks” conclude with the expectation of an eschatological armistice, as illustrated in his musings about his future meeting with Schleiermacher:

The only certain consolation which remains for me is to rejoice that in the kingdom of heaven I will be able to discuss all these questions with Schleiermacher extensively... for, let us say, a couple of centuries... I can imagine that that will be a very serious matter for both sides, but also that we will both laugh very heartily at ourselves.¹²³

In this same year, months before his death, he wrote the following to Karl Rahner, with reference to his frequent criticism of modern Neo-Protestant theology:

But take it from me, our Neo-Protestants were and are in their own way pious and even churchly people. To spend a few hundred years in eternity with their father Schleiermacher (whom I never think of as excluded from the communion of saints) would please me very much should I myself get to heaven—so long as I could have a few thousand years with Mozart first.¹²⁴

In the midst of battle, Barth anticipates a happy ending.

Notes

¹ This paper emerges from a larger project on Barth's theology of culture and was inspired in part by the surprise with which statements about humor in Barth's theology are often met. Thanks to Kathryn Tanner, Kevin Hector and Dan Boscaljon for their suggestions at various stages along the way.

² Karl Barth, *Ethics*, ed. Dietrich Braun, tr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (New York: Seabury Press, 1981), 512.

³ Ralph C. Wood, *The Comedy of Redemption: Christian Faith and Comic Vision in Four American Novelists* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 34.

⁴ A caveat: Theorists have developed varying definitions of comedy, humor, and the relationship between the two. In its original sense, comedy is a dramatic genre, opposite tragedy, often with a positive outcome for the protagonist but with no *necessary* relation to humor. On the other hand, modern usage typically sees a much closer relationship between the two, understanding comedy in terms of its intention to elicit laughter. Wood, for example, seems to tend toward the former view, while Hyers tends toward the latter. This paper will admittedly play fast and loose with ‘comedy,’ but will lean toward the modern usage.

⁵ “Pressekonferenz in Chicago” (Chicago Sun Times, April 1962) in *Gespräche 1959–1962 (GA IV.25)*, ed. Eberhard Busch (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1995), 450.

⁶ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, tr. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: Macmillan, 1911), 18ff.

⁷ Harvey Mindess, *Laughter and Liberation* (Los Angeles: Nash Publishing, 1971), 237.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 44f.

⁹ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea Vol. 1* (1819), tr. R.B. Haldane and J. Kemp (London: Trübner & Co., 1883), 76f. Kant holds that laughter “arises if a tense expectation is transformed into nothing,” in *Critique of Judgment*, tr. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987), 203.

¹⁰ C. Stephan Evans, *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self: Collected Essays* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), 87. Evans observes that Kierkegaard’s theory includes some elements of superiority and relief theories as well, since “it is the possession of a superior position that enables an individual to experience an incongruity as pleasant rather than painful,” while humor also offers “a relief from the vexations of life.”

¹¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, “Humor and Faith,” in *Holy Laughter: Essays on Religion in the Comic Perspective*, ed. M. Conrad Hyers (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), 135.

¹² *Ibid.*, 148.

¹³ Peter L. Berger, “Christian Faith and the Social Comedy,” in *Holy Laughter*, 127f.

¹⁴ Wood, *The Comedy of Redemption*, 1.

¹⁵ See *Ibid.*, 33ff.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁷ M. Conrad Hyers, *The Spirituality of Comedy: Comic Heroism in a Tragic World* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1996), 64ff. Italics original.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 115f.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 62. In light of the above accounts of the relationship between humor, limitation, and deification, it is not surprising that Aristotle developed a more positive view of comedy and laughter than Plato. See Salvatore Attardo, *Linguistic Theories of Humor*, Humor Research Vol. 1 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994), 20.

²¹ Hyers, *The Spirituality of Comedy*, 125. Quoting from John D. Godsey’s Introduction to Barth’s *How I Changed My Mind* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1966), 14.

²² T.F. Torrance, “Introduction” to Barth’s *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings 1920-1928*, tr. Louise Pettibone Smith (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1962), 9.

²³ T.F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology, 1910-1931* (London: SCM Press, 1962), 24. Said proof-texts include “his obvious enjoyment of the *Insecto-theologia* of Christian Lesser, the merriment with which he wrote at length about angels and cast his side-glances at the demons (for they have a bad smell!),... his delight at giving Mozart, as it were, a place among ‘the Church fathers’ (!), and not least the rich spice of humour even in his angry *Nein* to Emil Brunner, which Anglo-Saxons seem almost invariably to read with a Teutonic lack of humour.”

²⁴ John Morreall, *Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 118.

²⁵ Hyers, *The Spirituality of Comedy*, 124. Italics added.

²⁶ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics (CD) III.4*, ed. T.F. Torrance, ed. and tr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark), 665.

²⁷ For examples of these, see *Ethics*, 510ff.; *CD III.4*, 665ff.; *Evangelical Theology*, 155f.; *CD IV.2*, 125.

²⁸ Karl Barth, *Ethics*, ed. Dietrich Braun, tr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (New York: Seabury Press, 1981), 503f. Italics original. Barth’s remarks on play are taken from *Ethics*, 503ff. unless otherwise noted.

²⁹ Barth, *CD III.4*, 553.

³⁰ Barth’s discussion of humor is found in *Ethics*, 510-512.

³¹ Berger makes a similar observation, noting the humorlessness of the revolutionary versus the comic sensibility of the Christian, who can laugh because he takes neither himself nor the status quo he challenges too seriously in light of divine work. “The Christian challenge to the *status quo* begins by not taking it as seriously as it takes itself. It refuses to see individual human beings as incarnations of social symbols and principles... the Christian challenge to society lies above all in its radical humanizing of all social problems. This process of humanization carries with it a comic perspective. It “unmasks” human pretensions very much in the sense meant by Freud in his discussion of wit. Finally, because it lives in confrontation with God, this Christian challenge cannot take itself ultimately seriously either. Only God is ultimately to be taken seriously. Everything human remains less than serious by comparison.” Berger, “Christian Faith and the Social Comedy,” 129.

³² Hyers, *The Spirituality of Comedy*, 78.

³³ Ibid. Similar to both Barth and Hyers, Mindess holds that self-directed humor allows us “to accept ourselves for what we are” and in this way “humor sows humility.” Mindess, *Laughter and Liberation*, 181ff.

³⁴ Barth, *CD III.2*, 261.

³⁵ Karl Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics IV,4. Lecture Fragments*, Geoffrey W. Bromiley. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 97.

³⁶ Evans, *Kierkegaard on Faith*, 84.

³⁷ Hegel, *On Tragedy*, 52f. Cited in Hyers, *The Spirituality of Comedy*, 55.

³⁸ Barth, *CD III.2*, 537. See also Eberhard Busch, *The Great Passion: An Introduction to Karl Barth's Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 276.

³⁹ Barth, *CD III.4*, 558.

⁴⁰ Hyers, *The Spirituality of Comedy*, 128.

⁴¹ Barth, *CD III.1*, 410f.

⁴² Barth, *CD III.3*, 529.

⁴³ Barth, *CD IV.3*, 430.

⁴⁴ Barth, *CD II.1*, 655ff.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 656.

⁴⁶ Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, tr. Foley Grover (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 151. According to Barth, “this is the payment theology must make for the extraordinary ambition of its enterprise in devoting itself to this object.” Hyers makes a similar point, noting that “the theologian is in the clumsiest of possible positions,” for “the very ultimacy of the object of inquiry makes of theology the highest form of foolishness.” Hyers, *The Spirituality of Comedy*, 124.

⁴⁷ Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 155f.

⁴⁸ See Wood, *The Comedy of Redemption*, 34ff.

⁴⁹ Barth, *CD III.1*, 371. See also *CD II.1*, 665f.

⁵⁰ Barth, *CD III.4*, 378.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Barth, *CD II.1*, 666.

⁵³ Barth, *CD III.3*, 369. Here he observes that writings on angelology display “the lack of any sense of humour on the part of those who know and say too much, and the equal lack of any sense of humour on the part of those who deny or ignore too much.”

⁵⁴ Karl Barth, “Rudolph Bultmann – An Attempt to Understand Him” in *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate, Vol. II*, ed. Hans-Werner Bartsch, tr. Reginald H. Fuller (London: S.P.C.K., 1972), 131f.

⁵⁵ Carl Zuckmayer, *A Late Friendship: The Letters of Karl Barth and Carl Zuckmayer*, tr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 68.

⁵⁶ Karl Barth, “Mozart’s Freedom,” in *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*, tr. Clarence K. Pott (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 55.

⁵⁷ Karl Barth, *The Theology of Schleiermacher: Lectures at Göttingen, Winter Semester of 1923/24*, ed. Dietrich Ritschl, tr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 47.

⁵⁸ Karl Barth, “Schleiermacher,” in *Theology and Church*, 173. Italics original.

⁵⁹ Hyers, *The Spirituality of Comedy*, 109.

- ⁶⁰ “Once this dam is opened we relentlessly move on to a complete and irreversible amalgamation of Christian life and civilization.” Barth, *Theology of Schleiermacher*, 34. See also Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century: Its Background and History* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1973), 421.
- ⁶¹ “Interview von Mr. Lemon,” (Newsweek, 1962) in *Gespräche 1959–1962 (GA IV.25)*, 446.
- ⁶² Barth, *CD I.2*, 730.
- ⁶³ Barth, *CD III.2*, 447.
- ⁶⁴ Torrance, “Introduction,” in *Theology and Church*, 9.
- ⁶⁵ Craig Ferguson, *American on Purpose: The Improbable Adventures of an Unlikely Patriot* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 241.
- ⁶⁶ Robert Lloyd, “Craig Ferguson has no sidekick, no band, no budget. No problem,” *LA Times* 14 Jan 2010, Page D.1.
- ⁶⁷ Craig Ferguson, *The Late Late Show*, Episode 7.69, first broadcast by CBS on 14 December 2010. Currently available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LNEOOhPqOQQ>
- ⁶⁸ Quotes are from Craig Ferguson, *Between the Bridge and the River*, (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2007). Ferguson incorporates such thinkers often. For the monologue broadcast on Nietzsche’s birthday, see *The Late Late Show with Craig Ferguson*, Episode 7.35, first broadcast by CBS on 15 October 2010. Currently available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DxV1cZFUgHQ>
- ⁶⁹ Craig Ferguson, *The Late Late Show*, Episode 7.68, first broadcast by CBS on 13 December 2010. Currently available at http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=12%2F13%2F10a&aq=f
- ⁷⁰ Lloyd, “Craig Ferguson has no sidekick, no band, no budget. No problem,” D.1.
- ⁷¹ Ed Condran, “Craig Ferguson: That *Other* Late Night Guy,” *Atlantic City Weekly*, 7 July 2010, 58. Electronic edition available at: <http://www.atlanticcityweekly.com/news-and-views/cover-story/Craig-Ferguson-That-Other-Late-Night-Guy-97959389.html>
- ⁷² Bill Brownstein, “Craig Ferguson is now a vice-free comedian,” in *Montreal Gazette*, 5 Jul 2008, Page E8, Final Edition. For electronic edition see: <http://www.canada.com/cityguides/montreal/story.html?id=dd73e1bd-8624-4214-b484-a062c4d1b7e5>.
- ⁷³ Craig Ferguson, *The Late Late Show*, Episode 4.8, first broadcast by CBS on 20 February 2007. Currently available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7bbaRyDLMvA>
- ⁷⁴ These events are also recounted in Ferguson’s *American on Purpose*, 169ff.
- ⁷⁵ Bergson, *Laughter*, 18ff.
- ⁷⁶ Alex Dobuzinskis, “Craig Ferguson: Dragon Slayer,” *Reuters*, 24 March 2010. <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE62L4O920100324>
- ⁷⁷ Barth, *CD IV.2*, 607.
- ⁷⁸ Craig Ferguson, *The Late Late Show*, Episode 5.19, first broadcast by CBS on 25 Sept 2008. Currently available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n2x3AXJWxAU>
- ⁷⁹ Craig Ferguson, *The Late Late Show*, Episode 5.193, first broadcast by CBS on 21 July 2009. Currently available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GDuIvZkLun8&feature=search>
- ⁸⁰ Bergson, *Laughter*, 18.
- ⁸¹ Hyers, *The Spirituality of Comedy*, 59.
- ⁸² *Ibid.*, 89.
- ⁸³ Barth’s discussion of these ‘chthonic powers’ takes place in *The Christian Life*, 227-232.
- ⁸⁴ Written in a ‘fan letter’ to Carl Zuckmayer, attempting to introduce himself to his favorite poet/playwright (who responded with astonishment that Barth could think he did not already know of the famous theologian). See Zuckmayer, *A Late Friendship*, 4. Markus Barth pointed out that his father “has never made war on materialism. He likes life too much” (“Interview von Mr. Lemon,” *Gespräche 1959–1962*, 446). Barth was hailed by one American journalist as “a Calvinist, but not a gloomy one,” attending a Second City performance in Chicago and fraternizing with the comedians over beer and cigarettes (as immortalized in a *Time Magazine* photo from 20 April 1962). Moreover, he was a frequent movie-goer, attended festivals and variety shows, and enjoyed reading crime novels. Barth’s fondness for smoking is well known and, in discussing conceptions of the human, he interjects: “What a pity that none of these apologists considers it worthy of mention that man is apparently the only being accustomed to laugh and smoke!” Barth, *CD III.2*, 83.
- ⁸⁵ For example, Barth advocates for the dignity of the “unmarried mother,” who “must not allow this dignity to be removed from her” in the face of social reproach. Barth, *CD III.4*, 277. In exploring ‘honest work,’ he forms his definition and criteria such that the elderly and the sick are not denied the dignity of the worker. This work consists “in honest wrestling with his fate” and contributes in its own way to the benefit of humankind. Barth, *Ethics*, 222. Even the sea-lion is not overlooked in Barth’s advocacy for those deprived of creaturely freedom, as he notes the levels of “human stupidity, severity, caprice and irrationality at work” in the practice of caging animals for human entertainment and declares that “the revolt of a sea-lion... against what is demanded from it will evoke spontaneously the sympathy of all right-thinking spectators.” Barth, *CD III.4*, 352. The caging of humans was an even bigger

concern. During his sole visit to the U.S., he visited an American prison, which “was called a ‘cell-house,’” but, he reported, “they were not even cells; they were cages. Tiny cages for two human beings.” Having often visited Swiss prisons, he found the conditions in the U.S. to be “a terrible shock” and wondered, given the funds devoted to putting a man on the moon, “why not spend a fraction of the moon-shot’s cost on humane prisons?” Press Conference in New York, *Gespräche 1959–1962 (GA IV.25)*, 494.

⁸⁶ Barth, *The Christian Life*, 205.

⁸⁷ Hyers, *The Spirituality of Comedy*, 3.

⁸⁸ E.g. see *Ethics*, 185f., *Theology and Church*, 158, *CD III.4*, 155. Barth frequently relates this letter to Schleiermacher’s “feeling of absolute dependence,” which Barth describes as a “unique perversion of the sex consciousness.” (*Ethics*, 185).

⁸⁹ Barth, *CD III.4*, 155.

⁹⁰ Barth, *Theology of Schleiermacher*, 71.

⁹¹ Barth, *CD I.1*, 74.

⁹² Letter to Tillich, 22 November 1963 in *Karl Barth: Letters 1961-1968*, ed. Jurgen Fangmeier and Hinrich Stoevesandt, tr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 142.

⁹³ Barth, *CD III.1*, 396-399. Lesser’s book is: *Insecto-Theologia oder: Vernunfft- und schriffmässiger Versuch wie ein Mensch durch aufmercksame Betrachtungen derer sonst wenig geachteten “Insecten” zu lebendiger Erkänntnis und Bewunderung der Allmacht, Weissheit, der Güte und Gerechtigkeit des grossen Gottes gelangen könne*, (Frankfurt and Leipzig, 1738) ET: *Insecto-Theology: Or, A demonstration of the being and perfections of God, from a consideration of the structure and economy of insects*, (Edinburgh, 1799). The other two texts Barth refers to here are Lesser’s *Litho-Theologia, das ist, Natürliche Historie und geistliche Betrachtung der Steine*, (Hamburg, 1735) ET: *Litho-theology, i.e., the natural history and spiritual consideration of the stones*; and his *Testaceo-Theologia, oder Betrachtung der Schnecken und Muscheln*, (Leipzig, 1744) ET: *Testaceo-theology, or a consideration of the snails and mussels*.

⁹⁴ For the passages on Brockes and Kyburtz, see Barth, *CD III.1*, 399-403

⁹⁵ Mindess, *Laughter and Liberation*, 45f.

⁹⁶ Wood, *The Comedy of Redemption*, 34f. Wood observes that “Barth’s work was applauded because it seemed to provide the hammer wherewith disillusioned liberals could smash the crystal bauble of culture-religion inherited from the Victorian age. Now that academic theology has marched bravely backward into the nineteenth century again, Barth appears altogether as irrelevant as he was once current. My conviction is that both the early admirers and the late despisers have got Barth wrong.”

⁹⁷ Karl Barth, “No!” in *Natural Theology*, tr. Peter Fraenkel. London: The Centenary Press, 1946), 70.

⁹⁸ Diary entry from 21 Jan. 1899. Cited in Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 25. Busch portrays these years as a foreshadowing of Barth’s turbulent theological career: “Karl was also for some time the leader of a gang which was engaged even then in a bitter feud with another gang led by Martin Werner, a neighbour’s child, who was later to become Professor of Dogmatics in the University of Berne (the feud was to be carried on afterwards, in a different way.” Those familiar with Barth’s early years know that his fighting instincts were honed in these street gangs (described rather more like ‘fight clubs’) and in the Berne cadet corps.

⁹⁹ In letters to E. Thurneysen, 18 and 23 May 1921 in *Barth - Thurneysen Briefwechsel, Band I*, 489 and 492.

¹⁰⁰ “Interview von J. Elson,” (1962) *Gespräche 1959–1962*, 445. See also: “Interview von V. Sproxton” in *Ibid.*, 439; Letter to George Bell, Bischof von Chichester, 8 Dec. 1939 in *Offene Briefe 1935–1942 (GA V.36)*, ed. Diether Koch (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2001), 204; Barth, *How I Changed My Mind*, 44.

¹⁰¹ Barth, *How I Changed My Mind*, 51.

¹⁰² Barth, *Die Menschlichkeit Gottes* (Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1956), 7; ET: *The Humanity of God*, tr. John Newton Thomas and Thomas Wieser (Richmond, VA: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 41.

¹⁰³ Letter to H. Scholz, 24 May 1953. Cited in Busch, *Karl Barth*, 26.

¹⁰⁴ On Hegel, see *Protestant Theology*, 384ff. On Schleiermacher, see *Theology of Schleiermacher*, 272ff.

¹⁰⁵ Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, tr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 6.

¹⁰⁶ Torrance, “Introduction,” in *Theology and Church*, 9.

¹⁰⁷ Letter to E. Thurneysen, 14 Dec 1919. Busch, *Karl Barth*, 66.

¹⁰⁸ Letter to Tillich, 3 December 1963, in *Letters 1961-1968*, 143. Writing against Bultmann’s “demythologizing,” Barth characterized his friendship with Bultmann as one between a whale and an elephant and asked him, “do you know Melville’s remarkable book *Moby Dick*? You ought to have a high regard for it because of its animal mythology!” Letter to Bultmann, 24 December 1952. *Karl Barth – Rudolf Bultmann Letters 1922-1966*, ed. Bernd Jaspers, ed. and tr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), 108.

¹⁰⁹ John Updike, Foreword to Barth's *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*, 7.

¹¹⁰ Barth, *The Humanity of God*, 40.

¹¹¹ "Pressekonferenz in Chicago," *Gespräche 1959–1962 (GA IV.25)*, 450.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 9.

¹¹³ Hyers, *The Spirituality of Comedy*, 127f.

¹¹⁴ For example, see Barth on cultural standards of masculinity and femininity in *CD III.4*, 153f.

¹¹⁵ Torrance, "Introduction," in *Theology and Church*, 22.

¹¹⁶ Hyers, *The Spirituality of Comedy*, 129.

¹¹⁷ Torrance, "Introduction," in *Theology and Church*, 22f.

¹¹⁸ Barth, "Church and Culture," in *Theology and Church*, 349. Hyers claims that the comic hero interprets life as "a game." *The Spirituality of Comedy*, 64ff.

¹¹⁹ Torrance, "Introduction," in *Theology and Church*, 9. Again, refusing to take things too seriously does not mean that we do not take them seriously at all. On ecumenism, for example, Barth wrote that it is only by taking itself and its positions seriously that one church could have anything of value to contribute to dialogue with another, for it is only "with genuine dogmatic intolerance that there is the possibility of genuine and profitable discussion." Barth, *CD I.2*, 827.

¹²⁰ Hyers, *The Spirituality of Comedy*, 105.

¹²¹ In hermeneutics, for example. See Barth's essay on Bultmann in *Kerygma and Myth*, 83-132; *Theology of John Calvin*, 6; *CD I.2*, 727ff.

¹²² E.g. Barth, *CD IV.3*, 615 and 917, Barth compares the Christian life to Dürer's engraving *The Knight, Death and Devil* (1513).

¹²³ Barth, *Theology of Schleiermacher*, 277.

¹²⁴ Letter to Karl Rahner, 16 March 1968. *Letters: 1961-1968*, 288.