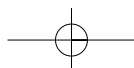
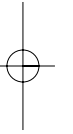
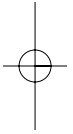
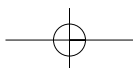
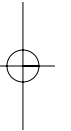
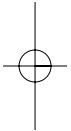
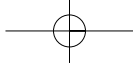


I Recent Questions





1

Robert W. Jenson, “You Wonder Where the Spirit Went.”

Robert W. Jenson is one of the most rigorous and creative theologians writing in English. His article “You wonder where the Spirit went” crystallizes an unease about successive nineteenth- and twentieth-century trinitarian revivals: whether they have much interesting to say about the Holy Spirit; whether, indeed, they tend (despite themselves) to reduce the Spirit to a function or “power” of the Son. He poses that question by focusing on the greatest and most ambitious of those revivals, that of Karl Barth.

Barth is a theologian’s theologian. Some students have read thousands of pages by him. Some have yet to read any. But both can learn from Jenson’s analysis things they can learn almost nowhere else. Why study an article devoted largely to someone you haven’t read? Because sometimes the omissions and tendencies of the greatest inspire the best thinking among their critics. They require those who find fault to think through why.

In thinking through why, Jenson identifies the impediments he suspects of obstructing robust Spirit-talk. Barth’s Spirit-talk shows a tendency to announce the Spirit but discuss the Son. He exhibits a kind of theological speech impediment: almost involuntary pauses in speaking of the Spirit, filled in by repetitions in speaking of the Son. The obstacles must be powerful indeed, if they hinder Barth. Why read Jenson on Barth on the Spirit? Because Jenson can diagnose what stumps Barth.

The case of Barth suggests, according to Jenson, that views like these will impede a theologian’s Spirit-talk:

- 1 The Spirit is a something rather than a someone.
- 2 The Spirit is no agent in itself, but God’s capacity to “echo” in some *other* agent (Jesus, the human being, the Church). The echo is unreliable or too hard to discern – “subjective” – in any agent but Jesus.

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- 3 Therefore the Spirit echoes rather than acts in human experience. Thus it reduces all too easily to human experience, rather than becoming objective in the Church.
- 4 The Spirit echoes rather than acts in human history. Thus the Church reduces all too easily to church history, rather than mediating salvation.
- 5 The Spirit echoes rather than acts at Pentecost. Thus Pentecost marks the denouement of the stories about Jesus, rather than a new initiative of the Spirit.

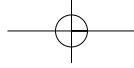
Jenson's diagnosis raises two questions of its own. (1) To what extent does Barth avoid the Spirit, only as a corrective to Schleiermacher? Would Barth have allowed the Spirit more scope, if he had fought an opponent on a different front? (2) Can Jenson talk about the objectivity of the Spirit in the Church, and still allow God to correct the Church?¹

Karl Barth (1886–1968) was the greatest Protestant theologian of the twentieth century, and arguably the greatest Christian theologian of that century. He revived trinitarian thinking to propose new and powerful answers to questions that had not been thoroughly thought through in trinitarian fashion before. Doctrines as diverse as revelation, election, creation, and redemption were to be judged by how trinitarian they were, where the opposite of “trinitarian” was “abstract.”

Yet the trinitarianism usually served to distinguish the Son from the Father. So not only was the Father the revealing God, but the Father was revealing himself in the Son. Not only was the Father the electing God,² but the Son was the electing God and the elect human being in One. Not only did the Father create, but it was characteristic of the Father to desire a created other to himself because he had an uncreated other to himself in the Son. Not only did the Son redeem, but in him the human being participated in the judgment of the Father.

You might expect pneumatological analogates of those moves. Sometimes you get them telegraphed; sometimes you don't get them at all. Barth makes the Holy Spirit responsible for the human being's “readiness” for revelation, or for God's involving or engaging the human being in revelation. But you do not hear that the Holy Spirit is the electing God; it falls to Jenson, in another piece, to develop that insight. You scarcely hear that the role of the Holy Spirit in creation is to create witnesses. You hear about the role of the Holy Spirit in redemption, but that turns out to reduce, Jenson notes, to “the power of Jesus Christ.”

Barth avoided the Holy Spirit, he makes clear, because he thought that Schleiermacher had made it too easy for the Spirit to cover anthropocentrism. You might read Jenson's career as devoted to the theology of the Holy Spirit. On the way, he proves in the doing that you get off the seesaw between Schleiermacher's anthropocentrism and Barth's avoidance of it. You could have a doctrine of the Spirit – or any of several interesting doctrines of the Spirit – without reducing the Spirit either to the Son or to the human being. Like Luther, Jenson generates new ideas with delight and phrases them with



compression, often leaving it to others to fit them together. More than any other theologian after Barth, he exercises the theologian's license to argue *thesenhaft*, in elegant and provocative theses. Among his more interesting proposals about the Spirit are these: The Spirit is the electing God. If God is the one who was, and is, and ever shall be, the Spirit corresponds to the future, to what God shall be. If the Father is the source of divinity, the *fons deitatis*, the Spirit is the goal of divinity, the *fnis deitatis*. The Spirit liberates the Father.³

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Karl Barth is the initiator and model (the *image*, in his own sense!) of this century's renewal of trinitarian theology. He is moreover a giant of the Reformed theological tradition, famous always for its witness to the Spirit. The near-unanimity is therefore remarkable, with which a recent meeting of the Karl Barth Society of North America agreed that long stretches of Barth's thinking seem rather binitarian than trinitarian. What can be the explanation? This paper is the result of the Society's assignment, that I should seek one.

There are at least three modes of trinitarian reflection in the *Kirchliche Dogmatik* [*Church Dogmatics*]. First, Barth so locates the doctrine of Trinity systematically as to make it *identify* the God whose ways the *Kirchliche Dogmatik* will seek to trace. The biblical narratives claim to identify a particular God, and therefore claim to be true of him in a way that specifies his hypostatic being. Barth sets his analysis of this phenomenon in the very prolegomena of his dogmatics, to make it plain that it is *this* God of whom also his subsequent dogmatic propositions are to be true. Barth's observation – so easy to make once he had made it – that the doctrine of Trinity is Christianity's *identification* of its God, and the amazing resolution with which he exercises that insight throughout his dogmatics, would be epochal theological contributions had Barth made no other.

Second, in I/1, §§8–12, Barth develops a full technical doctrine of Trinity. This *locus* is, I think, problematic in part. §8, “God in his Revelation” has been itself a revelation for many: the way in which the trinitarian mandates are laid one upon another, by each time asking what must be true if God is truly to *be* exactly as he is in revealing himself, has burned itself into the thinking of serious late 20th-century theology. But the §§ in which Barth then develops what he calls the “churchly doctrine” itself, are perhaps less rewarding as a whole. Though they are of course filled with remarkable individual insights, it cannot be said that they are either as creative or as knowledgeable as we expect from Barth.

Barth says that the three in God are foundationally to be understood “from their . . . variously specific genetic relations to each other,”⁴ but in the actual development of the doctrine he makes little or no use of this principle, in practice substituting

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“analogy” for “relation” – that analogy is itself a relation does not change the point. Again, Barth takes the traditional founding of the three in their mutual relations as a reason for preferring “modes of being” to “persons” for the three. Surely, however, precisely “persons” are constituted in mutual relation – exactly according to Karl Barth! – in a way harder to grasp for “modes of being.” My suspicion is that these questions are not unrelated to the question which directly occasions this essay.

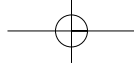
Third, throughout the *Kirchliche Dogmatik* Barth indeed *uses* the church’s and his insight into God’s triunity. This paper is devoted to a problem encountered just here. But that is only to say that the paper is devoted to nit-picking. For Barth is the theologian and the *Kirchliche Dogmatik* the book by which Western theology rediscovered that the doctrine of Trinity, while indeed a mystery, is not a puzzle, that instead it is the frame within which theology’s mysteries can be shown and its puzzles solved. If some of his own solutions are incomplete or even misleading, that remains a secondary matter. To be sure, if the nit I will pick turns out to be the one biting it is a sizeable varmint, and lively on the ecumenical scene.

II

The *Kirchliche Dogmatik* presents a smorgasbord of cases in which the doctrine of Trinity, as *used*, seems to be rather a doctrine of binity. Let me mention three, at this point merely to instance the problem. Of these, the latter two are especially alarming. The Karl Barth Society’s attention was drawn to the problem by the case of Barth’s trinitarian grounding of female-male community. As the Father and the Son are to one another, so therefore are Christ and humanity to one another, and so therefore within humanity are male and female to one another.⁵ Since there are only two sexes – at least in the strange world of the Bible or of Barth – it is plain that the Spirit’s appearance as a party in these analogies would be disruptive. But a theology’s power at any point is perhaps best shown by its ability to profit from disruptions.

A second instance of apparent binitarianism occurs in IV/3, §69, 1, 2, 4. In these daring and in many ways even beautiful pages, Barth conducts a probing and systematically way-breaking discussion of the “objectivity” of the proclamation. Surely he is right: to be faithful to the logic of the gospel, we must think of the gospel’s occurrence also *pro nobis* as itself a salvation-historical event antecedent to its sounding in any set of our ears, as itself an “external” reality. Perhaps we will be especially sensitive to this logic, if we have been attending to Orthodox ecumenical initiatives. Both common teaching and Orthodox urging will then make us expect Barth to designate the Pentecostal coming of the Spirit as the event just posited. Instead, Barth conducts some of the most tortuous dialectic in the *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, in order to locate the proclamation’s objectivity in the Resurrection of the Son. Does Barth suppose that an act of the Spirit cannot transcend subjectivity?

Barth’s more specific location of the proclamation’s objectivity in the “universal prophetism” of the risen Lord would then, to be sure, more than recoup the pneumatological loss, if in Barth’s description of this prophetism itself, the Spirit had the



role which surely he should have in description of a “prophetism.” But despite the title of §69, 4, *Die Verheissung des Geistes*, the Spirit hardly appears in the story.

Our third instance occurs in the same volume,⁶ under the title “The Holy Spirit and the mission of the Christian Congregation.” Barth here undertakes nothing less than an exegesis of the novelty which the church presents in universal history. The piece is a marvel. But he manages to write it entirely without mention of the Spirit – which must be an equal marvel, given who and what the Spirit is in Scripture.

III

I must turn to diagnosis. The present section is preliminary. It is regularly observed that Barth’s developed doctrine of Trinity is, despite the new insights on which it is based and despite some new insights scattered also in it, thoroughly Western-traditional in its general contour. The triune God as such is personal in a modern sense, while the three are otherwise characterized. The *filioque* is used systematically. Of the classic heresies, modalism is the temptation.

Notoriously, traditional Western teaching has its drawbacks, in my judgment one principally. Any theologian for whom the doctrine of Trinity is more than a relic, that is, any theologian who *uses* the doctrine of Trinity outside its own *locus*, is repeatedly led – indeed, compelled – to treat the three as *parties* of divine action, and that also “immanently.” Not only those with a “social” doctrine of Trinity do this sort of thing – for my own part, I was initiated into the possibility by my orthodox Lutheran and otherwise adamantly Augustinian *Doktorvater*, Peter Brunner. The problem with the Western form of teaching is that it offers little or no justification for this necessary practice; indeed, it seems actually to have quenched the practice in Western theology.

Notoriously also, difficulties of this sort are especially severe in the case of the Spirit – whether or not Eastern attribution of all Western problems to the *filioque* is correct. Augustine himself felt and remarked a special difficulty with the Spirit, and so have many successors.

The general problem is plainly present in Barth. The three in God are not to be regarded as “persons” in a modern sense, but rather as the “modes” in which the one God “is three times differently God” (*dreimal anders Gott*);⁷ in this systematically decisive definition Barth moreover intends the “is” as an active verb with the one God as its subject, so that the being of three is adverbial. Such a doctrine of Trinity can offer no better support for the actual use which Barth elsewhere makes of God’s triunity than Western teaching in general does for such use. For also Barth’s use invariably depends on taking the Father and the Son as *parties* of an action in God.

The drawbacks of Western-style trinitarianism are not necessarily fatal to theology that labors under them. That not every conceptual practice that a theologian finds necessary is fully supported by his/her general system is probably, indeed, a distinguishing virtue of theology. Moreover, Eastern forms of trinitarian teaching present equal if different drawbacks. So probably would any such future revised or ecumenical form as Pannenberg or I have been working on.

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But within Barth's system, Western hindrances may obstruct more mischievously than elsewhere, just on account of his achievements. Barth envisions the entire history of salvation as eternally actual in God, in whom it is divine history posited in God's trinity. Therefore the way in which the immanent Trinity is interpreted must more directly determine the way in which God's triune work is grasped, than is usual in Western theology. This is profoundly to the good. But therefore again – and this is my preliminary diagnosis – in Barth's theology, Western trinitarianism's common difficulty in conceiving the Spirit's specific immanent initiative in God must become a difficulty in conceiving the Spirit's entire salvation-historical initiative.

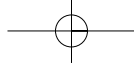
It is not, of course, that Barth *wants* to conceive such a salvation-historical personal initiative of the Spirit and is hindered from doing so. He denies that there is any such thing to conceive: "The New Testament knows . . . of only one coming of the One who has come. . . . It is not thereby excluded that this . . . occurs in differing forms, at times he . . . chooses and in circumstances he orders. . . . It occurs . . . in the time of the church . . . also in the form of the sharing of the Spirit. . . . And it will again occur in other form . . . as his coming to inaugurate the general resurrection. But in all these forms it is one single event (*ein einziges Ereignis*)."⁸ What Barth is hindered in, is supposing that he *ought* to conceive a specific salvation-historical initiative of the Spirit.

IV

I will now concentrate my analysis on a decisive mark of Western trinitarianism and principal bone of contention with the East. In normal Western trinitarianism, characterization of the Spirit as the *vinculum amoris* between the Father and Son is systematically central. Barth is no innovator or exception at this point. Indeed, his great attachment to this theologoumenon is his stated reason for supporting the *filioque*.

Barth writes, "The *filioque* expresses our knowledge of the fellowship between the Father and the Son: the Holy Spirit is the love that is the essence of the relation between these two modes of God's being."⁹ Confirming Orthodoxy's worst suspicions, he continues with the explicit proposition that this "perfect consubstantial fellowship between the Father and the Son" is "the being of the Spirit . . ." and that precisely these propositions make the point "on which everything seems to us to depend . . ."¹⁰

The "inner-divine" fellowship of Father and Son in the Spirit is explicitly described as "two-sided," since the Spirit is the fellowship itself. Precisely this merely two-sided fellowship is then the eternal ground for there being fellowship between God and humanity,¹¹ first between God and the Son Jesus and then between God in Jesus and Jesus' sisters and brothers. But that is to say that this merely two-sided fellowship is the eternal ground of all salvation-history. Moreover, the way this grounding works is that each two-sided fellowship is the *archetype* of the thereby next grounded such pairing,¹² so that the two-sidedness reproduces itself at every ontological level.



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One passage must be quoted *in extenso*: “The Holy Spirit is the power and his action is the work of *coordination* between the being of Jesus Christ and that of . . . his congregation. Just as he as a divine ‘person,’ i.e. mode of being, as Spirit of the Father and of the Son (*qui ex Patre Filioque procedit*) is the bond of peace between the two, so in the historical work of atonement he is the constituent and guarantee of the *unity* of the *totus Christus* . . .”¹³

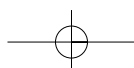
According to Barth, the triune reality of God is actual as the event of election, of the decision made “before all time” in God. And that is to say, the triune reality of God is actual as an eternal meeting between the Father and the Son, a meeting in which, as in all personal meetings, something is decided. What is decided is that the eternal relation of the Father and the Son is in fact the relation between the Father and the man Jesus and so also a covenant between God and Jesus’ sisters and brothers.¹⁴ I think this complex theologoumenon precisely and simply true. But again, it may be that just the precision and depth of his understanding make Barth’s participation in the common difficulties of Western theology more than usually consequence-laden.

Some of the pressure on Barth’s ability to identify the Spirit’s actuality may come from a residue of the traditional Calvinist teaching of predestination. That doctrine, for all that can otherwise be said in its praise, described the event of election much in the protological past tense and little in the eschatological future tense. Within Barth’s correct identification of the event of election with the actuality of triunity, Calvinist presuppositions about election must exercise a reverse pressure on the interpretation of triunity. And if the Trinity’s actuality thereby comes to be thought definitively in the past tense, the Spirit is left without that mode of God’s time in which the Bible locates him.

But my guess is that the *vinculum*-doctrine is the chief Jonah. Precisely in that the inner-trinitarian relations do gloriously become concrete and alive in Barth, so that the Father and the Son *confront* one another, the actuality of a *vinculum* between the two parties Father and Son must be their I–thou relation itself. Thus the very reality of the Spirit excludes his appearance as a *party* in the triune actuality.

In formal doctrine, Barth calls all three hypostases *modi essendi*. In his *use* of trinitarian insight, he nevertheless speaks freely of the personal immanent intercourse of the Father and the Son. But the Spirit is condemned by the *vinculum*-doctrine to remain a *modus* only. The concretion of triunity is a history in God in which the Spirit does not appear as an historical party. Appropriately, the causative relation of this history to a reality *ad extra* is an impersonal principle, of image-analogy.

It is again tempting to speculate that the pressure may work backwards, here from a merely two-sided understanding of human community and so of historical reality, inherited from the “I–Thou” tradition of 19th-century German philosophical anthropology, to a merely two-sided understanding of trinitarian community and history. Were this the case, it would be the symptom of a deep flaw indeed. It would mean that Barth’s use of the image-analogy principle had opened a channel in his thinking for projection of perceived human value onto God, for theological analogy in which a human phenomenon is the primary analogate also in the order of being. I will not pursue this horrid possibility.



V

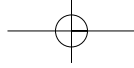
It is surely with the doctrine of the church that a discussion of this matter must terminate. The discussion of the church in IV and particularly in IV/3 finds its warrants at every step in descriptions of a meeting in God between the Father and the Son. An alternative possibility of course would be to find such warrants in description of a meeting between the Spirit on the one hand and the Son with the Father on the other.

The ecclesiology which would result from this alternative move has the recommendation of ecumenical urgency. For it is precisely that currently being pressed on the Western church by Orthodoxy and increasingly found salvific also in Catholic/Protestant dialogues – though not often by Protestant churches reacting to the dialogues. What according to Orthodoxy must be apprehended is that the Pentecostal coming of the Spirit is “a new intervention of the Holy Trinity in time . . .” and that on this occasion the intervention “issues from the third Person of the Trinity . . .”¹⁵ When this specific role of the Spirit is not grasped, the Western pendulum between Catholic institutionalism and Protestant spiritualist individualism must, according to Orthodox polemic, necessarily ensue. When it is grasped, an ecclesiology of *communion* ensues.

This leads to a final speculation – which I offer with quite intense suspicion that it is true. Perhaps the final reason for the whole web of Spirit-avoidance in the *Kirchliche Dogmatik* is avoidance of the *church*. For if the Pentecostal creation of a structured continuing community were identified as the “objectivity” of the gospel’s truth *pro nobis*, then this community itself, in its structured temporal and spatial extension, would be seen as the *Bedingung der Möglichkeit* of faith. Or again, if the Community between the Father and the Son were himself an *agent*¹⁶ of their love, immanently and economically, then the church, as the community inspired by this Agent, would be the active *mediatrix* of faith, in precisely the way demanded by Catholics and resisted by Protestants in every chief dialogue.

Catholic commentators have notoriously found many approaches in the *Kirchliche Dogmatik* to Catholic patterns of thought. The point at which approach would become arrival has been defined by no less than Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger: “For the Catholic, the church is itself comprised in the deep source of the act of faith: it is only in that I believe with the church that I share in that certitude in which I may rest my life.”¹⁷ Union with the church constitutes a “new and wider self” of the believer; and it is this self that is the subject of faith, “the self of the *anima ecclesiastica*, that is, the self of that person through whom the whole community of the church expresses itself . . .”¹⁸ May Karl Barth’s impulsion to practiced binarianism be in fact the last resistance of his Protestantism?

I must finish by considering the chief passage in which Barth states the ecclesial reality of the Spirit theoretically, IV/3, 867–872. The mysteria of the church is the “identity of her being with that of Jesus Christ.”¹⁹ But this identity obtains only as it *happens*; i.e., insofar as it is “work of the Spirit.”²⁰ So far, one might think, so plain. But then two phenomena appear.



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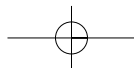
The personal agent of this work in fact turns out at every step of Barth's argument to be *not* the Spirit, as advertised, but Christ; the Spirit is denoted invariably by impersonal terms. The Spirit is "the power of Jesus Christ's being";²¹ "the Holy Spirit is the godly power (*Gottesmacht*) unique to the being of Jesus Christ, in the exercise . . . of which he lets his congregation become what it is";²² the Spirit is what happens when "Jesus Christ makes use of his power . . ."²³ This work in itself is the *coordination* of "heavenly and earthly activity . . ." in which their difference is – in good Western fashion – strictly maintained. And then we discover that the earthly activity in question is the "*subjective*" side of the knowledge of God.²⁴

It seems unavoidable: in Barth's system, the Spirit is precisely the *Geschichtlichkeit* of "the relation of the being of Jesus Christ to that of his congregation . . ."²⁵ The Spirit is the capacity of God as archetype, at whatever ontological level, to evoke an echo in some subjectivity. When does the Spirit disappear from Barth's pages? Whenever he would appear as someone rather than as something. We miss the Spirit at precisely those points where Bible or catechism have taught us to expect him to appear as someone *with capacities*, rather than as sheer capacity – in the archetype/image scheme, as himself an archetype.

It is of course a generally unsolved problem, felt from the earliest days of Christian theology: How is the Spirit at once his own person and what "all three" hypostases actively are together? How is the Spirit at once one who has power and that power itself? It is no general refutation of Barth, that he too has left a few problems unsolved. But interaction between this unsolved problem and Barth's particular achievements produces an especially painful set of symptoms.

Notes

- 1 For an example of a Jenson protégé arguing that the Church is the hypostasis of the Spirit, see Reinhard Huetter, *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice*, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999).
- 2 Robert W. Jenson, "The Holy Spirit," in Robert W. Jenson and Carl Braaten, *Christian Dogmatics*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), vol. 2, pp. 101–82.
- 3 Robert W. Jenson, *The Triune Identity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), last chapter; *Unbaptized God: The Basic Flaw in Ecumenical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), Part III.
- 4 Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*, 4 vols. in 13 (Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag/Zollikon, 1932–70). English edn.: *The Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols. in 13, trans. G. W. Bromiley et al. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936–75), I/1, 382.
- 5 III/2, §45.
- 6 IV/3, §72.
- 7 I/1, 380.
- 8 IV/3, 338.
- 9 I/1, 504.
- 10 I/1, 505.
- 11 I/1, 504.
- 12 I/1, 505.



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13 IV/3, 870.

14 For all this, I may perhaps be permitted to refer to my first book about Barth, *Alpha and Omega* (New York: Nelson, 1963), especially chapters 3 and 5.

15 Nikos Nissiotis, *Die Theologie der Ostkirche im ökumenischen Dialog* (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1968), pp. 74f.

16 I do not yet know how to work out this proposition conceptually.

17 Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, "Luther und die Einheit der Christen," *Communio* 12 (83): 575–6.

18 Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Église, Oecuménisme et Politique*, trans. P. Jordan, P.-E. Gudenus and B. Müller (Paris: Fayard, 1987), p. 173.

19 *KD*, IV/3, 867.

20 *Ibid.*, 868.

21 *Ibid.*

22 *Ibid.*, 869.

23 *Ibid.*, 870.

24 *Ibid.*, 871.

25 *Ibid.*, 868.

