

# The Spirit of Objectivity and Subjectivity

*What I object to is the disappearance of the object. In art, as in theology, it is the object that counts, not the subject.*

-Karl Barth<sup>1</sup>

Karl Barth was born in 1886 in Basel, Switzerland, into a tradition of Reformed Protestant ministry. His father and both grandfathers were pastors in Basel. In keeping with the family's legacy, Karl undertook theological studies at the universities of Bern, Berlin, Tübingen, and Marburg, completing his formal education in 1909. He intended to study for a doctorate under his beloved Marburg professor, Wilhelm Herrmann, but that never materialized. In fact, he never earned an advanced degree.<sup>2</sup> Instead, like his father and grandfathers, Barth entered parish ministry. He served for two years as assistant pastor of a German-speaking Reformed congregation in Geneva, then for ten years as pastor of a mostly working-class congregation in Safenwil.

Barth's time in the parish helped him to clarify certain convictions about the Christian message, which later gave him a distinctive voice in the academy. He learned above all that the liberal tradition he had enthusiastically embraced in theology (Herrmann), history (Adolf von Harnack), social theory (Leonhard Ragaz and Herrmann Kutter), and exegesis (Adolf Jülicher) did not address the existential crisis that he found parishioners to bring with them to church. Barth discovered that the questions that really animated his parishioners, that made

1. Karl Barth, cited by John T. Elson, "Witness to an Ancient Truth," *Time*, April 20, 1962, 65.

2. He was, however, awarded eleven honorary doctorates; see Barth, *Letters 1961-1968*, ed. Jürgen Fangmeier and Hinrich Stoevesandt, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 259. See also Barth, *Final Testimonies*, ed. Eberhard Busch, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 23: "That's *all* I am," Barth replied to an interviewer asking why he was listed only as an honorary doctor. "It's the way it was. I was not aiming at an academic career. I wanted to be a pastor."

them come to church in the first place, concerned the fact and nature of God's existence and their nature and destiny relative to him. They did not primarily concern ethical directives. It was not enough, therefore, to treat their faith as one expression of a universal religious consciousness (even if the highest), from which one could distill timeless principles of moral living. It was not enough to cultivate ethical social values modeled after the "historical Jesus."

It is not that Jesus' historical life is irrelevant. Rather, as most pastors do, Barth learned that people handle moral living well enough on their own. "Obviously the people have *no* real need of *our* observations upon morality and culture," he reflected.<sup>3</sup> Laypersons are capable of modeling a life of charity and personal discipline around the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus without the historical-critical insights of the liberal pastor. What they really wanted, and needed, was someone to speak to the *horizon of mortality*. Barth found that his education and approach to ministry more or less domesticated this existential need. It offered almost nothing to the demanding, in fact impossible task actually confronting the minister: to address the everlasting reality facing humanity beyond death.<sup>4</sup>

Faced with the insufferable pastoral challenge to speak of the eternal beyond rather than ephemeral morality, of the life of God before and above the life of humanity, Barth began to rethink the very nature of preaching and theology. How could it be possible to speak of God if not in terms of pious affections? What is "God" if not the basis and goal of human devotional ideals, of a manner of being that transcends brutish survivalism and self-interest in pursuit of higher consciousness and purpose? What can the content of "God" be—to what can the term give expression—apart from realization of superlative states of being and doing: the Ground of Existence, the Ultimate, the *Summum Bonum*? What can the Christian know of deity except as realization of a purified humanity?

Barth was on the cusp of realizing that the heart of the Christian message is not insight into "the divine within" or some "numinous potency" but an objectively distinct Being who makes himself susceptible to temporal experience *without sacrificing his eternal nature and identity* in doing so. The

3. Barth, "The Word of God and the Task of the Ministry," in *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (1928; Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1978), 188.

4. "Why . . . did the theologians I knew seek to represent the minister's perplexity, if they touched upon it at all, as a condition superable and sufferable, instead of *understanding* it at all costs, instead of facing it—and thereby perhaps discovering in it, in its very insuperableness and insufferableness, the real theme of the theology?" Barth, "The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching," in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, 102.

essence of God's revelation in Jesus of Nazareth is that God is sensibly perceived as a phenomenon in space-time, yet as Lord (Maker, Redeemer, Sustainer) of space-time. In short, Barth was on his way to moving the content of theological discourse, indeed all speech of God, away from subjective principles and goods toward God's inimitable *revelation*. In human being and doing, God remains distinguishably *God*.

"It was Thurneysen who in private once whispered the keyword to me, half aloud: what we need for preaching, instruction and pastoral care is a 'wholly other' theological foundation."<sup>5</sup> Thinking together with his longtime friend, Eduard Thurneysen, Barth began to ground Christian thought and practice in God's external address to humanity rather than internal religious enthusiasm. He began to understand that this was the quintessence of Christian Scripture—revelation of the God who is not mere discharge of "spiritual" potential latent within the human, but "wholly other." He thus reread the Bible with an entirely new appreciation for its content.

The textual proving ground, so to speak, for Barth's emerging conviction that the Bible contains an objective Word to humanity, which interrogates and in fact condemns human principles and goods as non-divine idolatry, rather than mystically astute human words about divinity, was the Apostle Paul's Letter to the Romans. In 1916 Barth began to write a commentary on Romans, the eventual success of which would catapult him to academic recognition.<sup>6</sup> He was awarded an honorary professorship in Reformed theology at the University of Göttingen subsequent to publication of that commentary (the first edition appeared in 1919 and the rewritten second edition in 1922). From Göttingen (1921–1925) Barth became Professor of Dogmatics and New Testament Exegesis in Münster (1925–1930), then Professor of Systematic Theology in Bonn (1930–1935). In 1935, having refused to make the newly required oath of allegiance to the German *Führer*, Barth was suspended from teaching in the German university. He accepted an invitation to a chair in the theological faculty in his hometown of Basel, where he taught until his retirement in 1962, and wrote and lectured thereafter until his death in 1968.

In the preface to the second edition of his Romans commentary, Barth indicated his central thematic concern. "If I have a system," he wrote, "it is limited to a recognition of what Kierkegaard called the 'infinite qualitative

5. Barth, "Nachwort," in *Schleiermacher-Auswahl: mit einem Nachwort von Karl Barth* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Mohn, 1980), 294. The next sentence continues: "[The way] onward from Schleiermacher obviously went no farther."

6. For fuller treatment of this history, see Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 92–125.

distinction' between time and eternity, and to my regarding this as possessing negative as well as positive significance: 'God is in heaven, and thou art on earth.'<sup>7</sup> Extolling Paul's judgment about the final spuriousness of natural revelation (Rom. 1:18-32), the immutability of *divine* faithfulness *in opposition to* very mutable *human* faithfulness (Romans 3), the relationship of "pot" to "potter" (Romans 9:19-24), and so on, Barth argued that when it comes to knowledge of God, fallen humanity cannot rely on pious inclinations, transcendent awareness, or inductive inferences sourced in piety or principles of self-transcendence. Before God's reality these are all subject to inconsistency and error. Paul teaches that we have no reliable basis in ourselves to perceive God or comprehend God's works. Restricted to nature and reason, we manufacture idols. That is the negative significance of the "infinite qualitative distinction" between God and humankind.

Thus, we must receive knowledge entirely from a source external to ourselves. God is God in revealing to humanity the ontological barrier between deity and humanity. The positive significance of recognizing humanity's utter differentiation from God is that it necessarily places us in a posture of receptivity. If we cannot look inward, then we must turn outward to hear from God. In the ongoing event of his self-revelation, God establishes both our need and his supply. He both shows us our incapacity for him and overcomes it.

Barth contended that if we would speak rightly of God—and in this, perceive creation rightly and reason rightly—then everything we would know and speak of God and his relationship to space-time must come from God. God alone *as God* is the source of our knowledge and speech. Barth's criticism of liberal theology can be summarized as relentless demonstration of its untoward tendency to liquefy the essential difference between eternity and time, to create an inappropriately fluid account of divine and human being. As he famously quipped, one does not speak of God by speaking loudly of man.<sup>8</sup> One either speaks of God *by God*, that is, by constructive reiteration of God's own speech under the tutelage and power of God's ongoing act, or one evacuates the term "God" of meaning and significance.

7. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwin C. Hoskyns (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 10. The final phrase is a reference to Ecclesiastes 5:2.

8. "With all due respect to the genius shown in his work, I can *not* consider Schleiermacher a good teacher in the realm of theology because, so far as I can see, he is disastrously dim-sighted in regard to the fact that man as man is not only in *need* but beyond all hope of saving himself; that the whole of so-called religion, not the least the Christian religion, *shares* in this need; and that one can *not* speak of God simply by speaking of man in a loud voice" (Barth, "Word of God," 195-96).

The onset of World War I supplied Barth with the historical proving ground for his conviction that God is not humanity and that humanity has no intrinsic ability to ascertain, let alone attain, divinity. He was scandalized to find that nearly all of his liberal professors publicly supported Kaiser Wilhelm II's war effort.<sup>9</sup> Barth recognized that it was ultimately the ready association of human ideals with divine qualities that enabled them to readily embrace bellicose nationalism. The will of God was presumed to be unfolding in, indeed guiding the movement of history. Individuals transcended bondage to brute survivalism as they sacrificed personal realization in service to social and political transformation, ultimately accomplished in the triumph of the nation-state. In this, the collective sociopolitical good of the German people became the theater of the numinous, the context in which persons took part in a higher way of being.

Manifestly absent in this way of thinking, Barth observed, was a God free enough to criticize cultural agendas. Liberal theology left no resources for self-critique in that it located the life and power of God in the fulfillment of idiosyncratic human goods. Now patriotism, collective achievement, and racial purity were endowed with divine significance and made relevant to salvation. *Blut und Ehre* not for *Vaterland*, but *Heilig Vaterland!*

Barth diagnosed the critical failure to be liberalism's assumption of a capacity for ultimacy, transcendence, and various other expressions of "divinity" within human being and doing. It could not see the ways that all human potential and activity, however exercised and intended (that is, even in service to inspiring public ends), are tainted with sin and shortsightedness and can hardly be, of themselves, means of personal realization or salvation. Again in historical context, transferring human fulfillment into belligerent accomplishment of the ideals of any nation-state is simply *immoral*. It fails to hear the *wholly other* God's "No!" Against this, Barth took a definite theological posture, which endured throughout his life's work. He asserted the distinctiveness of God as the necessary starting point of all thought and speech about the deity. God faces us objectively, not as the sum total of human ideals or the projected negation of human failings.

9. On August 1, 1914, ninety-three German intellectuals issued a statement endorsing the German war policy. Barth saw that almost all of his former professors had signed the statement. "[My teachers] seemed to have been hopelessly compromised by what I regarded as their failure in the face of the ideology of war. . . . A whole world of exegesis, ethics, dogmatics and preaching, which I had hitherto held to be essentially trustworthy, was shaken to the foundations" (Barth, *Fakultätsalbum der Evangelisch-theologischen Fakultät Münster* [1927], and "Rückblick," in *Das Wort sie sollen lassen stahn: Festschrift für Albert Schädelin*, ed. Hans Dürr et al. [Bern: H. Lang, 1950], 4; cited in Busch, *Karl Barth*, 81).

Yet this objectivity (God standing distinctively before humankind) constitutes human subjectivity (living thought, word, and action) in its very happening. God could not be objective God if he did not make himself known as such. If he did not take up our perceptual apparatus and enable us to see and hear him just in his complete differentiation from all other objects of perception and from our acts of perceiving in themselves, then how could we ever know of him as anything other than an aggrandized version of ourselves? God is God in revealing to humanity the ontological barrier between deity and humanity *and so crossing the barrier*.

When God actually stands before humanity in Jesus Christ, he changes human being and doing. Coincident with his condemnation of sinful thoughts, words, and acts in Christ, God re-creates these modes of our being. He makes and maintains conditions according to which he is truthfully known and spoken. He generates *faith*. He speaks a clear “Yes!” in the echo of his “No!” He brings true salvation in the wake of judgment. The way that Barth formulated the particulars of this dialectical situation changed over the years, but as a description of his thought, “real dialectic”—that is, the event of eternal God coming to temporal humankind but as eternal God and thus with full ontological determination as to his being and ours—remained central.

Our opening chapter demonstrates that the real dialectic of God coming to humanity in Christ is so ingredient to Barth’s thinking that one cannot conduct any sort of Spirit-centered theology in abstraction from it if one is to appreciate the gains that Barth achieved relative to liberal theology. One cannot abandon dialectic as if it was merely a methodological presupposition. One cannot uncritically turn to a synthesis of eternity and time, God and humanity. One cannot imbed the Spirit in creation, religion, piety, ultimacy, or any other category of human existence.

Moreover, one does not *need* to make such moves as if the Spirit was otherwise absent from Barth’s christocentric thinking. This chapter also shows that there is a substantive pneumatological undercurrent flowing together with

and even guiding his more overtly christological conclusions.<sup>10</sup> One can draw out and build on Barth's own "pneumatocentric dialectic."

Finally, as these introductory remarks have indicated, the matter at hand reaches well beyond Karl Barth and a right understanding of his thought. Dialectic so understood is central to Barth's understanding of the Christian God for good reason: it derives directly from a series of commitments fundamental to Christian faith, namely, the nature of the human predicament and the character of grace. In and as Jesus Christ, humanity encounters a God who is *Lord*, the Maker who brings all things to be in and through his *Word*. In this, it encounters creation utterly dependent on God, contingent on the exercise of an incomparable creative power. From first to last, indeed from all eternity the abundance of limitless self-defining love summons beings into existence out of nothingness. Yet the creature's absolute dependence on the Creator is not

10. I would qualify Busch's claim that in advocating a theology of the Third Article the late Barth "was thinking of a theology which, unlike his own, was not written from the dominant perspective of christology but from that of pneumatology" (Busch, *Karl Barth*, 494). My concern is with the phrase, "unlike his own." If this is taken to mean that Barth wished for a new generation of theologians to "begin again at the beginning," as he often liked to say, rethinking every doctrinal statement in terms of the work and Person of the Holy Spirit in exactly the same way he had done with the work and Person of Christ Jesus, then that is to the good. If, on the other hand, it is taken to mean that Third Article theology ought to be undertaken as a formal and material alternative to Barth's Second Article approach, then that is to the bad. There is no Christology that is not also Pneumatology. One simply cannot understand the Word, particularly as the center of dogmatic reflection in the light of which Christian thought takes defining shape and substance, apart from the living action and distinct identity of the Spirit. There is no Word ontologically or epistemologically independent of the Spirit, certainly none that Barth speculatively posited as the ground of theological activity. Conversely, there is no Spirit independent of the Word, certainly none that Barth now speculatively advocates as some new dogmatic norm and guide. There is no Pneumatology that is not also Christology. Busch is reflecting Barth's concession that the "neo-Protestant" impulse, which led to treating the human subject as source and norm of dogmatics, "has a legitimate place within the doctrine of the Holy Spirit" (Barth, CD I.2, 368). Thus, Busch concludes that when envisioning a theology of the Third Article, Barth intended one "in which the concerns of the theology of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were not so much repeated and continued as understood and developed further" (Busch, *Karl Barth*, 494). But Barth nevertheless insisted that *genuine* human being (and, correspondingly, theology that places humanity within its central theme), is given in Christ. "Human self-determination, and therefore the life of the children of God, is posited under the predominant determination of revelation" (Barth, CD I.2, 368). The actualistic event of human being can function at the center of theological reflection, but only insofar as it is understood in terms of the determination of all being in the event of the Christ. Only insofar as human existence is the event of coming to be before God understood within the life and activity of the God-human does it obtain any significance for Third Article theology. Pneumatology, if it is really to be *Christian* Pneumatology (and not neo-Protestant speculative anthropology), takes its structure and material significance from Christology.

enough to keep it from rebellion. The space and time opened up by God to be the vicinity and order of loving union with the creature affords the illusion of self-realization, of assuming God's charity rather than gratefully receiving it, and constructing from this false flash a life lived independently of the Creator.

But God refuses to be stymied by sin. He does not allow our contrived agendas to have the last word. He remains who he is in spite of who we might make him, ourselves, our people, our environment, our cosmos. He is the God of grace and as such he makes himself present to fallen creation. He shows himself as he is, the God of yesterday, today, and tomorrow, the self-consistent "he who is" whether we would have him or not, hence he who will have us in spite of our rebellion. Thus, the human predicament is that we have no basis for independent existence, yet we seek it. God's grace is that he wills from all eternity to grant us existence before him, which willing is not undone by our infidelity.

The very logic of God being eternal God just in the event of his coming to humanity, then, is basic to Christian faith. It is as central to our knowing and speaking here and now—contemporaneous encounter with the Spirit—as it was to the knowledge and speech of the prophetic and apostolic witness to Jesus, for there is no Christian God spiritually or biblically except the One who is bent on reviling sin and loving creation. Pneumatology can only be constructive reiteration of biblical Christology.

For this reason, we lead with Barth's exegesis of the prologue to the Gospel of John, one of the most profound New Testament statements concerning the nature of Christ. Barth helps us to see the essentially pneumatic core to John's logic. Specifically, we start with John 1:18.

Why the final verse and not the first? First, materially, this verse concisely expresses the dialectical circumstance that we have been addressing. In that no one has perceived God, God makes *himself* known *as God*; this, moment by moment in the event of self-exegesis in Christ Jesus.

Second, formally, it should become clear as we proceed that knowledge and speech of God in terms of Spirit are entirely dynamic—they are *knowing* and *speaking*. There is nothing static about this kind of theology. Any conclusions that we draw dogmatically are characterized by encounter, event, happening. In God's coming to humankind, *we* think and speak; indeed, our thinking and speaking are part and parcel of God's coming, coordinated in content and form with the flesh of Jesus. Inverberation is thus not a circular sort of dialectic where we simply go back and forth and never progress. It is, rather, a spiraling affair. John 1:18 sets the interpretive parameters for the rest of the prologue, which we will consider in the ensuing chapters. When we



conclude with v. 17 in chapter 5, the reader may then reconsider v. 18 from a “higher” vantage point, poised, it is hoped, to experience the very motion assessed throughout.

## BARTH’S EXEGESIS OF JOHN 1:18

*THEON OUDEIS HEŌRAKEN PŌPOTE*

*No one has seen God at any time;*<sup>11</sup>

“What is meant by *theon oudeis heōraken pōpote*? Precisely what is said. . . . God’s essence is not seen.”<sup>12</sup> If we are to get a handle on Barth’s Spirit-centered thought, then we must be willing to risk the proverbial thousand repetitions in order to say this one thing: no one has seen God. Barth’s pneumato-logic, his thinking and speaking of the Spirit, shoots up from christological negation of all human thought and speech. If we are to set ourselves down the right path in this first chapter, then we must perceive the significance of this “No!”

In fact, we must allow the force of this “No” to meet our own thinking and speaking, *or we have not perceived its significance*. The christological negation cannot be a mere datum of knowledge for us, only a descriptor of a peculiar kind of thought and speech apart from us. Rather, it must function for us, too, lest we make an exception in favor of our own thinking and speaking as being theologically competent.

Now, I have to acknowledge that it is difficult to demonstrate his conviction that this “No” must meet us from strict exposition of Barth’s exegesis, because Barth does not try to describe this pneumatic happening. He assumes it as the condition of his exegesis. His writing operates on its basis, as

11. *Translations are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB).*

12. Barth, *Witness to the Word: A Commentary on John 1. Lectures at Münster in 1925 and at Bonn in 1933*, ed. Walther Fürst, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 126. Barth never completed his exegesis of John’s Gospel; his lectures only cover through chapter 8. With the typescript of the 1933 series serving as default text (amended with the earlier material where it made better sense), the lectures were published posthumously in 1976. See Barth, *Erklärung des Johannes-Evangeliums (Kapitel 1–8). Vorlesung Münster Wintersemester 1925/1926, wiederholt in Bonn, Sommersemester 1933*, Gesamtausgabe 9 (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1976).

thinking and speaking that exist only in the light of what has come to them and therefore as having no other content. They can repeat only what they have learned as their basis, substance, and goal. I can demonstrate this way of thinking and speaking only by relating what Barth has written and then drawing attention to the Pneumatology implicit therein.

To be as straightforward as possible at this point: Barth does not merely exegete the biblical text as a word addressed to him. It is again that, too. But it is such a Word as to involve Barth as exegete in the address, to refuse him, like all exegetes, perception of its subject on the one side even as it reveals that subject (the living God) to them on the other, and more, as it involves their labor, their own thinking and speaking, their exegesis, in that revelation. *Noēsis* of the divine derives entirely from the event ontology of God's self-determinative engagement with humanity, his being God in and with us. God is *God* in the event that he is *Immanuel*—the *event* that takes place as he is actively known and confessed to be Immanuel, what I am calling “Inverberation,” or the contemporaneous manifestation of God in *verba* of the christological negation through which God makes himself to be and to be known as he is.

Back to the verse at hand. When I say that Barth's own thinking and speaking assume the christological negation of human thought and speech, I mean that he includes himself as being among those who do not see God:

It should be noted that the perfect *heōraken* . . . has here present or supratemporal significance, so that it is not part of a narrative but is presenting a universal fact. The whole statement, with its full content, applies also to those who hear and believe and proclaim the gospel. The second statement does not say that he has enabled us to see or perceive God. It is still true that no one ever sees God.<sup>13</sup>

John's declaration is a supratemporal declaration. It involves us, too. This is indicated by the continuing effect of the perfect verb form. The fundamental situation is not altered by a temporal locus after Christ; our inability to see God is not undone by the fact that “one has made him known,” as we will discuss shortly. Rather, in God's being made known in Christ, we encounter him as unknown.

13. Barth, *Witness to the Word*, 127.

We encounter him this way. All humans are included in the christological negation. In the Spirit, we are *made* absolutely dependent on God, moment by moment *set* before him. The dependency of which the father of liberal theology, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), spoke so powerfully is rendered actualistic by Barth; it happens contemporaneously not in feeling (*Gefühl*) or piety (*Frömmigkeit*) or any other human modality statically conceived, but in God's self-determinative activity of making himself known as he is.


Dependency is not an implanted seed of the divine within us, which blossoms to full-grown divinity with the water of religion. There is no such point of contact with God, only God's coming to us and making a point of contact, which as such is no point at all, no place, entity, or happening that can be taken for granted as just there for us, but only the intersection of eternity with time that God brings about moment-by-moment in and of himself. There simply is no ladder outside of us in nature or internal to us in reason, will, or religious consciousness by which we may ascend to heaven.

In regard to the actualistic dependency established by God in the form of apostolic testimony to Christ confronting us today, Barth, in exegeting John 1:18, makes reference to his earlier exegesis of Romans 1:20. That is because Romans 1:20 seems to stand in tension with John 1:18 as Barth reads it. Romans 1:18–32 represent one of Scripture's most renowned statements on so-called natural revelation, the idea that God can in fact be seen, that there are seeds of divinity in creation, which can be watered and can climb upward toward the deity. Verse 20 says, "for since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse." Does this verse not suggest, in contrast to Barth's exegesis of John 1:18, that some have seen God's God-ness, at least impressions or vestiges of it in the created world?

In treating Romans 1:20, Barth agrees that God ought to be seen in and through the visible work of creation. "In truth things are such that we are completely able to see the full reality, namely, the invisible being of God, directly in the mirror of the visible."<sup>14</sup> But notice that what we see, if in fact we see *God*, is his *imperceptibility*, his *sui generis* glory, his complete unlikeness to the finite objects and powers of creation; we see that it is of his essence not to be seen. It is God's *invisible* qualities that are mirrored in the visible.

14. Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Erste Fassung) 1919*, Gesamtausgabe 16 (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1985), 28.

That is how things *ought* to be according to Paul: God ought to be seen, but *as God*. But Paul also indicates that it is not how things are. Humanity does not give God his glory and instead ranges his deity among the visible, as a variation of the visible. Humanity is “without excuse,” says Barth, for failing to confess the wholly otherness of God’s true being—the incomprehensibility of his eternal life to our temporally conditioned reason and so our need for his revealedness. “Without excuse is our false religiosity, because the works of the Creator speak to our reason of the ‘eternal power’ of the invisible God and protest with it in advance against the idol worship through which we make him equal to finite and visible and derived powers.”<sup>15</sup>

The human  thinks and speaks of God in the same way that it does all other objects—as the conjunction of attributes that it perceives in creation and the projection of categories on to those objects.<sup>16</sup> The creature must *receive* the appropriate constructs for meaningfully arranging God’s attributes, but instead it assumes those constructs and ranges the deity’s qualities according to cognitive constructs native to it. In this, it creates a god out of both the actualities and possibilities of space-time as it knows and exists spatially-temporally. It is not that true God is space-less and timeless, as we will see in chapter 3, for assuming that would simply be to negate the conditions of our knowledge and call it “eternity.” The problem is rather the projective trajectory, which is intuitively operative, to work from the nativity of space-time to “God” rather than the other way around. Working from itself, humanity fabricates an aggrandized version of creaturely being and doing, an idol, and relates to it by supplication, sacrifice, and prayer when of course it has predetermined what the outcomes of these activities can and must be.

15. *Ibid.*, 29.

16. Barth (especially in the first edition of his commentary on Romans), appropriates certain insights of modern epistemology, specifically the critical realism of Immanuel Kant. Just as for Kant there is no reality apart from the projection of categories of being onto objects of perception, for Barth there is no creaturely or divine reality apart from the reference frame of perception. “Nothing *is* in itself, everything *is* only insofar as we see, know, think it. Nothing *will be* of itself, but everything that will be, will be through spirit, through reason, through word, through which we see it. Nothing is *there*, which is not first *here*” (*Der Römerbrief* 1919, 28). *Es gibt kein Ding an sich*, “there is no thing in itself,” Kant famously taught. All things, as they are, have their being at the nexus of constituent qualities in perception. Knowledge is an event. It is the coincidence or meeting of sense data, on the one hand, and the projection of categories by which those data are meaningfully arranged, on the other. For Kant and, *mutatis mutandis*, for Barth, knowledge entails not just what things are but also what they can be; their defining attributes are placed within a prereflective matrix consisting above all of spatiality and temporality. On Barth’s epistemology, see Bruce McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909–1936* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

Why does humanity do this? Why do we lack the categories to perceive God as he is in creation when we ought to possess them, and so supply our own? We pervert creation's testimony because we exist in sin. Barth's thinking becomes fairly intricate at this stage, but we must continue with him for a bit, for what he exegetes from Romans 1:20 concerning sinful humanity is, once more, integral to his understanding of the firm declaration stated in John 1:18.

Barth considers human perception of God not on speculative anthropological grounds, not from what the human might have become and known and what God might have been and been known to us if Genesis narrated a different history, but from the sober reality of life east of Eden. "Sin is that by which man as we know him is defined, for we know nothing of sinless men."<sup>17</sup> Humanity faces God in the rebellion represented by Adam and Eve. *Represented* by Adam and Eve—the primeval couple are not to be taken as the origin of sin as if in a chronological sequence from sinlessness to sinfulness, but as the picture of humankind bound for sin and death. "Adam has no existence on the plane of history and of psychological analysis. He exists as the first Adam, as the type of the second Adam who is to come, as the shadow cast by His light."<sup>18</sup> Adam has no independent identity; he is "mankind" (Hebrew *ādām*) insofar as he is the object of the True Man's redeeming work. Humanity as such is known only in the light of Christ, namely, as repetition of Adam's disobedience, the shadow to which God's light is directed, the unworthy object of God's gloriously extensive affections.

The Genesis account of Adam must be read in light of Paul's "second Adam" (Romans 5; 1 Corinthians 15), in which case it functions as a comprehensive expression of the human condition. Specifically, it shows us as sinners, when "sin" means living in contrast to the righteous way of being revealed in Christ. "Sin is . . . meaningless and incomprehensible except as the negation of the righteousness which is in Christ."<sup>19</sup>

Sin is not mere behavior but holistic negation of the right order of things revealed in Jesus. It is impatience with our mortality before the Immortal, replacement of our remoteness from God with the presumption of proximity, rejection of his otherness in favor of his similarity to us, romanticizing our own way to infinity:

17. Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, 167.

18. *Ibid.*, 171.

19. *Ibid.*

Sin is robbing of God: a robbery which becomes apparent in our arrogant endeavor to cross the line of death by which we are bounded (i. 18, 19); in our drunken blurring of the distance which separates us from God; in our forgetfulness of His invisibility; in our investing of men with the form of God, and of God with the form of man; and in our devotion to some romantic infinity, some ‘No-God’ of this world, which we have created for ourselves.<sup>20</sup>

Sin is perpetual criminal offense, unjustified reversal of life and death, the relationship in which we stand with God, visibility and invisibility, human and divine being, time and eternity. It is robbing God of his due majesty and glory by placing ourselves first and him second.<sup>21</sup>

In short, God has established his glory and majesty, his inherent invisibility in the created order, but in sin the creature perverts that order and renders God visible, made after creation rather than the other way around. In his revelation, God restores the right order of things; he makes himself invisible in his visibility. He shows himself as he is in relation to us as we are, sinners in need of his gracious revelation.

But why should we be beset by sin? Would our condition not be God’s “fault,” so to speak, if we are made by him to see him but are not able to do so?

Barth allows that the theoretical possibility of sin, of idolatry, is given in the character of the world as God has made and sustains it, but the culpability or guilt of sin is ours in each place and moment that we exercise the capacities given by God to form the world after us. Sin is originally ours in the event-

20. *Ibid.*, 168.

21. “Sin is the act of man in which he ignores and offends the divine majesty. Sin is, therefore, disobedience” (Barth, CD IV.1, 414). Barth’s fullest discussion of sin takes place across three part-volumes of the *Dogmatics*: CD IV.1 §60, IV.2 §65, and IV.3.1 §70. Each treats human “pride,” “sloth,” and “falsehood,” respectively. As a general summary, Barth contends that sin can be understood only in terms of the reconciling work of Jesus Christ, as its persistent contrast (see esp. CD IV.1 358–413). As disobedience, sin is “the human action that does not correspond to the divine action in Jesus Christ but contradicts it” (CD IV.1, 215). It is a way of being opposed to the God who has his life in upholding communion with his creature. It is, as such, a possibility opened up by God’s creation of vicinities and sequences of being, thinking, and doing external to himself, of granting creaturely freedom. “Man proves himself to be a liar in whose thinking, speech, and conduct his liberation by and for the free God transforms itself into an attempt to claim God by and for himself” (CD IV.3.1, 368). God’s liberating work is perverted by humanity into the moment-by-moment lie by which it claims God; as if it could, humanity reverses the right knowledge of God, placing itself in the position to think and speak and act as lord over God.

ontology of our existence, in the pre-conscious instinct to think everything, including God, from a center in ourselves.

Barth presents an interesting take on “original sin.” He retains the Augustinian emphasis on the ontological quality of sin, construing it as a condition endemic to all humanity. “Sin is power—sovereign power. . . . By it men are controlled.”<sup>22</sup> Sin is no mere behavior or infelicitous choice. It is an inheritance more basic than action and volition. But Barth does not think of this human inheritance as a static characteristic emerging at a definite point on the timeline of human ancestry, which is then passed down biologically or socially or what have you. On the contrary, it is “an especial relationship of men to God.”<sup>23</sup> Sin is a disordering of the right existence between Creator and creature. It is breaking the essential bond of fellowship with God.

Thus sin, for Barth, is the actualistic contradiction of existence in rebellion against grace, which defines all of humankind, for we have our *being* in this *act*. Concretely, God creates the faculties for authentic relationship—above all perception and volition. God does not create automatons but genuinely conscious and willing creatures intended to return his knowledge and love. It is in such perceiving and willing that we enjoy secondary co-determination: we reckon the world and our place in it honestly or in self-serving deception as we instantiate an intimate closeness or cold remoteness relative to God and each other. In the latter, we drag the world into sin and nothingness:

There has come into being a *cosmos* which, because we no longer know God, is not Creation. . . . It is a world in which things move toward independence, a world of things existing powerfully in their own right, a world of principalities and powers and thrones and dominions. Like men, the world is imprisoned. As their world, it unwillingly participates in the perversity of men and shares their damaged relationship with God.<sup>24</sup>

Sin is moment-by-moment exercise of the faculties with which we were endowed by God, faculties by which we are to exist in authentic relationship with God, to construct a world of autonomous self-rule, a world independent of

22. Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, 167.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*, 169.

God in which we act as lord over him and each other. Once more, this exercise is basic to the full range of human existence.

That does not make sin and its guilt a reality only when a person reaches an age of conscious and volitional accountability, for that would be to suggest that before this age there is such a thing as unaccountable humanity, a way of being opposite God without God, such that the relationship in which we exist with God and its negation by sin take place at some eventual stage of being and not in the core of our being. No, there are no faculties of knowing and willing that are not given and sustained by God from the beginning in his Word, and thus only a truly baseless rebellion all along the line. We cannot explain sin as original to us except by acknowledging that it is an opportunism at every stage of life, an ever-ready impulse to self-priority. "Sin is the characteristic mark of human nature as such; it is not a lapse or a series of lapses in a man's life; it is the Fall that occurred with the emergence of human life. Sin occurs before it has taken concrete form consciously or unconsciously in this or that man, and it is powerful before it takes control of his will or disposition."<sup>25</sup>

Adrift in the vacuous throes of sin, the human needs to be shown her problem if she is to see and desire its solution. There is no foothold otherwise, no cleft in the rock on which to stay the fall into nothingness. God must overcome every instinct of the darkness to its own priority. "In this world [of sin], which is our world, the true life is invisible, unknown, and impossible. . . . The only glory of the Creator which remains is that by which this independent validity [of the human and its objects of perception] is limited. . . . The only possibility of perceiving the glory of God is that perception which operates *sub specie mortis*."<sup>26</sup> Only from the perspective of our negation is God to be seen as he is—only in the light of our death is God the true source and meaning of life.

If God is to remain *God* before sinful human being and doing, he must judge sin that ensnares (en-frames) us and, in us, our world. He cannot simply stand at the end of our religious intuitions as their outcome, but must condemn the very impulse to place him there. He must definitively reject our misshapen idolatrousness if he is actually to be our God, if he is actually to relate to us as we need him to, if he is to put an end to our relentless self-compromise. Salvation comes through damnation; grace through judgment; gospel through the law. God's "No" is the precondition of his "Yes." "The wrath of God [Rom. 1:18-19] . . . which comes to expression in the ruinous condition in which we see the world today (5:12; 8:19-20), is not fate (*Schicksal*) but bitter necessity."<sup>27</sup>

25. *Ibid.*, 173.

26. *Ibid.*, 169.

27. Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Erste Fassung)*, 29.